

American Oystercatchers in Tampa Bay: an Overview

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1. Numbers (breeding)

Florida	400 pairs
Tampa Bay system	120 pairs = 30% of FL population
Hillsborough Bay	80 pairs
2. Trends in Tampa Bay Increase over last 25 years due to creation of new spoil islands.
(Hillsborough Bay numbers have doubled since 1985)
3. Very stable distribution; pairs present at same sites for 1-2 decades. One “trio” present at same location for ca. 15 years.
4. Primary habitat: beach ridges on natural beaches (15%) or spoil island shorelines (85%). [22 prs /145 prs, including pairs in Clearwater Harbor and St. Joseph Sound]
5. Adults forage within territory; also leave for extended periods to forage under mangrove edge or elsewhere, 0.25 to 1.5 mi away. Some also apparently visit territory in winter, during warm weather, but we have not noted active defense.
6. Earliest egg dates about March 25. This appears to be a recent development, and they may be nesting earlier than formerly. During renesting, eggs may be laid as late as late June but if young have not hatched by July 4 we think they have no chance. Occasional observations of young being fed by presumed parents 4-5 months after fledging.
7. Regular fly-bys by other pairs, and short-term territorial defense in clearly substandard (very low) habitats suggest saturated population, with surplus pairs.
8. Nesting success is very low, especially in last few years: 7 young fledged by 60+ pairs in 2004, 5 young fledged by 60+ pairs in 2003. Certain pairs are consistently successful, and appear to be those with source of oysters (oyster bar or mangrove roots) close by.
9. In some territories where substrate is almost entirely sand or shell hash, half-grown young exhibit neurotic, almost frantic foraging activity but ingest nothing. Adults are sometimes present, sometimes not. These young disappear. We suspect that parents are not providing enough food, and the young cannot supplement sufficiently on their own.

10. Renesting attempts are frequent, with some pairs laying 3 (or possibly 4?) clutches in one season. Interval between egg loss and relaying appears to be ca. 16 days but sometimes less.

11. We are finding some pairs nesting under tree cover as shorelines retreat and exotics advance (under *Schinus* and *Casuarina* on spoil islands, and under mangroves on small keys where there is a small shell ridge barely above high tide.

12. Management issues:

- a. human disturbance (3 million residents, plus snowbirds, tourists, dogs, etc.)
- b. erosion
- c. growth of exotic plants (esp. *Schinus*, *Casuarina*) on spoil islands
- d. dredging projects – activity on dredge material disposal sites (i.e., spoil islands used by nesting AMOY)
- e. ship wakes at high tide
- f. predators (esp. raccoons, fish crows; probably also fire ants, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night-herons, Cooper's Hawks, other raptors; possibly rattlesnakes)
- g. possible food shortage within some territories

13. Management and protection to date:

- a. Audubon protection of 3 main islands (65-68 pairs): posting, weekend patrol. Extensive cooperation with Tampa Port Authority, owner of 2 of the islands.
- b. Monitoring of other sites as possible.
- c. Restoration of Port Manatee Key and protection of 4-6 pairs.
- d. Collaboration with FFWCC and local Audubon Chapters to monitor oystercatcher pairs and other beach-nesting birds in region, especially at key nesting areas including Passage Key NWR, Egmont Key NWR, Shell Key County Preserve, Honeymoon Island SP, Anclote Bar SP. Collaboration with State, FWS and County staff essential. (But human disturbance and nesting failure a continuing problem at these sites.)
- e. Raccoon trapping and removal.
- f. Working with Tampa Port Authority to address ship wakes and exotic plant issues (repair and maintenance of islands offer opportunity to add scrapedown of exotic plants, possibly recontour shoreline or add offshore wavebreak to construction contracts. Ongoing discussion.
- g. Migratory Bird Protection Committee has worked well since 1990. Cosponsored by the Tampa Port Authority and Corps of Engineers, this committee is annually reviews upcoming dredging needs and disposal site options, and fits dredging around bird nesting! Policies developed here have been applied throughout the Jacksonville district, though with varying results. This committee is an outgrowth of a situation where Audubon stopped a dredging project in 1990 due to loss of Least Tern nests.
- h. Annual fishing line removal projects from 30-50 islands annually potentially benefits AMOY. Organized by Audubon (Fla. Coastal Islands Sanctuaries) and Tampa BayWatch, and now conducted for 11 years.

- i. Experimental placement of oyster reefs using clean mined shell and volunteer labor, to stabilize eroding island shorelines and encourage establishment of live oyster reef communities. Tampa BayWatch is lead organization, Audubon also heavily involved. Reefs grow rapidly but break apart over time; design is improving as we learn by trial and error.

14. Priority needs

- a. We still don't understand why nesting success is so low! Most likely factors include human disturbance, predation, ship wakes, possibly food shortage and starvation in territories that lack source of oysters. Human disturbance remains a significant problem even at "protected" sites.
- b. We need to add or restore habitat to counter losses due to erosion and spread of exotics. Port Manatee Key was one example but minor benefit to AMOY. Possible addition of spoil material to Alafia Bank is in discussion. Reworking of shorelines on Tampa Port Authority islands 2D and 3D is in discussion.
- c. Disturbance of small islands in Clearwater Harbor and St. Joseph Sound is so frequent that we (Nancy Douglass too) suspect these areas may only be a population sink. We believe we are seeing fewer AMOY pairs on these islands. Protection of these sites needs to be improved. Authority rests with the DEP Office of Aquatic Preserves. Same concerns apply to Shell Key County Preserve.

15. Perspective:

We want to close with two points. First, personal relationships are key to finding ways to accomplish important conservation goals. The trust that characterizes such relationships often allows site access, project flexibility, and support that would not otherwise be possible. Second, we regard volunteer participation as absolutely critical to the future of efforts to protect beach-nesting birds such as oystercatchers in urbanized areas like Tampa Bay.

Although oystercatchers nest fairly densely along some shorelines, they are not colonial. This makes it difficult to protect significant numbers of nesting pairs at once, especially by very small numbers of people. The alternative is to recruit collaborators from a number of sources, especially agencies responsible for lands where oystercatchers occur and volunteers who can assist in vital monitoring and protection efforts. In the Tampa Bay area, efforts to protect AMOY, Least Terns and other species have led to the organization of a Beach-nesting Bird Committee. Composed of agency biologists and land managers, Audubon biologists and chapter volunteers, other volunteers, and an Eckerd College professor and her students, the BNB committee is attempting to ramp up protection of nesting sites for these species and to broaden the effort to include other parts of the Florida coastline. Significantly, the committee is organized and led by the volunteers themselves. With agencies severely limited by legislative mandate, budget, politics and other factors, it may be the actions of informed volunteers in their communities that will make the critical difference for breeding populations of oystercatchers and other beach-nesting birds.

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