

Abundance of Black Oystercatchers in Northwestern Prince William Sound, Alaska

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On 28 May 1999, Kent Wohl and I conducted a survey for breeding black oystercatchers in northwestern Prince William Sound, Alaska. We started at Pt. Pigot and surveyed the western shore of Port Wells that included Pigot Bay, Pirate Cove, Hummer Bay, Hobo Bay, and Harrison Lagoon; we did not survey Bettles Bay (see enclosed maps). We also surveyed all of Harriman Fiord and surveyed Barry Arm between the mouth of Coxe Bay and Pakenham Point. We used a 25-foot Boston Whaler and conducted surveys between 0830 and 1530 hr. Except for head of Pigot Bay, we believe we covered all other shorelines suitable for nesting oystercatchers in this area. Observations of oystercatchers were recorded as singles or pairs.

We did not encounter any oystercatchers along the (approximately) 68 km of shoreline that stretched between Pt. Pigot and Pt. Doran and between Pakenham Point and a point directly east of Pt. Doran. In contrast, we found 19-24 pairs along the (approximately) 56 km of shoreline in Harriman Fiord. Six pairs of oystercatchers were observed on an island in the mouth of Serpentine Cove; about 110 arctic terns were also observed on this island. The area between the northeastern corner of Serpentine Cove and the southwestern shore of Surprise Inlet had the greatest abundance of black oystercatchers and supported 13-15 pairs. With the exception of the island in Serpentine Cove, all remaining pairs, or singles, were observed on avalanche outwashes.

Pair density in Harriman Fiord, when treating the 5 singles as 3 pairs, was approximately 0.39 pairs/km. Pair density in Harriman Fiord was similar to densities previously recorded on Green Island (0.51 pairs/km) and Montague Island (0.46 pairs/km) in east-central Prince William Sound. All these sites had >5 times the density recorded on Knight Island. Pairs on Knight Island tended to nest on offshore rocks; only in Drier Bay and Lower Herring Bay did I encounter pairs nesting on avalanche outwashes (4 out of 40 pairs).

Because black oystercatchers observed in Harriman Fiord are likely to build nests on avalanche outwashes, campers may disrupt nesting birds. Oystercatchers were observed on several beaches that are indicated as camping sites in the Lethcoe's cruising guide. In Harriman fiord, few camping sites are available away from these beaches. The area just above the high tide line that appears to receive the most use by campers corresponds to the area often chosen by black oystercatchers for nest placement.

Easy access to nest sites and relatively high density of breeding pairs indicate that a study to determine effects of disturbance on breeding oystercatchers could be feasibly undertaken in Harriman Fiord. Detailed observations of nesting birds could help in establishing management guidelines. I hope this quick survey may be valuable as a baseline for future work in the fiord. The insights I gained into habitat use of oystercatchers (potentially) nesting in glacial fiords may help to refine the U. S. Forest Service's black oystercatcher habitat model.