

Marine Matters Ecological Almanac

Black oystercatcher – Sgaadang.a

by Charlotte Tarver

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One of the more familiar birds along the rocky shorelines of Haida Gwaii is '**Sgaadang.a**' or **Black Oystercatcher**. It is an unremarkable long-legged and blackish-brown shorebird – except for a long, orange-red bill, and loud, raucous calls. One might pass them by and not realize how important a role Black Oystercatchers play in our local systems. *Oystercatchers live on land at the shore's edge, yet are entirely dependent on the ocean for their food. Thus, they are a good indicator species of shoreline health.*

Black Oystercatchers are year-round residents on Haida Gwaii/QCI. Their habitat includes rock headlands, rocky shorelines and sand/gravel beaches with lots of tidal and wave action. *In spring and summer, they can be found on small islands or rocks, where they nest and raise their young. In winter, they congregate in large flocks of 20 to 100 to feed in protected inlets.* A Christmas bird count in Naden Harbour once recorded a flock of 150 birds.

Despite their name, oystercatchers feed mostly on mussels and limpets. They rely on the immense mussel beds and abundant populations of limpets and crustaceans found here. These prey species in turn rely on the high quality, plankton-rich waters of the Islands, and are also an indication of a healthy marine environment

Black Oystercatchers are fascinating to watch. They run with short quick steps, side-by-side, then rotate in place or make a 180-degree turn and give dramatic leaps. With head and bill downward, neck and shoulders hunched, they rush at each other, giving a rapid series of calls. *These antics are performed when defending territories, luring intruders away from a nest site or when reuniting with a mate.* Known to live over 16 years, pairs form long-lasting bonds and stay together for many years. They return to the same breeding and nesting sites year after year.

Another fascinating detail about Black Oystercatchers is their nest locations. *They lay their eggs on the bare rock of a headland, just above the high-tide line, with only a few pieces of gravel or shell for nesting material.* An optical illusion hides the egg as its mottled colour matches the surrounding habitat. Ravens fly back and forth over a nest site for long periods of time, searching for eggs they cannot find.

Natural predators of eggs and chicks are ravens, crows, eagles and other birds. *When a predator approaches, adults give a single warning call and use decoy tactics. Chicks instantly flatten themselves against a rock, under tiny ledges or in small cracks.* The colour of their downy feathers is almost a perfect match to surrounding rocks. Adults have few predators.

A 12-year study by local researchers includes banding chicks on nesting sites in Laskeek Bay. Bands on birds can reveal how long birds may live; if they return to nest in the same place each year; and where they go throughout the year. Bands include a black plastic band over a white plastic band on a left leg, with a metal band on a right leg. Metal bands have large numbers that can easily be read with binoculars. *Birds banded in Laskeek Bay have been sighted elsewhere, such as Darwin Sound, Cumshewa Inlet and off Lyell Island.*

What can cause Oystercatcher populations to drop? *Oystercatchers no longer nest on small islands in inlets like Skidegate because of introduced raccoons and rats. Human disturbance can cause adult birds to desert their nest. Ocean pollution is another factor limiting populations.* The '1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska killed 20 percent of adult Black Oystercatchers in the area. In heavily oiled shorelines, 39 percent of adults did not lay eggs, and many chicks that hatched did not survive.

Oystercatchers can be considered the “canaries in the coalmine” on the ocean's edge. In other words, if the oystercatcher population in a given area drops, we should take note because major changes in the marine environment may be occurring.