

**Year-round Residency in Northern Populations of the Black Oystercatcher.** Brad A. Andres, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Bird Management, 1011 East Tudor Road, Anchorage, Alaska, 99503. 15 February 1994.

In many parts of its range, the black oystercatcher (*Haematopus bachmani*) is considered a year-round resident of rocky, marine shorelines. Although pairs might not maintain their territories throughout the winter, they often remain in the general vicinity of the breeding area. By mid-summer, non-breeding or failed breeding birds begin to aggregate; flocks can range from a few to several hundred individuals. In Alaska, little is known about the seasonal movements of black oystercatchers. This report summarizes information on the seasonal changes in the abundance and distribution of black oystercatchers in southcentral and southeastern Alaska.

On 11 February 1994, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) pilot Bill Butler and USFWS observer Brad Andres conducted a fixed-wing aerial survey of Prince William Sound to locate and count flocks of wintering black oystercatchers. Based on previous anecdotal information, shorelines in the following areas (Figure 1) were surveyed: 1) Port Etches/Constantine Harbor - Hinchinbrook Island, 2) Rocky Bay, Zaikof Bay, Stockdale Harbor, Port Chalmers - Montague Island, 3) Gibbon Anchorage - Green Island, 4) Little Green Island, 5) Channel Island, 6) Bay of Isles - Knight Island, and 7) north Chenega Island. The survey was conducted from 1200 to 1500 hours under clear skies and with moderate winds. Luckily, the survey coincided with a high tide; flocks are more concentrated and more easily located during high tides.

Five flocks containing 157 individuals were found in eastern Prince William Sound (Table 1). Flock size averaged 31 individuals. No birds were located in Bay of Isles, on Knight Island, or on northern Chenega Island.

Table 1. Location and number of individuals in black oystercatcher flocks located in Prince William Sound, Alaska on 11 February 1994.

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Location of flocks	No. of individuals
Constantine Harbor, Hinchinbrook Island	30
Rocky Bay, Montague Island	12
Stockdale Harbor, Montague Island	40
Port Chalmers, Montague Island	30
Gibbon Anchorage, Green Island	45
Total of all areas	157

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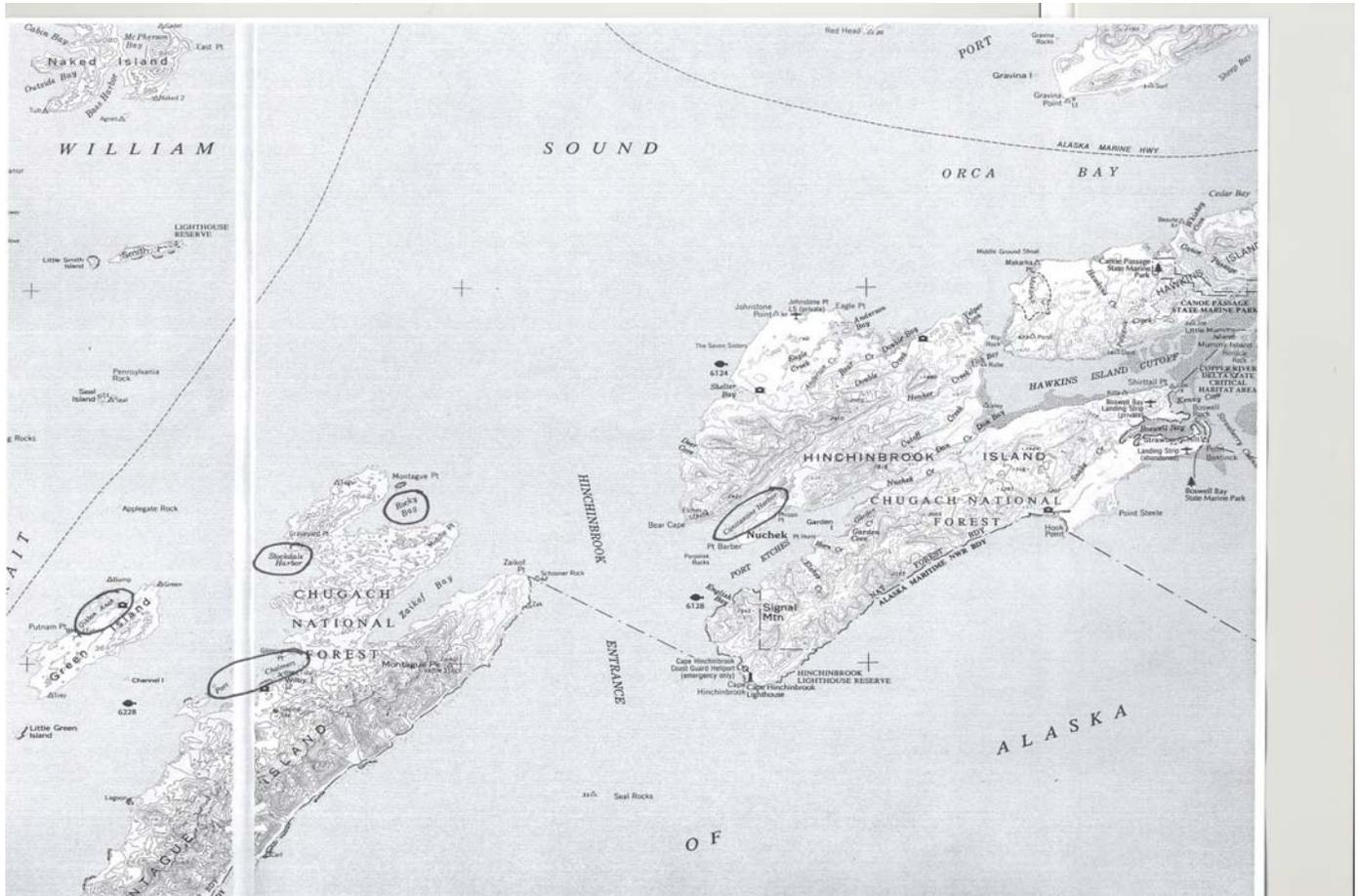


Figure 1. Location of areas in Prince William Sound where black oystercatcher flocks were found on 11 February 1994.

Generally, oystercatcher flock sizes in February were lower than those previously reported in mid- to late August. Fewer individuals comprised the flock inhabiting western Montague Island in February 1994 than in late summer 1992 (Andres, unpubl. data). The Montague Island flock (1992) increased throughout the summer and reached their peak numbers in mid- to late August (Figure 2). By the end of August, virtually all pairs had vacated their territories on Knight Island (B. A. Andres, unpubl. data). Oystercatcher chicks color-banded on Knight Island were seen on Montague Island in late August. More birds were also recorded in flocks in Constantine Harbor in late August 1977 (71 individuals, Sangster et al. 1978) than in February 1994.

The Sound-wide population of black oystercatcher in March, estimated from boat surveys, was about 2% of the July population (1989-1993, Agler et al. 1994), whereas the March population estimated by Dwyer et al. (1975) was 30-40% of the July population (1972-1973). Differences in March population estimates between surveys can be attributed to the chance location of random transects; random designs can provide misleading or imprecise information for species that are clumpily distributed. I suggest that the population size of black oystercatchers wintering in the Sound is about 25% of the summer population size.

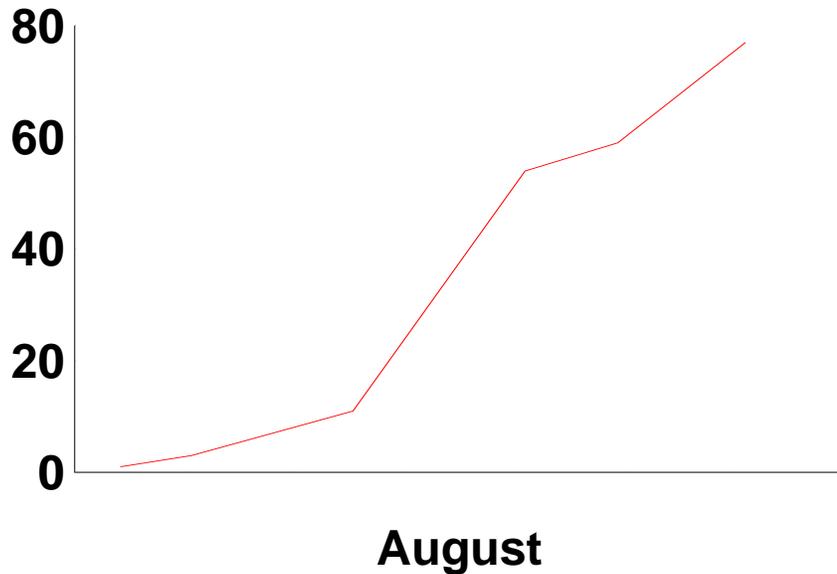


Figure 2. Changes in the flock size of black oystercatchers inhabiting Port Chalmers, Prince William Sound, Alaska in 1992.

Few observations of birds wintering birds in western Sound exist; no oystercatchers were recorded on winter surveys of Port Valdez and Valdez Arm in 1979 (Hogan and Colgate 1980). Although a flock of 11 birds was present on the northern end of Chenega Island in late July 1993, no birds were seen on the February 1994 survey.

The major portion of the black oystercatcher population breeding in Prince William Sound does not spend the winter there. The most probable wintering area for Sound oystercatchers is Southeast Alaska. Migrating flocks of oystercatchers have been recorded in the spring at Yakutat (V. Harke, U.S. Forest Serv., pers. commun.) and on spring sea watches at Cape St. Elias (Arneson 1978). Large flocks of oystercatchers wintering in Glacier Bay (600 individuals, G. van Vliet, pers. commun.), most likely, contain foreign birds. Numbers of black oystercatchers seen in Glacier Bay in the winter exceed the population estimate of the entire Southeast (520, Nelson and Lenhausen 1983). However, no sightings of >150 color-banded oystercatcher chicks marked in Prince William Sound (from 1991 to 1993) have been made in Southeast Alaska.

Christmas Bird counters annually record >250 black oystercatchers on northeastern Kodiak Island. Wintering flock size exceeds the size of the local breeding population and flocks, most likely, consist of individuals from northern Kodiak Island, Afognak Island, and perhaps, the Kenai coast. Prince William Sound oystercatchers could, conceivably, migrate to Kodiak Island. However, no birds color-banded in the Sound have been reported on Kodiak Island (areas on Kodiak are more accessible to birders than those in southeastern Alaska).

Wintering flocks on Kodiak Island and in Glacier Bay and post-breeding aggregations in Prince William Sound were much larger than those recorded in British Columbia (Hartwick 1974) and California (Lindberg et al. 1987).

In summary, >75% of the population of black oystercatchers breeding in Prince William Sound migrate out of the Sound to spend the winter. The majority could migrate >300 miles to Glacier Bay or other areas in Southeast Alaska. No oystercatcher pairs in the Sound appear to maintain year-round territories. In February 1994, flock sizes in Prince William Sound ranged from 12 to 45 individuals and flocks were concentrated on eastern islands. Flocks appear to be faithful to wintering areas.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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