



**Natural Heritage  
& Endangered Species  
Program**

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*Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife*

**American Oystercatcher  
*Haematopus palliatus***

State Status: **None**

Federal Status: **None**

**SPECIES DESCRIPTION:** A large (17-21 inches in length), thick-set shorebird, the American Oystercatcher has a black head and neck, a dark back, a white belly, large white patches on wings and tail, and a distinctive large, straight bill. A noisy bird, its vocalizations include a piercing *wheep* and a loud *pic-pic-pic*.

**DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE:** In Massachusetts, American Oystercatchers are rare but increasing in abundance and expanding in distribution along the coast. Although American Oystercatchers were first documented nesting in Massachusetts in 1969, their presence here is believed to be a re-occupation of former territory lost sometime after European colonization, rather than a new range extension. A statewide census in 2004 estimated 189 pairs at 58 sites in Massachusetts, with the largest numbers on Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge in Chatham, and the Boston Harbor Islands. Post-breeding concentrations of over 100 birds now occur annually in August on intertidal flats and beaches at the Monomoy islands and South Beach in Chatham.

**HABITAT DESCRIPTION:** The American Oystercatcher nests above the high tide line on the upper portions of sandy or gravelly beaches, at the edges of salt marshes or dunes, or on low ridges within salt marshes. It feeds nearby on lower portions of beaches, on intertidal flats, and at edges of salt marshes. Principal foods include oysters, mussels, clams, marine worms, crabs, and other marine invertebrates.

**THREATS:** Known threats in Massachusetts include mammalian and avian predation on eggs and chicks; and human-caused disturbance and mortality of egg or chicks caused by human recreational activities, off-road vehicles, and dogs. Oil spills are a potential threat.

**REFERENCES:**

- Nol, E., and R. C. Humphrey. 1994. American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 82 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.: The American Ornithologists' Union.
- Petersen, W.R., and W.R. Meservey. 2003. *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas*. Massachusetts Audubon Society and University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts.
- Veit, R., and W.R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

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**A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan**

**Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife**

1 Rabbit Hill Rd., Westborough, MA; tel: 508-389-6300; fax: 508-389-7890; [www.mass.gov/dfw](http://www.mass.gov/dfw)

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