The strikingly-marked American Oystercatcher is found all along the Atlantic coast from New England to Florida as well as the Gulf coast. They are distinctly coastal birds, seldom found far from their preferred habitat of sand and shell beaches, rocky shorelines, marsh islands, mud flats and offshore gravel bars. In the 1800’s they became locally extinct in the northeast due to hunting and egg collecting, but with protection have now extended their range northward, reoccupying their historical range in New England. Oystercatchers move south in the winter spending the cold months in the southern states and the Gulf. Up to one third of the population may spend the winter in South Carolina alone.

These large, conspicuous water birds are uniquely marked by their black and white body and long, thick orange beak. Their loud, whistled “wheep!” can often be heard at a long distance before the bird comes into view.

In spite of the name, American Oystercatchers do not feed exclusively on oysters, but consume many species of shellfish and other marine invertebrates including clams, mussels, crabs and worms. They stalk the shellfish beds seeking a mollusk filtering water with its shell partially open. They then quickly hammer their bright orange, laterally-flattened bill between the shells of the unsuspecting bivalve, snipping the adductor muscles before the shells can close and feasting on the meat “on the half-shell”. The nest of the Oystercatcher is a simple shallow scrape, lined with shells, pebbles or bits of tide wrack and disguised among the shells and pebbles where the two to four specked eggs blend perfectly with the gravel beach.

Oystercatchers are shy, sensitive birds, susceptible to human disturbance and loss of habitat due to degradation or development of our coastline and beaches. Storms and high tides can flood the nests, swamping the eggs and nestlings where the birds are forced to nest near the high tide line. There is much concern in Connecticut and throughout the northeast about the effect of sea level rise on the nesting habitat of these and other beach nesting birds.

Although offshore spoil islands have provided secure nesting habitat for Oystercatchers and other water birds all along the mid-Atlantic coastline, Connecticut has yet to adopt this practice.

Currently, the Connecticut Endangered Species Act lists this species as “Threatened.”

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