



Sooty Oystercatcher

Haematopus fuliginosus

Other common names Black redbill

The Sooty 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

The Sooty Oystercatcher with its entirely black plumage often blends inconspicuously into the rocky shores, wave cut platforms and headlands that it frequents. Like the Pied Oystercatcher, the Sooty Oystercatcher also has 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 brownish tipped bill.



Above: Sooty Oystercatcher adult. Photo Amy Harris

Their call includes loud carrying ‘hu-eep’ in flight and when disturbed, with a piping display call.

Distribution

The Sooty Oystercatcher has a thinly scattered distribution throughout Australia, where it prefers rocky outcrops, headlands, offshore islands and exposed reefs.

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, Montague Island NR, Tollgate Islands NR, Belowla Island NR.

Habitat

The Sooty Oystercatcher prefers rocky shorelines and headlands, stony beaches, offshore islands and exposed reefs, only occasionally does it occur on sandy beaches. Thereby this differentiates the habitat preferences of the two oystercatcher species in Australia. Along the South Coast region of NSW the Sooty Oystercatcher breeds mainly on offshore islands, only occasionally nesting on the mainland in suitable habitat. Like the Pied Oystercatcher,

the Sooty Oystercatcher is very territorial whilst breeding. On some smaller islands pairs can nest within a few metres of each other, tolerating a close nesting proximity. Pairs often disperse back to the mainland in the non-breeding season forming small gatherings of sociable individuals in their preferred foraging habitats.

Ecology

Sooty Oystercatchers feed on limpets, periwinkles, mussels and cunjevoi picked off rocks, with shells being hammered on rocks to open them and bivalves being prized open. During the breeding season, favoured feeding sites for chicks can become littered with opened shells and limpets.

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

Sooty Oystercatchers breed during the spring/summer months from August to January. One to four eggs (usually two) are laid into a shallow rocky or shell lined hollow, located well above the high tide mark. Eggs are incubated for 25-32 days by both sexes, and chicks fledge within 5 to 9 weeks. Chicks typically run and hide or squat at a disturbance call from their parents. Nests and chicks are aggressively defended with loud calls, directional flights and 'injured wing' distraction displays. Pairs exhibit high site and mate fidelity.



Above: Sooty Oystercatcher chick. Photo A. Harris

Threats

- Disturbance to foraging and nesting habitat by island-goers. 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 rats and raptors.
- Entanglement in discarded fishing tackle, mainly fishing line and hooks, which can lead to serious injuries and mortality of adults and chicks
- Ocean swells inundating nest sites, particularly during king tide events.

Management

- Protection of known breeding habitat, including implementing habitat protection zones surrounding nest sites and restricting access to offshore islands.
- 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 rats on offshore islands

References

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