



# Pied Oystercatcher

*Haematopus longirostris*

**Other common names** None

The Pied Oystercatcher is listed as a **Vulnerable Species** on the New South Wales *Threatened Species Conservation Act, 1995* (TSC Act).

## Description

*Length*

480 – 520mm

*Bill*

50 – 80mm

With their bright pied plumage (i.e. black and white), Pied Oystercatchers are a distinct large species of shorebird. Their upper parts including the head, wings and tail are black, with a contrasting white breast and under-tail. This coloration is contrasted with a bright red to orange-red eye, bill and legs. The male and female show little differentiation except that the males generally sport a shorter, wider beak. Immatures have a more brownish-black plumage, with grey-brown legs and a bill with a darkish brown tip.



Above: Pied Oystercatcher adult. Photo Mike Jarman

This species has a distinct clear penetrating ‘he-eep’ or single repeated ‘pic’ call, mainly in flight. During courtship and display a chorus of ‘kervee-kervee-kervee’ that may end in a low trilling may be used by both sexes.

## Distribution

The Pied Oystercatcher has a thinly scattered distribution throughout Australia, where it prefers sandy beaches and sandy-shored estuaries.

## Recorded occurrences in conservation reserves in the South Coast Region

Eurobodalla NP, Mimosa Rocks NP, Bournda NP, Ben Boyd NP, Nadgee Nature Reserve, Murramarang NP, Narrawallee Creek NR, Booderee NP.

## Habitat

The Pied Oystercatcher prefers sandy beaches and estuaries. Pairs usually occupy one territory during the breeding season and defend this aggressively from other individuals. During the non-breeding season pairs can disperse and large, noisy groups of non-breeding birds can gather at suitable feeding sites along the coast.

## Ecology

Contrary to their name, Pied Oystercatchers seldom eat oysters. Instead they usually feed on bivalve molluscs and also invertebrates found along sandy beaches and within estuaries. Their prey is prised apart with a specially adapted bill, with the opening technique suggested to be learned from their parents.

The breeding population on the South Coast of NSW is estimated to be approximately 50 pairs.

Pied Oystercatchers breed during the spring/summer months from August to January. Two to three eggs are laid into a 'scrape', a shallow depression in the sand, located well above the high tide mark. Eggs are incubated for 28-32 days by both sexes, and chicks fledge within 5 to 9 weeks. Nests and chicks are aggressively defended with loud calls, directional flights and 'injured wing' distraction displays. Pairs exhibit high site and mate fidelity.

## Threats

- Disturbance to foraging and nesting habitat by beach-goers, dogs, horse riders and vehicles driving along beaches. This can result in disruptions to incubation, chick feeding, and trampling or destruction of eggs and chicks.
- Predation of eggs and chicks by introduced and native predators such as foxes, dogs, cats, ravens and raptors.
- Entanglement in discarded fishing tackle, mainly fishing line and hooks, which can lead to serious injuries and mortality of adults and chicks
- Habitat destruction and modifications as a result of coastal

residential, agricultural and tourism developments.

- Hydrological changes to estuaries and similar water bodies causing modification or removal of important areas of suitable habitat.
- Inundation of nest sites by king tides, waves, storm surges and rising lake levels.

## Management

- Protection of known breeding habitat, including implementing habitat protection zones surrounding nest sites.
- Erection of habitat protection measures such as fences and signage surrounding nest sites, particularly those located on high-use beaches or estuaries.
- Monitoring nest sites to determine outcomes and establish baseline data for this species
- Undertaking a community educational program to raise awareness of threatened shorebird species found along the South Coast.
- Controlling introduced predators, particularly foxes, surrounding shorebird habitat.
- Coordinate a volunteer program to help with the conservation of this species.

## References

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- Pringle, J.D. (1987) The Shorebirds of Australia, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.