



African Black Oystercatcher

Swarttobie

Haematopus moquini

The African Black Oystercatcher is endemic to the coast of southern Africa, occurring as a vagrant in Angola as far north as Lobito (Summers & Cooper 1977; Hockey 1983). During the atlas period, this vocal and conspicuous bird was recorded from the Kunene River (1711BD) in the northwest to the Msikaba River (3129BD) in the southeast, with four isolated records from KwaZulu-Natal. The total world population is less than 5000 birds, over half occurring in the southwestern Cape Province and 29% on offshore islands of Namibia and the Cape Province (Hockey 1983). It becomes increasingly scarce towards the extremities of its range. Apart from the areas around Walvis Bay (2214DC) and Lüderitz (2615CA), there were relatively few records north of Port Nolloth (2916BD).

Habitat: Molluscs are its principal prey (Hockey & Underhill 1984). It is therefore found along rocky and sandy shorelines and in estuaries, preferring coasts with a mixture of rocks and beaches. It occasionally uses other wet-

lands near the coast. Greatest densities occur on offshore islands. Islands and sandy shores are the preferred breeding habitat (Summers & Cooper 1977; Hockey 1983).

Movements: Adults are largely sedentary, whereas juveniles may disperse over distances in excess of 250 km (Hockey 1983). Most of the birds at the extremities of the range are nonbreeders, mainly juveniles (Hockey 1983). The models indicate a slight increase in reporting rates March–September in areas beyond the main breeding range north of St Helena Bay (3218CC) and east of the Kei River (3228CB). This coincides with a decrease in reporting rates in Zone 2 and possibly reflects post-breeding dispersal. During the breeding season there are local movements away from rocky shores to breeding sites on sandy beaches and islands (Hockey 1983).

Breeding: Most breeding takes place between Lüderitz (2615CA) and Mazeppa Bay (3228BC), although breeding is scarce between Lüderitz and the Olifants River (3118CA) (Hockey 1983). There are breeding records from Möwe Bay (1912BC) on the Skeleton Coast and between Swakopmund (2214DA) and Walvis Bay (C.J. Brown *in litt.*). Breeding occurs October–April with a peak December–January (Summers & Cooper 1977). Young may remain with their parents for several months.

Interspecific relationships: Apart from vagrant European Oystercatchers *H. ostralegus*, this is the only oystercatcher in southern Africa. Its closest relative, the Canarian Black Oystercatcher *H. meadewaldoi*, is almost certainly extinct (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

Historical distribution and conservation: The historical and present distributions are likely to be similar; it seems as rare now in KwaZulu-Natal as it was at the beginning of the 20th century (Stark & Sclater 1906). The greatest threat to the African Black Oystercatcher is human disturbance, including midsummer recreational activities on the shore coinciding with the peak of the breeding season. Off-road vehicles on isolated beaches reduce breeding success (Jeffrey 1987), probably through direct nest destruction by moving vehicles, and through desertion caused by vehicles stopped for long periods near nests. Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus*, breeding on the offshore islands, prey on the eggs and young (Hockey 1983). Populations of Kelp Gulls in the southwestern Cape Province are increasing owing to enhanced food supply at fishing harbours and rubbish dumps (Hockey *et al.* 1989); it may become necessary to consider controlling artificially enhanced Kelp Gull populations. Other threats are the introduction of mammalian predators to offshore islands and paralytic shellfish poisoning, so-called ‘red tides’ (Summers & Cooper 1977; Hockey & Cooper 1980; Hockey 1983).

A.P. Martin

Recorded in 122 grid cells, 2.7%
Total number of records: 7314
Mean reporting rate for range: 35.3%

