

**BREEDING OF THE AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER,
HAEMATOPUS PALLIATUS,
CONFIRMED IN MISSISSIPPI**

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On 23 May 2002 Skipper Anding, his son Jason, and I, after completing a breeding block survey in the Desoto National Forest, headed for the Mississippi Gulf coast. I had promised Skipper that if he would help me out with the breeding block, I would take him out to one of my favorite haunts, Horn Island, part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Skipper had never been out to Horn Island and was excited about the possibilities of sighting birds not too frequently seen on the mainland. High on his list of expectations was the American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*).

Because of a late start, we arrived at the East end of Horn Island in just enough time to set up camp. We were awed by the black skimmers cruising the edge of the water in the sunset, thrilled at catching a few fish in the surf, and relished the island cuisine of hot dogs roasted over a small fire.

Morning was for bird watching, and that is what we did. The tidal pond on the North side of the Island just east of the first trees and osprey nests was alive with assorted shore birds. Reddish Egrets (*Egretta rufescens*) danced in the tidal pool; Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*), Red Knots

(*Calidris canutus*) and Black Bellied Plovers (*Pluvialis squatarola*) paraded in their breeding best; and one lone Wimbrel posed for pictures.

An American Oystercatcher flew by carrying something and landed near a second individual on the small sea-purslane (*Sesuvium portulacastrum*) covered dunes. Then we saw them. Two gray, golfball-sized young, begging for the attention and food from the adults. We thought this a "neat" find and it certainly made our day. Neither of us was aware of the significance of confirming the breeding of these birds in Mississippi.

We played hide and seek with the young but were finally able, with considerable luck, to photograph the approximately day-old chicks (Fig. 1). These birds were phenomenally adept at concealing themselves amongst the detritus and dune debris. The concerned adults never went far. One would feign a limp and go one way and the other would go a different way. We quickly took pictures and allowed the adults to return to their parenting duties.

On returning home and posting our outing events on the "MISSBIRD" listserv, we received word from several notable Mississippi birders that not only was this sighting of the American Oystercatcher with young "neat" as I described it but of significance because it was the first confirmed breeding record in the state of Mississippi.

Turcotte and Watts (1999), state that "Breeding on the Mississippi mainland or islands has not been reported". In discussing our find with Judith Touns, she indicated that breeding has been suspected in Mississippi but never documented. She did indicate that the Oystercatcher populations seem to be on the rise along the coast. Although I can usually count on seeing two or three in any trip to the

islands, a recent Christmas Bird Count supposedly reported nearly 100 in Jackson County, MS.

On 30 July 2002, one week after first finding the young, I returned with my wife, Sandi, and both young were doing well. On our approach, they would go into hiding and even though they had nearly doubled in size, they were even more skilled in finding hiding places. We did manage to find and photograph one but the other completely eluded us. Within minutes of backing off, the young would come out of hiding and join the adults.

Two weeks later, we returned again to the east end of Horn Island and looked for the young oystercatchers. During the course of the two weeks, one of the young had apparently succumbed to the rigors of life, leaving the two adults and one sibling. By this time the remaining youngster had grown to nearly half the size of the adults and actually looked like an oystercatcher.

During that summer, I have returned several times and the three Oystercatchers all seem to be faring well. The juvenile bird looks nearly identical to the adults except for some discoloration on the bill.

Literature Cited

Turcotte, W. H., and D. L. Watts. 1999. *Birds of Mississippi*. University Press of Mississippi and Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks, Jackson, Mississippi.



Figure 1. Young American Oystercatcher photographed on 23 May 2002 near the east end of Horn Island, Gulf Islands National Seashore, Ocean Springs, Jackson County, Mississippi.