

African Black Oystercatcher chicks dive to escape danger

K.M. CALF

Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa,
e-mail: kathy@maths.uct.ac.za

Minton (2001) started a spate of reports (Sitters 2002) in the *Wader Study Group Bulletin* of wader adults and chicks swimming and diving to escape danger. Minton (2001) noted an unconfirmed report of Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* chicks swimming underwater for short distances when approached by an observer and D. Heg (Sitters 2002) confirmed this behaviour. Hayes & Bennett (1985) and Morgan (1994) confirmed this behaviour in American Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus bachmanii* chicks, and I can confirm that African Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* chicks also behave in this way.

I have been working with African Black Oystercatchers on Robben Island, South Africa, and on numerous occasions I have witnessed chicks of various ages, from just over a week (about 100 g) to fledging (between 400 and 500 g), swimming to join their parents on limpet-covered rocks. In addition, chicks from two weeks (about 200 g) to fledging run, swim and dive to avoid danger. I have caught numerous chicks on a regular basis to determine growth and often played the "predator" role in incidents where the chicks, suddenly panicking when I approached, have swum to sea and dived if I was too close. In many cases I have been able to catch the chicks, some with down covering large parts of their bodies, and they are remarkably dry.

The usual behaviour for African Black Oystercatcher chicks, like many other waders, is to run for cover and hide, keeping very still. However, when caught unawares or alarmed by the proximity of observers, chicks have been

observed to run across the rocks towards the sea and swim. After swimming along the surface at a furious pace chicks will often dive underwater and use their half-closed wings as paddles to propel themselves. I have seen them dive to a depth of one metre and swim for about 10 seconds, covering 4–5 m underwater. They return to the surface, paddling with their feet, and some chicks have dived numerous times before capture. In several chick-catching attempts I have caught chicks that had dived in very shallow water, so I was looking down on them and could just pluck them out of the water. I found that if I could not look down on the chick, catching it was far more difficult when it was underwater. They frequently change direction making it difficult to anticipate where they will surface.

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