

# THE ORIOLE

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# THE ORIOLE

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## LIFE HISTORY NOTES ON THE AMERICAN OYSTER-CATCHER

By IVAN R. TOMKINS

To one who has lived close to the salt-marsh and the shore, the songs of the shore birds are quite as harmonious and emotion-waking as the more conventional and better known songs of the birds of the field and the forest. The barking of the Black Skimmer overhead at night, the plaintive whistle of the Black-bellied Plover, or the wild calls of the Willet in courtship, are full of their particular appeal, but of all the birds I have known, the song of the Oyster-catcher has a special place. The wild pibroch has a cadence and modulation that cannot be described in words. It is one of those things that brings back to mind the "looming" of winter horizons, the glare of intense sun on barren beach, of storm tides when all the world seems adrift, shutting out the things of every day and opening a remote world. It is a symbol, an actuality and an enigma. The piping of the birds can often be heard a mile away, long before they can be seen. The group sweeps in, wing beats perhaps shortened into the "butterfly" flight, alights on beach or oyster-reef, choruses and parades with arched necks and bills pointed downward, a performance unique.

Of the thirty-odd shore birds that visit our Georgia coast, the Oyster-catcher is the only one that can rightly be called a permanent resident, though many others may be given that label because a few individuals can be found here the year around.

There is quite a little evidence to show that the birds that breed from northern Florida to the Capes of Virginia along the Atlantic Coast, spend their winters in the Carolinas, Georgia and northern Florida, an orbit that tends to isolate them from those of the Gulf Coast. The American Oyster-catcher, a subspecies which ranges on the Gulf and Atlantic coasts of North America has been known as *Haematopus palliatus palliatus* and is so listed in the Fourth Edition of the American Ornithologists Union Check-list (1931), but there is now a tendency to regard it as a subspecies of the European Oyster-catcher, under the name of *Haematopus ostralegus palliatus*. A discussion of the matter will be found in Murphy (1936, 973). The title of this paper seems to indicate that the notes refer to the entire subspecies, but the notes have all been gathered along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, and can only be referred to this population. Whether there is different behavior in other parts of the range is unknown. There is danger of extinction in such isolation, yet the situation might be one that would lead to further subspecific differentiation.



The literature contains little on the life history of our American birds, though the European bird has been quite well documented according to the many references to studies made by Selous, Makkink, Huxley, and others.

Our local birds are few in numbers, and thinly spread during the nesting season. They are shy and intolerant of other birds in nesting season, whether of their own kind or not. They are gregarious in the non-breeding season. Sprunt and Chamberlain (1949, 208) confirm this shyness when nesting, in the light of their experience in the Cape Romain region, north of Charleston, where the birds are more numerous than they are here. In contrast to this, the accounts of the European Oyster-catcher causes us to believe that it is more tolerant of intruders, tamer so to speak, and nests in loose colonies.

For the sake of the record, a brief description of the terrain which includes the Oyster-catcher habitat of this region is given. The outer coast of South Carolina and Georgia, consists of barrier islands fronting on the ocean and looking back across several miles of salt-marshes toward the mainland. Between the islands there are estuaries, some of which carry the spill of the fresh water of the rivers into the ocean. The islands consist of sand beach and dune land, with pine and oak and palmetto forest on the older parts, and salt marshes on the inner side. The salt-marshes are threaded with waterways that fill and drain partially with the ebb and flow of the tides, a phenomenon of considerable magnitude along this portion of the coast where the normal range of the tide is over seven feet, with spring tides ranging to ten feet or more. When the spring flood reaches a high stage there is very little of the marsh area uncovered, and all that remains dry are the sandbars and the banks of dead oystershells thrown up by wave action.

At certain places in this band of islands and marshes there is suitable Oyster-catcher habitat, but other wide reaches lack the essentials, and none are found there. Sometimes the habitat needs are met where it appears that the outer beaches are used, but this is not generally so.

In another short paper (Tomkins, 1947) stress was laid on the belief that the Oyster-catchers here are limited to a definite habitat where there are oysterbeds that are covered and uncovered by the tide each day, and that this is the reason for the limited distribution of our Atlantic coast birds. It is true that there are accounts from other coasts of the Americas which indicate or infer different habitat limitations, but this theory as applied to our birds has been tested by many years of observation, justifying the statement that they do not live where such habitat is interrupted. No conclusions can be offered concerning the habitat in other parts of the range of *palliatum*.

At the mouth of the Savannah River, there are long rock jetties covered with oysters, limpets, barnacles, etc., and harboring a host of other forms of marine life. There are also extensive intertidal oysterbeds nearby. In Charleston Harbor (S.C.) and again in St. Mary's River Entrance (Ga.-Fla.) there are similar jetties, while

at various localities between there are large intertidal oysterbeds. Woodward (1949, 5) reports winter flocks of 22, 20, and 16, from Sea Island (Glynn County, Ga.) in 1946, 1947, and 1948.

The Savannah River Entrance had flocks of 60 to 70 birds in winter from 1928 through 1935, then there was a gap of several years when opportunities were inadequate. For a few years from 1946 on it seemed that their numbers were reduced to 40 and 50. The past three years flocks of 60 and 70 have been counted again. It is not difficult to locate all the birds of an area if it is possible to cover it well, for they are conspicuous and prone to use the same feeding and resting grounds each day. Some small flocks arrive in August and early September, but the full winter complement is not reached until October. The winter flocks begin to break up in March, but small flocks which are probably non-breeders, perhaps birds not yet mature, persist until late April or May, occasionally all summer.

The habitat of any bird is made up of several things, which can often be listed when the situations are known under which the birds shelter, feed, and nest. These factors of course are liable to be somewhat broader than can be determined in any one locality. They are also susceptible of modification from population pressure when some birds must occupy less than optimum habitat, or by individual learning, or the personal attachment for one particular locality which may be clung to even after considerable habitat modification. In the case of our Oyster-catchers, the habitat of the season of non-reproduction appears to consist of two very simple things:

- a. Suitable feeding ground on or near intertidal oysterbeds.
- b. Suitable resting places over high tide, on open ground, within commuting distance of (a). The resting places are always on open ground without vegetation, such as beaches or reefs of dead oystershells above tidal levels. A suitable place may be used year after year.

Presumably one may subtract the habitat requirements of the winter season from that of the breeding season, and gain an understanding of the additional requirements for nesting. This is more likely to be feasible in the case of a species which lives in the same areas and uses the same kind of food in summer and winter. On this basis, the following additional things are needed for successful nesting:

- a. Open ground above tidal level for nesting, which must have
- b. An opening to the beach where the birds can walk, not fly, to the nest area, and
- c. A slight elevation for good vision, and
- d. Preferably considerable distance from other large nesting birds of its own or other species.

These things may not be of equal importance, nor of prime necessity, but all nests observed have had them to a marked degree. It should be stated that this determination has been based on areas where there was no great population pressure, hence they probably represent optimum nesting needs.





Young Oyster-catcher about one week old. At this stage the bill is plover-like.



Young Oyster-catcher about three and a half weeks old. The bill begins to resemble that of the adult.

The nests are made in the open, not close to vegetation like the Wilson's Plover or in grass like the Eastern Willet. Sometimes the nests are on open sand, in the "drift sedge" or drifted grass stems at the mark of highest water, or on dead oystershells. Usually the nests are ringed with bits of shell, perhaps as a symbolic courtship feeding, though this behavior has not actually been observed.

The birds habitually avoid anything higher than the normal ground. Other Charadriiform birds will feed or rest or nest under bridges, close to pilings, old logs and the like, but not this species. The birds are very wary and hard to approach when on the nest. One nest was on sand some 300 feet from the beach, and was approached very carefully a number of times. When my head came into view of the bird perhaps 1,000 feet away, the incubating bird would slip off the nest and walk directly away from me for some distance before taking wing. Another nest was on a sand ridge visible through my binocular from the dredge where I worked, and the sitting birds could be seen without difficulty. The workmen laid dredge pipelines closer each day, and when one was placed across the sand ridge 300 feet from the nest, the birds abandoned the eggs for good. Sometimes a nest has been found in a colony of Black Skimmers or Least Terns, but in every case it has appeared that these birds had moved in after the Oyster-catcher nest had eggs in it, and were there by suffrance only. Sometimes a nest has been abandoned when the other birds moved in.

One pair used to nest on a sand ridge north of the Savannah River when there were oysters available nearby. Dredge spoil covered this food supply, but for a year or so a pair, probably the same ones, continued to use the location and would commute one and a half miles across two river channels to an oyster filled creek to feed.

The European Oyster-catcher is said to nest closer together. The only case known locally where several nests were placed close together is that mentioned by Bent (1929, 311), in Glynn County, where the late Mr. M. H. Burroughs found four nests in a space a little over 300 feet across. In 1930, Mr. Burroughs showed me this place, and it seemed to both of us that the construction of a resort (Sea Island) had preempted some of the nesting territory, and that these birds had accepted the presence of close neighbors rather than leave their home range. It would be interesting to know how our birds would react to a crowded habitat in an area like the Cape Romain section where the birds are much more numerous.

This matter of attachment to a particular home range seems pretty well proven, and it is not uncommon to find a pair or so resident on their home territory when the remainder of the population is gathered in flocks elsewhere. These are not family groups with young of the year present, and there has been no sign of pairs among the flocks. Perhaps it is homing rather than the strength of the pair-bond that hold these adults on their nesting ground. In the case of a pair that lived on Oysterbed Island, the pair-bond must have been strong to bring them into the proper state for early nesting each year. This pair nested very early from 1922 until about 1930. The earliest egg date given by Bent (*loc. cit.*) was March 27th, when a set of three was found. This set of eggs were from this pair. After



1930, the same territory was occupied by a pair that nested at a more normal time.

It often seems that the behavior patterns of the yearly cycle, from the social life of the winter flocks through the courtship that aids the pair formation, and furnishes the stimulation that brings them both into psychological and physiological synchronism for breeding, and the later stages of the nesting and family care, are the hardest of all to interpret. This account has little to offer on the subject but a few brief comments. The shyness and mobility of the flocks and later of the pair and family make it exceedingly difficult to decipher these things. There is a general similarity to the behavior of Wilson's Plover (Tomkins, 1944). The territory behavior, the scrape-making, and much of the defense of the young, are all on the same general pattern, though the details vary.

Armstrong (1947, 167) has described and pictured the ceremonial piping display and parade, from the accounts of European naturalists, and of course referring to their bird. The account is much like a description of the behavior of our birds, if seen through the eyes of several observers and then abstracted by someone else, except that, contrary to Armstrong, *both sexes of our birds take part*. I have seen the display performed by a few of a large and unconcerned flock; by a pair that were feeding far away from the nesting ground in mid-winter when another pair lit nearby, and continued by all four birds until the second pair flew away; by two pairs that came in from the open sound, lit on the beach and piped and paraded together, then settled quietly to rest; and often heard the chorus when one or more strange birds invaded a nesting territory, in which case the intruders usually left shortly, followed by the resident pair, one of them soon returning to the territory, followed by the other after a little while. It seems to begin by nervous excitement, and one never knows when the usual oyster-catcher notes will catch fire into the piping with any or all of the postural trimmings. That it is highly stimulatory cannot be doubted by anyone who has seen or heard it. In flight it usually is accompanied by the "butterfly" flight. From the present viewpoint it seems to serve in the dual capacity of courtship and territory defense. In the case of the Wilson's Plover, (*loc. cit.*) it seemed to me that the notes and scrape-making served this dual function, if indeed the two are separable. It is altogether likely that there are bits of rehearsal among the sexually dormant flocks before either courtship or territory is taken seriously. There seems no value to it in the way of sex recognition.

From pair-formation and territory establishment until eggs are laid is sometimes quite long, not surprising in the case of a species that winters nearby and has long months in which to raise a family. There has been no indication of more than one brood a season.

One pair on Oysterbed Island in 1931, occupied territory by the 26th of February; the first nest hollow was scraped by the 26th of March; they made and abandoned five such scrapes in an area about 200 feet in diameter; had two eggs in the sixth scrape on the 23rd of April, and the third egg was laid on the 25th. Here was a case where the birds defended their territory for three months before the eggs were laid. The territory was of great importance to this pair.

Later on in this paper, a comment will be made of the writing of Hoxie which turns on this point. One of the first two eggs hatched on the 21st or 22nd day of May, another on the 22nd, and the last one laid had not hatched late on the 22nd, though the hatching was imminent, when it became necessary for me to leave the vicinity for several weeks. This gives an incubation period of about 28 days (after the last egg was laid) rather than the 24 or 25 days given by Sprunt and Chamberlain (*loc. cit.*).

It takes long and steady effort for the chick to break the heavy shells. The last egg mentioned in the previous paragraph, had cracked lines on it May 18th, and all of the eggs were plainly pipped the next day. The movement of the young birds inside, turning and tapping the shell-breaker on the upper mandible against the inner surface of the egg, might be considered the perfect example of pure instinctive action. Certainly it is done without learning and before experience. The term "shell-breaker" is considered preferable to "egg-tooth" which has been frequently used. Heilmann (1927, 90) has drawn attention to the fact that the lizards and the snakes have a genuine dentin tooth in the premaxillary, but that in the birds and some of the reptiles the device which serves the same purpose is in no sense a tooth and should be called a "shell-breaker" instead.

There is a published account (Hoxie, 1887, 129) of an Oyster-catcher moving her eggs between the thighs to another prepared nest a hundred yards away. I would have preferred not to comment on this account, but it has been quoted so often that it should not be passed without comment. The behavior reported by Hoxie in this case is so foreign to my own conception of Oyster-catcher behavior that it is preferred to consider the account romantic rather than classic, at least until further evidence is forthcoming. Though other scrapes are made prior to egg-laying, they are not of further use, and become erased by the wind or rain before long.

One pair of birds was marked with prussian blue by placing swabs in the nest. After they removed several of these swabs, both birds became marked on different parts of the breast and belly, but little was learned except that both shared in the incubation duties.

Three eggs is the normal clutch and about all that can be covered. One nest contained five eggs, probably from one female as only two birds were seen in the vicinity. On a later visit one egg was outside the nest. It was put back, a foolish action on my part, and on a later visit there were only three. Perhaps the birds had rolled the excess out.

Sometimes the nesting birds come to meet the human intruder long before he can see the nest, and when he leaves they often fly over again when he is some distance away. They readily attack the Fish Crows, but seem to be tolerant of terns and skimmers in flight. There is a well developed "cripple-display." The flight powers are never fully realized until one is seen in pursuit of a crow.

The young birds are fed with oysters, frequently brought from quite a distance. Regurgitation of such food is a necessity. It was hard to find the young birds a week old, until it was found that they often enter the water and swim out a hundred yards or more, hiding



in grass if any is present. If one hides at a little distance, they will soon return to land. One such young bird, pursued in three inches of water, tried to dive but was unsuccessful.

When first hatched the chicks have both mandibles hooked downward at the tip. After a couple of weeks the bill resembles that of a Plover, and the typical oyster-catcher bill begins to develop at four or five weeks of age, about when the young are able to fly with the parents. At about five weeks, they are the size of the parents, but can be told in the field by buffy tail coverts instead of white, and by the dark bill and legs. They remain with the adults until about early September. In the fall flocks the legs appear to be adult in color, but the outer end of the bill remains dull in color until the next spring. This character has real value in flock counts to determine the nesting success of the previous summer. The winter flocks can readily be separated so, if one can get close enough to look them over carefully. They are prone to hide the bill in the feathers of the back when resting which prevents a good view. For the last two winters as many counts as possible have been made, but the results are too inconclusive to detail here. The young of the previous summer comprise from 18 to 30 percent of the flocks by these trials.

Armstrong (*loc. cit.*) quotes Dirksen to the effect that the European Oyster-catcher does not breed until three years old. My observations seem to indicate that this may be true here, with the presence of non-breeders in late spring, and the fact that these groups contain birds of the previous year and others apparently more mature. There is no more definite evidence than that.

The foregoing notes are but fragmentary, yet they seem to contain more on the life history of our birds than has before been published. When a more complete study of this interesting bird is made, I hope they will be useful.

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#### GENERAL NOTES

##### PURPLE MARTIN NESTLINGS KILLED BY EXTREME HEAT.

—Having enjoyed large colonies of Purple Martins (*Progne subis*) in my backyard for the past fifteen years, I had been looking forward to the time when the four to five baby birds in nearly every one of my 96 gourds should begin to fly. But the record 104 degree heat of June 27, 1954, killed all the baby birds in gourds hanging from the two lower of three wire cables hung across the open lawn between two trees (reflected heat evidently affected the lower cables more than the top one), and before I successfully stopped them, hordes of ants moved in from the six ends of the cables and drove most of the parent birds from their homes. So, except for a few determined parents and hardy young on the topmost cable, our colony was completely vanquished.

As past experience has taught me that the martins will not patronize gourds too close to shady trees but like the wide open spaces with plenty of "runway," I hang the gourds where they are necessarily exposed to hot sun all day long. Many times in past years a few young martins suffered from heat, but this was the first time that catastrophe struck on a large scale. All the young were well-fed and fat; the parents fed and cared for them to the very end.—FRED A. BIRCHMORE, 613 Milledge Terrace, Athens, Georgia.

**BLUE GOOSE AT WEST POINT.**—On November 3, 1953, an adult Blue Goose (*Chen caerulescens*) was observed on the banks of the Chattahoochee River within the city limits of West Point, Georgia. The bird was in the company of a small flock of domestic geese owned by Mrs. Hugh McCullough, who first saw the strange goose a week previous to the above given date. The Blue Goose became rather tame and was accustomed to feeding twice daily in the McCullough yard which borders on the river. The goose was easily observed at close range, and identification was no problem after observing the one at the Ida Cason Gardens the previous winter. May 10, 1954, was the last date the bird was seen. One wonders if this goose was the same one that spent the winter at the Gardens the year before.—GRACE M. WHITEMAN, 801 Third Avenue, West Point, Georgia.



**NOTES FROM ATLANTA.**—Recent field work in the Atlanta area has resulted in several records of interest. All the birds noted here are considered to be rare or uncommon in this region.

Lincoln's Sparrow: *Melospiza lincolni*. A male collected on April 8, 1953, from a brush pile near Peachtree Creek in the northeast section of the city is my first record of this species and one of the few for the Atlanta region.

Ring-billed Gull: *Larus delawarensis*. An immature bird found dead on Highway 42 June 2, 1954, at South River is my first record here.

Ruddy Duck: *Oxyura jamaicensis*. A flock of 13 birds was seen on the lake at Piedmont Park on April 12, 1954. One bird was a male in full breeding plumage, another almost so, and the remainder were females or males still in winter plumage.

Tennessee Warbler: *Vermivora peregrina*. A male, which I believe was singing, was collected on May 16, 1954, in the Wallace Mill Road area. This species is a common fall migrant here but is almost unknown in spring.

The following birds were all taken in a small swampy area near the South Fork of Peachtree Creek off Clairmont Road in DeKalb County.

Philadelphia Vireo: *Vireo philadelphicus*. Although considered a rare fall migrant in Georgia, a female taken on October 3, 1953, and another taken on September 11, 1954 are my third and fourth records, and I do not doubt that they occur regularly here in fall.

Swainson's Warbler: *Limnithlypis swainsonii*. A singing male taken on April 11, 1954, is my second record here.

Connecticut Warbler: *Oporornis agilis*. For years I looked for this warbler in Atlanta, but until May 22, 1954, I was unsuccessful. On that date I collected a male, and on the following day observed another male, singing, near Wallace Mill Road.

Wilson's Warbler: *Wilsonia pusilla*. A male taken on September 11, 1954, is my first record for Atlanta.

Long-billed Marsh Wren: *Telmatodytes palustris*. A male was collected on April 24, 1954. My only previous record was a bird observed on May 3, 1937.—RICHARD A. PARKS, 2303 Pembroke Place, N.E., Atlanta, Georgia.

**AERIAL FEEDING OF CATBIRD.**—A pair of Catbirds (*Dumetella carolinensis*) had a nest in some shrubbery near my front porch. One evening sitting on the porch at dusk I was attracted by a bird flying out of a tree catching insects in the air. I was surprised to find it was a Catbird. It continued doing this for about twenty minutes, alighting on the telephone wire as well as in the tree, then flying out and snapping up the insects. Although I am sure many birds occasionally pursue insects in flight, such a deliberate and prolonged effort at flycatching by a Catbird seemed unusual to me.—MRS. T. T. GIFFEN, 801-A North Monroe Street, Albany, Georgia.

**THE RED CROSSBILL IN RABUN COUNTY, GEORGIA, IN MAY.**—On the morning of May 16, 1954, Mrs. Marianne Strauss of Augusta observed four Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*) about half way up Black Rock Mountain (est. el. 2600 ft.) near Mountain City, Rabun County, Georgia. Her attention was first attracted by the audible snapping of their beaks as they extracted seeds from pine cones in the tree beneath which she was standing. The birds were studied through 8X glasses and the crossed bills especially were noted. There was one adult in the group, the others being first year males or females. Being unaware of the importance of the possibility of their nesting no effort was made to determine this point.

The writer as a result of his association with Mrs. Strauss on many field trips feels that this record is entirely accurate and reports it as a stimulus to further work in the area.—J. FRED DENTON, 1510 Pendleton Road, Augusta, Georgia.

## NEWS AND COMMENTS

**FALL MEETING, 1954.**—The thirty-first semi-annual meeting of the Georgia Ornithological Society was held at Savannah Beach, Georgia, on October 8, 9, and 10, 1954, with headquarters at the Tides Hotel Apartments.

Registration was begun on Friday evening for early arrivals and was continued on Saturday from 10:00 A.M. on during the day. Total registration was 56, including three from Tennessee and one from Alabama.

On Friday evening the big topic was the amazing number of migratory birds which had perished on the night of October 7 at Warner Robins, Tybee Light, Turner Field, and downtown Savannah. Numbers of the dead birds which had been picked up in the Savannah area and at Warner Robins were on limited display. It appeared that warblers constituted the bulk of the birds killed.

Many members were up early Saturday morning for a field trip to the upper end of Tybee Island to observe shore and water birds. After breakfast small groups visited at various areas thereby adding to the bird list.

At noon an executive meeting was held.

At 2:00 P.M. the business session was held in the Town Hall with the president, Mrs. Charles Neal, presiding.

Dr. Sam Anderson, Treasurer, gave the annual financial report of the society.

William Griffin reminded the group that the Charles Neal Fund was set up by Mrs. Neal and friends honoring the late Charles Neal, and that it was a contingent fund for *The Oriole*. Members were invited to contribute.

Mrs. Thomas Cater gave the reports of the Regional Vice Presidents.

A letter from Herbert Stoddard concerning the forthcoming book on Georgia birds by Thomas Burleigh stated that the manuscript



was now complete, and the financial arrangements for publication would be undertaken soon.

After discussion concerning possible action to be taken in connection with the recent destruction of migratory birds, it was decided that on returning home members should investigate the possibility of bird mortality in their various localities, and any information obtained should be sent to David Johnston at Mercer University who would correlate the information for the state.

Greetings were read from the Carolina Bird Club, Alabama Bird Club, and the Key West Bird Club.

After a sea food dinner Saturday evening, the members and guests assembled in the Town Hall. It was announced that the next meeting would be held in Atlanta.

Herman Coolidge introduced the speaker for the evening, Mrs. Arthur A. Allen of Cornell, a leading authority on the ornithological history of America, who gave an interesting discourse on the life and work of John Abbot, the English artist and ornithologist who spent many years studying and painting the birds of Georgia. Mrs. Allen's talk was illustrated with colored slides of a number of Abbot's paintings of birds.

At 8:00 A.M. Sunday the group met on board an excursion boat in Savannah for a trip down the Savannah River to its mouth. Many water and shore birds were seen, and especially interesting was the Bald Eagle seen to good advantage both at rest and in flight. On the return the bird count was taken and showed a total of 87 species seen.

**NEWS OF MEMBERS.**—GEORGE SCIPLE has recently returned to Atlanta and is now at the Emory University Medical School. . . . ROBERT NORRIS, who was erroneously reported here as going to Duke University, has joined the faculty in the Department of Zoology at Rutgers University. . . . DR. HAROLD JONES has returned to Rome after an absence of several years and is again on the faculty at the Berry Schools.