

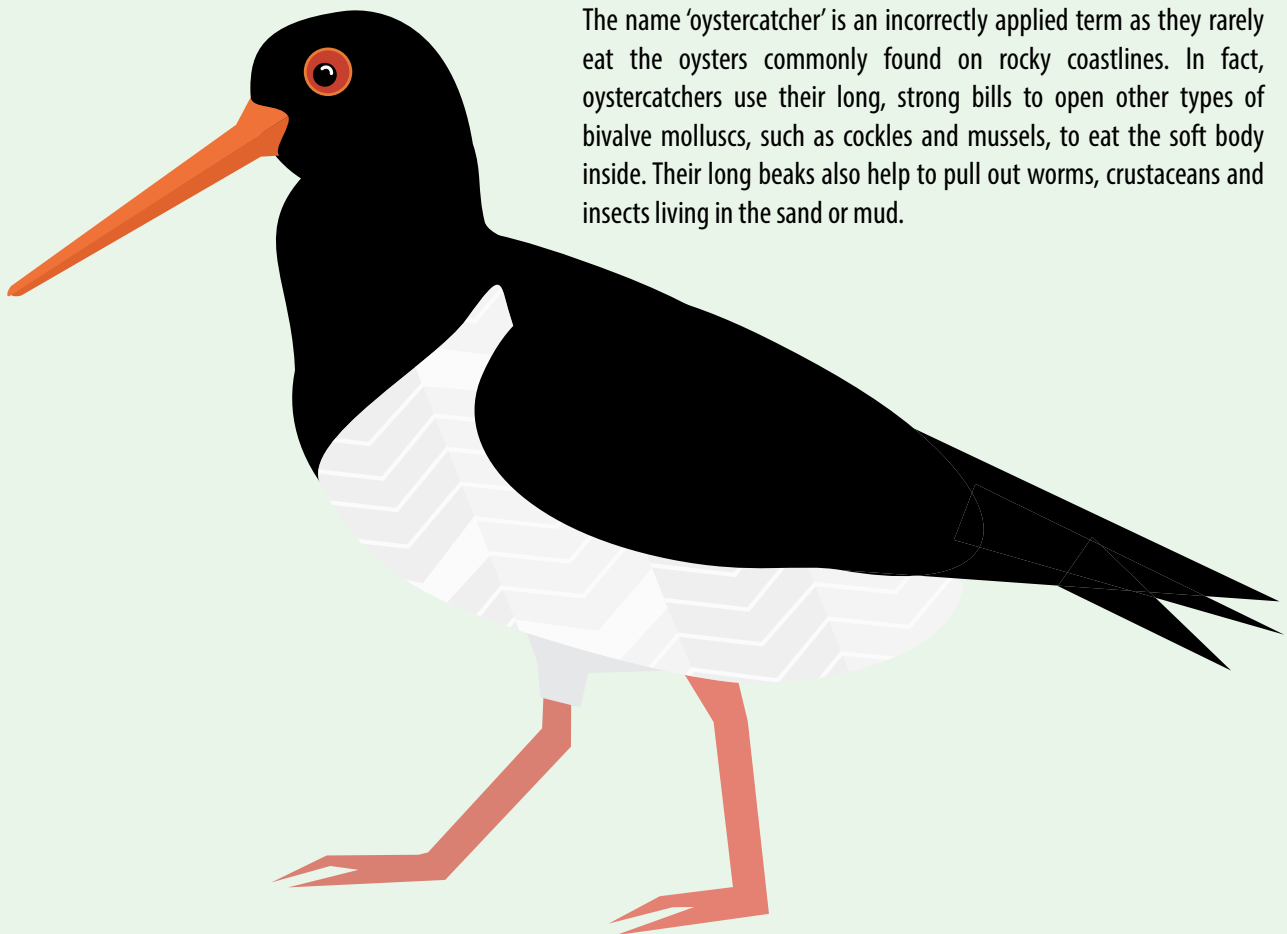


Threatened Fauna of the Hunter & Mid Coast

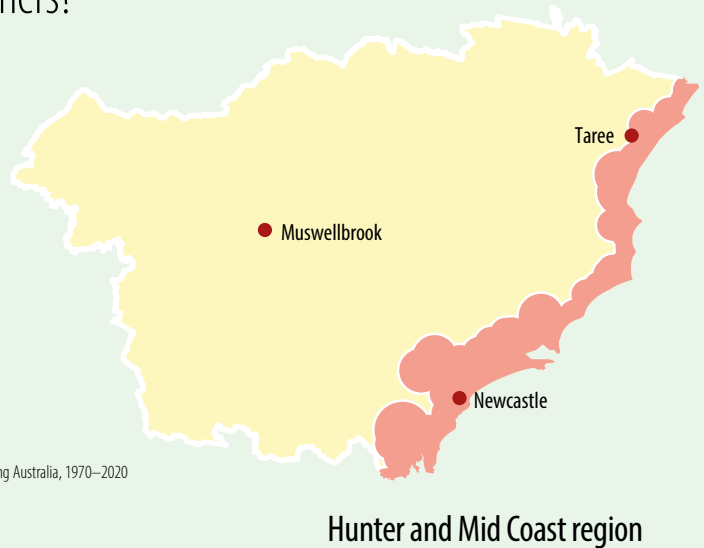
Australian pied oystercatcher *[Haematopus longirostris]*

There are several species of pied oystercatcher around the world. The Australian pied oystercatcher is found all around the coast of Australia with a preference for sandy beaches where there are a few rocks around as well. They are one of only five species of Australian shorebirds that nest exclusively on, or close to, the beach. They rely on coastal habitats for their survival.

The name 'oystercatcher' is an incorrectly applied term as they rarely eat the oysters commonly found on rocky coastlines. In fact, oystercatchers use their long, strong bills to open other types of bivalve molluscs, such as cockles and mussels, to eat the soft body inside. Their long beaks also help to pull out worms, crustaceans and insects living in the sand or mud.



Where are you most likely to see pied oystercatchers?



Why is this species important?

Beach-nesting birds are some of the most threatened in the world. This is because we all like to visit and recreate on our beaches, bringing rubbish, foot or vehicle traffic, noise disturbance and domestic pets with us to these locations.

Pied oystercatchers are currently listed as Endangered in New South Wales.

Port Stephens typically supports 1–1.5 per cent of the total Australian population of pied oystercatchers. In recent years, numbers have been increasing in the nearby Worimi Conservation Lands. Combined, these two sites now have around 250 birds. Twenty years ago, that was about the estimated total NSW population.

According to observations by the Hunter Bird Observers Group, breeding success has been improving in Port Stephens and Worimi Conservation Lands. Most likely this is from a combination of fox control and management of recreation on the Worimi Conservation Lands beaches.

Although it is possible to see pied oystercatchers right along the coastal regions of NSW, in the Hunter and Swansea/Lake Macquarie estuaries there are only small numbers of birds recorded.

Habitat

The pied oystercatcher prefers mudflats, sandbanks and sandy ocean beaches, and is less common along rocky or shingle coastlines. Though rare, the species may occasionally be found in estuarine mudflats and short pasture.

Although they aren't migratory, pied oystercatchers are locally nomadic moving up and down the coastline for food and shelter. They can be territorial over their stretch of beach and can often be heard warning intruders to stay away.

Breeding in pairs, pied oystercatchers form a breeding territory of approximately 200 m of coast. Both birds protect the territory. Nesting takes place on sand, shell grit or shingle just above the high water mark on beaches, sandbars, margins of estuaries and lagoons. The eggs are well-camouflaged, being pale brown with darker brown and black blotches and streaks, but despite this are still vulnerable to predators.

Parenting duties are shared between the sexes. If the parents become too disturbed they will often abandon the nest with the eggs or babies. This is another impact on this already vulnerable species.

Pied oystercatchers feed on bivalve molluscs (such as cockles and mussels), worms, crustaceans and insects. They use their long, strong bills to cut open the adductor muscles (that hold the two shell halves together) of bivalve molluscs so they can eat the soft body inside. Young pied oystercatchers are one of the few wading birds that are fed by their parents using this specialised feeding technique.



Pied oystercatchers nest in small 'scrapes' on the beach. Their eggs are camouflaged and exposed, so they are easily trampled.



Courtesy Peter Merritt

A pied oystercatcher's long, bright orange bill helps them pull out worms and other crustaceans deep in the sand.



Courtesy Raymond Burton

Identification

The pied oystercatcher is medium-sized shorebird, also known as a wader, 42–51 cm long and weighing about 400–780 grams.

Pied oystercatchers are easy to distinguish from other shorebirds. They are predominantly black and have a white breast, belly and underwing. Their bill and eye-rings are bright orange and they have a red eye. Their legs are a duller, coral pink colour. Both males and females have a similar appearance, with the females having a slightly longer, more slender bill. Young birds lack the vivid red-orange colours and are brown rather than black.

Pied oystercatchers breed from September to January and have a clutch of 2 to 3 eggs. The young, when hatched, are tiny, brown, striped chicks that leave the nest within a few days. Adults will defend their nests by pretending to be injured and luring the predator from the eggs or chicks.

The most frequent call is a loud, sharp high-pitched 'peep-a-peep', which is usually given in alarm and sounds much like a squeaky toy.

The pied oystercatcher is wary of humans and rarely allows people to approach them too closely. When the eggs are close to hatching and the chicks are small they will make more noise while they draw you away. If you hear them call and take flight, you're too close.

Threats

The greatest threat to Australia's beach-nesting shorebirds is disturbance from people visiting the beach. This disturbance is greatest in spring and summer, when beach-nesting birds usually lay their eggs, coinciding with the peak period of recreational use of beaches. Camouflaged eggs and chicks on a beach are vulnerable especially when parents leave the eggs to forage, or are scared away by people, dogs or vehicles.

Share the shore

Finding a balance between continuing to enjoy these places and protecting the unique natural and cultural values of this coastline is a challenge for us all. We all share a responsibility to share the shore and ensure our activities are balanced with maintaining the unique conservation values of the Hunter and Mid Coast region.



*Adults with a chick.
Courtesy Rob Palazzi*



Courtesy Alan Stuart



Courtesy Silas Darnell

You can help the pied oystercatcher



1. Respect signs or fencing indicating beach-nesting birds and keep out of those areas. You might not be able to see either the birds or the nests, and may crush eggs accidentally. Once chicks have hatched, they don't just stay in the fenced areas and may be hiding in plain sight, anywhere on the beach. Reduce your chances of stepping on a tiny chick by walking below the high tide mark.



2. Only drive below high tide. No one can see these almost-invisible eggs from a car. Only drive on designated 4WD beaches and stay below the high tide mark.



3. Birds in sight? Don't make them take flight! If a bird takes flight, you're too close. Frightened birds leave eggs and chicks unguarded. Whether walking, driving, riding a horse or a quad bike or in a boat, keep your distance – at least 250 m for pied oystercatchers.



4. Walk dogs only on designated dog beaches and keep them on leash. Off-leash dogs scare birds and cause them to abandon their nests. Dogs may also eat or trample on eggs or chicks.



5. Shorebirds and seabirds can get entangled in rubbish left on beaches and in waterways, especially discarded fishing line. Take your rubbish with you when you leave the beach and 'take three for the sea' – pick up three extra pieces of rubbish every time you are at the beach.



6. If you own land close to any shorebird nesting, roosting or feeding habitat, contact your Local Land Services representative about controlling foxes on your property. If you own a cat or dog, be a responsible pet owner and keep your pet confined to your property – day and night.



*During shorebird breeding season, please respect the signs around nesting sites.
Courtesy Trish Blair (Myall Koala Environment Group)*

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