

Sooty Oystercatcher

Haematopus fuliginosus

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An adult female Sooty Oystercatcher (photo: Telesha Ferguson)

This is a stocky mid-sized Australian endemic shorebird that specialises on rocky coastline habitats, where it both forages and breeds. Adult males and females are similar (except, see below), with all-dark plumage, bright orange-red bill, red iris with a yellow orbital ring, and pinkish legs and feet.

Juvenile plumage is brown-black, their legs are grey and their iris is brown. However, the bill is the main feature for distinguishing a juvenile from an adult – the proximal half is pale orange and the distal half is grey-black. As young birds develop, that dark area on the bill contracts but even at two years of age the bill usually retains a small dusky tip.



An immature Sooty Oystercatcher with an adult female – note the young bird's grey legs, brown iris and dark-tipped bill. Also, it has a very pointed bill – is it a young female? (photo: Alan Stuart)

New South Wales status

The Sooty Oystercatcher is classified as Vulnerable in NSW. Cooper *et al.* in 2014 estimated the state population to be probably less than 150 birds in total, and noted that it no longer breeds on the mainland in NSW. Although the state population must be higher than their estimate, its size is limited by the availability of suitable nesting sites at undisturbed locations.

Regional Status

This century, Sooty Oystercatcher numbers have been rising in the Hunter Region. A review in 2019 of their regional status found that records had been sporadic until the early 2000s and mostly involved records of small groups (for details, see *The Whistler* 2019). For 2004-2007, the annual totals were of 29-37 birds (but, at that time there were scant data for offshore islands). Subsequently, the population estimate rose steadily. For 2012-2017 the average estimate was 140 birds, and the peak was 158 birds in 2015. Regional count data no longer get collated, but the total population probably has plateaued.

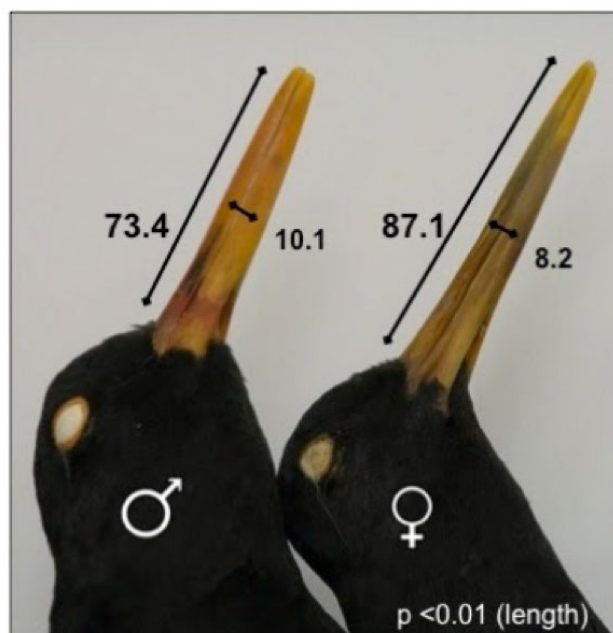
Birds breed as solitary pairs on offshore islands – there are records from Broughton Island, Cabbage Tree Island and Boondelbah Island, and also

historically from Moon Island (more recently, there was suggestive breeding behaviour there in 2008). At least five pairs breed on Broughton Island (*The Whistler* 2021 plus subsequent records). Assuming the same density of breeding sites on the other islands of the region, there might be 20 or so pairs breeding annually in our region. Most of the potential breeding sites are difficult to access and monitor.

In the non-breeding season, adults and juvenile/immature birds congregate at high tide roost sites. There are several well-known roost sites in the Hunter Region. The rock platform near Newcastle Baths has the greatest numbers – the counts from there often are of around 50 birds. Broughton Island hosts 30 or so birds, and there are another 30-40 which roost in Port Stephens.

Males and Females

Although males and females look almost identical, there is one important difference that we know about. They forage differently, and therefore their bills are different. The female's bill is longer and pointier (on average her bill is 19% longer). This is related to males and females foraging on different prey. A study in 2011 found striking differences between the sexes in diet, with seven prey classes eaten exclusively by one sex (male: 4, female: 3); also, all of the shared prey classes were eaten in different proportions (source: *Austral Ecology* 2011).



Male (left) and female (right) Sooty Oystercatcher bills (source: *Austral Ecology* 2011).

Sub-species

There are two sub-species: *ophthalmicus* (Northern Sooty Oystercatcher) and *fuliginosus* (Southern Sooty Oystercatcher). The southern limit for the northern subspecies is at about Mackay ie we only see the southern subspecies in NSW. The main differences are that the northern birds have a much larger yellow orbital ring and they have dark claws on their toes.

About the name

Sooty Oystercatcher

Apparently the term “oystercatcher” (originally as two words: oyster catcher) arose in North America in the early 18th Century, spread to Britain soon afterwards and thence to other parts of the world including Australia. Oysters are at best a minor part of the diet of any of the species in this guild of birds, and so the name is rather a misnomer.

Five of the eleven extant oystercatcher species have all-dark plumage (the other six are black and white birds). The African Oystercatcher is one of the all-dark species; the other four are named in relation to how dark they seem to observers: Black, Blackish, Variable, and Sooty.

Haematopus fuliginosus

The species name is from the Latin word *fuligo*, meaning soot. All the world’s oystercatchers belong to the same genus, with its name deriving from the Greek words *haima*, blood, and *pous/pod*, foot – thus, “blood-red foot”. That’s another misnomer, as all of the species possess pinkish legs rather than bright red ones.



A pair of Sooty Oystercatchers at Harrington - note the differences in their bills (photo: Alan Stuart)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names A Complete Guide • Richard Cooper, Ian McAllan and Brian Curtis (2020). Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT, Vol 1

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