BLACK OYSTERCATCHER Donald Shephard

Note:black beak tip of immature.
Photo Don Shephard

Every Thursday for the past three weeks, I have lugged a lawn chair, a spotting scope and other gear to the narrow inlet north of the Point Cabrillo Lighthouse. I spend an hour or more monitoring the Pelagic Cormorant nests, eggs, chicks and adults. My small contribution to citizen science has given me an understanding that is different from that based on years of random wandering observing our natural surroundings.

I note the interconnections between the study species and other plants and animals. A pair of Pigeon Guillemots has tunneled behind some iceplant to nest there for at least two years now. Three Western Gull chicks beg for food on a grass-topped pinnacle behind the cormorant colony. Northern Sea Lions bask on rocks opposite the nests. Each visit, I hear Black Oystercatchers' shrill *wheep-wheep* carried above the sound of the surf and my attention wanders to these inhabitants of a narrow littoral niche, yards wide and several thousand miles long.

The black head and body, and stout pink legs of this crow-sized, short-tailed shorebird make it distinctive. Yellow eyes with a surrounding ring of red skin, and a large red bill produce a striking contrast with the back. Conspicuous and noisy, the Black Oystercatcher lives along rocky shores from Alaska to Baja California.

Their name is doubly misleading since no oysters grace local rocks and they are sedentary and do not form an important part of Oystercatcher diet. Mussels and limpets are their primary food, but Black Oystercatchers prey on a wide range of shellfish and other creatures. Bivalves, such as limpets and mussels, have a strong muscle that holds the two shells tightly together but oystercatchers pry them open with ease. The birds also sneak up on open mussels, quickly stab their beaks between the shells, sever the muscle, shake the mussel free and swallow it. With sharp jabs of their chisel-like bill, oystercatchers dislodge limpets and chitons from rocks, turn them over and eat the soft tissue.

Oystercatchers often forage in the wave zone, because mussels splashed by waves open more frequently. A local health official, who monitored mussel beds for disease, tells me oystercatchers probe their bills among bivalves to get the worms, amphipods and isopods that shelter there. They forage primarily at low tide and then rest at high tide.

Black Oystercatchers defend territories that encompass both nesting and feeding areas. Threats often begin with a piping call when a territorial bird first sights the approach of another oystercatcher. The neck is outstretched and the bill is lowered slightly. This rigid upright stance is interrupted by a forward lowering of the head and bill as the threat gains intensity. This display is often met with similar intensity by neighbouring pairs at the boundary of the territory. Oystercatchers that fly toward a territory are usually met in flight and escorted far away by

Black Oystercatcher (continued)

territorial pairs. The defending Oystercatchers will sometimes slow their wing beats to enhance the display.

Males and females form long-term pair bonds. Oystercatchers copulate following a long display of piping calls, prancing about the territory and raising and lowering of the head and bill. The male holds his neck erect with the bill pointed down while the female crouches and gives churring calls. He climbs on to her back, bends his legs and moves his tail until his cloaca touches hers. He then leaps from her back and the pair stands, wag their tails and preen.

Both male and female build a small scrape on the ground, well above the high tide mark, and line it sparsely with pebbles or shell pieces. The female lays 2-3 speckled and well camouflaged eggs, and both the male and the female incubate for about 3½ - 4 weeks.

Oystercatcher chicks hatch with downy salt and pepper colored feathers that they wear for the first few weeks until the juvenal feathers emerge. Their legs and bills are dark brown to black in color and the eye is dark. Juveniles have dark brown almost black feathers fringed with buff on the mantle and wing. The iris is brown and the legs are dark brown or yellowish. In their first winter, oystercatchers resemble a paler version of the parent. The bill is reddish or orange with a dark brown tip. It will carry this plumage until it is about 12-13 months of age when it will attain the full adult breeding plumage. Adults molt their feathers in late summer.

Predators include raccoons, river otters, Bald Eagles, Glaucous-winged Gulls, Northwestern Crows and Common Ravens. High wave action during storms devastates nests. The 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska, had a major impact on breeding oystercatchers in that location: 20% of the population in the spill area was directly killed by the spill; breeding activity was disrupted in 39% of the oystercatcher pairs attempting to nest on heavily-oiled shorelines; and the survival of chicks was reduced. Human activities also pose a threat to this species on a smaller scale. The presence of humans on potential nesting islands often inhibits breeding attempts by Black Oystercatchers.

On your next walk along our rocky shore, listen for the shrill notes of Black Oystercatchers and consider that an estimated 10,000 of them occupy a narrow strip of land from Alaska to Baja where they merge with black and white American Oystercatchers.

Red beak tip of adult and look carefully for camouflaged chick. Photo LeValleyphoto.com

Black Oystercatcher nest and eggs