

FEATURE ARTICLES

PRODUCTIVITY OF BLACK OYSTERCATCHERS: EFFECTS OF RECREATIONAL DISTURBANCE IN A NATIONAL PARK

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Abstract. National parks in Alaska are generally assumed to be high-quality, undisturbed wildlife habitats. However, these parks attract recreational users, whose presence may reduce the suitability of key habitats for nesting shorebirds. In Kenai Fjords National Park, Black Oystercatchers (*Haematopus bachmani*) often breed on gravel beaches that are also popular campsites. In this study, we examined the effects of recreational activities in coastal Alaska on reproductive performance of Black Oystercatchers. We monitored survival of nests and chicks on 35 to 39 breeding territories annually during four breeding seasons (2001–2004). Most recreational disturbance on these territories occurred after the peak hatching date of first clutches. Annual productivity was low (average of 0.35 chicks per pair), but was not strongly affected by recreational disturbance. Daily survival of nests varied annually and declined over the season. Our results suggest that nest survival was lower during periods of extreme high tides. Daily survival rate of broods increased over the season and was higher on island than mainland territories, likely due to differences in predator communities. Territory occupancy rate and site fidelity were high; 95% of color-banded oystercatchers returned to the same breeding territory in the subsequent year. We conclude that Black Oystercatchers are resilient to low levels of recreational disturbance. However, in light of projected increases in recreation, we suggest managers move campsites away from the traditional nest sites identified in this study to minimize future disturbances.

Key words: Black Oystercatcher, national park, nest survival, productivity, recreational disturbance.