THE MYSTERIOUS OYSTERCATCHER

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The American Oystercatcher may be the most spectacular sighting on the wetlands of Long Island. A dozen years ago, you would not have seen him even in such prime shorebird habitat as Moriches Bay. Although Audubon himself reported these large birds nesting to Labrador, his account has not been corroborated. As recently as a quarter of a century ago, Long Island and even New Jersey sightings were merest hearsay, and one had to go to the Carolinas for this exciting experience. A little over a decade ago, the American Oystercatcher made his return to the eastern end of Long Island. No more is know of the reasons for the reappearance than for the disappearance. It is but one of the many fascinating lines of study this bird suggests.

There is sometimes a discrepancy between the "invasion" of an area by some life-form (bird or flower) and its first report by a human observer. This is unlikely with the oystercatcher, which would hardly be unobtrusive anywhere, much less an area so heavily "birded" as Long Island. He is too big, bold, and beautiful.

Among shorebirds, only the rare, Long-billed Curlew is larger, has, as advertised, a very long bill seven inches!), and is of even more ancient lineage and apparently longed lifespan than the Oystercatcher. But the curlew, a dull-plumaged fellow except when he shows his cinnamon underwings in flight, has a way of obliterating himself against sand and beach grass.

The American Oystercatcher (one of four living species) is distinctive and dramatic, with an orange-rimmed yellow eye in a black, lustrous head; flashing white lower breast, wing- and tail-patches; and especially that vermilion bill. At least four inches long, broad and flat, the oystercatcher's chistl beak would seem to be unmistakable. The only shore-bird with an approximately equivalent "shellcracker" is the even more mysterious crab plover—of the Indian Ocean.

With this amazing tool, the oystercatcher deals summarily with large quahogs, those tough-shelled clams that can turn a sturdy knife in — or into — a man's hand. The bladed bill can also chip off barnacles and, of course, separate the oyster clusters that are its specialty. These are adhesive, rough, powerful molluscs, as any skin diver or shellfisherman can attest.

Recently we heard two oystercatcher stories that further impressed us with the disparity between bird and human abilities. Our informant was Leroy Wilcox, well known for such banding records as a total of 1350 ospreys or, with Walter Terry, 16,000 bandings in one year. His specialty is plovers, but for ten years, he has been attentive to the Moriches Bay oystercatchers.

According to Leroy, relatively little is known about the American Oystercatcher, although this is one of the oldest native American birds, dating back to the Lower Miocene, with the earliest fossil-type found in Nebraska. These birds are hard to catch. Only 250 oystercatchers have been recorded by Regional Association banders in a 50-year period, Leroy having accounted for 80. There have been very few returns. He is luckier than most banders in this respect: of the 17 reported returns, he has had 15, mainly because he is the only bander to trap oystercatchers on their nests. One bird has been coming back for five years. The infrequency of returns may be attributable to bands rather than birds. American bands, of light alloy, do not last on the shorebirds because the abrasive sand soon blurs the numbers.

For all these reasons, even such a doughty birder as Wilcox has more questions than answers about the big black and white oystercatcher. For instance, at what age do the chick's black eye and bill turn to the bold colouration of the adult? Mr. Wilcox believes that the bird probably matures at two years, with the female 10% larger and heavier than the male. How long-lived is this big flier, with presumably few natural predators? The maximum age for which Wilcox can personally vouch is 10 years. European records, however, based upon sturdier bands, give oystercatcher ages to 25 years. (Perhaps the very stiff recognition requirements for hunting licenses in some European countries contribute to this longevity. (Friends in Fish and Wildlife, please heed!)

Our first story has to deal with another virtually unknown aspect not only of the oystercatcher but of bird life generally: how do they recognize their young? Some colonial birds ,such as the penguin and perhaps its northern counterparts, the Alcidae, depend on voice. But what of the precocial chick that may put in his first appearance when the parents are not around? Some shorebird youngsters, such as the Piping Plover, feed themselves as soon as they are dry. Oystercatchers feed their semi-dependent offspring.

Leroy Wilcox had been watching a nesting pair near Hampton Bays since their mannerly, bowing courtship. There were two eggs in the clutch, which in the normal course of things hatched twenty-four hours apart. At the time the second one was pipping, the parents and the first-born were gadding along the beach.

Leroy took the pipped egg home. "Home" is the oldest duck farm on Long Island, well-equipped to deal with one more baby bird. Mr. and Mrs. Wilcox fed it minced clams every three hours. By the third day, they deemed it capable of holding its own with the unattentive parents and unknown sibling, on whose whereabout the birder had been keeping tabs.

The sand-nesting birds care only for their own chicks, usually killing or at least driving off other youngsters that stray into their territory.

It was with double trepidation that Leroy Wilcox replaced his adoptee: how far had the "imprinting" process affected natural parent recognition, and would the oystercatchers accept the chick they had never seen?

The birds had no doubts. They raised both offspring with parental impartiality, and the temporary "foundling" never showed any human tendencies!

How did these adult birds know their own? To use the word "instinct" (if it happens to be stylish at the moment) is only passing the buck. We are still saying that we do not know. Fortunately, they do.

The second anecdote concerns another family of oystercatchers that Leroy banded at Moriches Inlet. It takes forty days from hatching to flight. Only one of the two chicks in this clutch survived to migrate with his parents. In November, Leroy watched them circle off.

Three months later, U.S. Fish and Wildlife sent him the band he had placed on one of the adult birds. It had been submitted to them by a duck-hunter whose name they also gave. He had killed it over Great South Bay, only a few wingbeats from its home.

On impulse, Mr. Wilcox telephoned the hunter and asked how he had happened to shoot an oystercatcher. The man replied that he had not intended to, that in token of his sincere regret and good faith he had sent in the band under his own name and address.

"But how did it happen?" Leroy persisted.

"Well, there were three of us in the blind, and we all thought it was a bufflehead," hunter replied defensively.

A bufflehead is a small duck, mostly white, with an almost crested white patch circling the head. It does have white wing-bars, as do plovers, willets, and mockingbirds, to name but a few. The hunter had "recognized" and fired at the oystercatcher's wing-bars.

One marvels at the respective cognitive faculties of birds and man.

We live at the bottom of a cone of mystery. From it come the provocative calls and songs of birds. The distant light flashes on the colours and shapes of another life-form. Some of us are impelled to probe the mystery, with encouraging but so far limited success. Others of us shoot at it.

The birds, inferior in imagination and intelligence, apparently find the universe much less puzzling. They fly in the open light and know what they are about.

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