Beauty in black and white

By Rebecca Bracken

Here is Texas, there is a really unique bird that Gulf Coast Bird Observatory has been monitored since 2011. It's a striking bird, with a black and white body and vivid red-orange bill. It is commonly found foraging for oysters and other bivalves along the coastline, where it spends most of its life. Guess it yet? It's the American Oystercatcher!

American Oystercatchers are the only birds in their environment that have the ability to open large mollusks such as clams and oysters, and this ability often attracts other birds looking to steal an easy meal.

But because they forage for very specific prey items, they are only found in saltmarshes and along barrier beaches and islands. Here in Texas, that spells trouble. The American Oystercatcher is now on the Partners in Flight's Yellow Watch list, mean it has been declining in numbers and is susceptible to a variety of threats. They are very sensitive to development and human traffic on beaches where they nest, and nests can easily fail (not hatch) when adults are continually off the nest because of disturbance.

American Oystercatchers are not the only oystercatcher species in North America, and they are actually one of 11 black and white, or all black, oystercatcher species (and 1 additional species that went extinct sometime in the early 1900s).

In North America, American Oystercatchers are found on the east coast and along the Gulf of Mexico. They are also found in the Caribbean, along both coasts in South America, and along the Pacific coast of California and Mexico. But there is another species that shares its range in California and Mexico called the Black Oystercatcher. The Black Oystercatcher ranges from Baja California all the way up through coastal Alaska.

In other parts of the world, there are several other oystercatcher species. There are the Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatchers in the southern portions of South America, the African Oystercatcher in the southern portions of the African continent, the Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers in Australia, and the South Island and Variable Oystercatchers in New Zealand. Then there is the Chatham Oystercatcher, which is only found on the Chatham Islands in the Pacific Ocean. And finally, the last extant species is the Eurasian Oystercatcher, which is found across northern Africa, Europe, and in parts of Asia.

Another species was the Canary Islands Oystercatcher, which was endemic to the Canary Islands in Spain. The last known collected bird from this species was taxidermized in 1913, and locals reported that the species disappeared around 1940. The species was officially declared extinct in 1994 after extensive searches failed to find any evidence of its survival.

The species is thought to have gone extinct because of the overharvesting of intertidal invertebrates and human disturbance. The presence of rats and cats on the islands is also thought to have contributed to its decline, as both frequently eat bird eggs. Humans were also known to collect eggs from this species and other birds. In addition, there is some evidence that widespread desertification caused by unsustainable agricultural practices might have led to increased pressures on the intertidal systems by creating flash floods and decreasing food supplies for these birds.

The extinction of the Canary Islands Oystercatcher can certainly be a lesson for us all. Humans can have large, unintended impacts on the environment, even through simple changes in agricultural practices. Birds generally do not respond quickly enough to adapt to such changes, and therefore must find new areas to live and forage, or they will perish. At Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, we are actually working with partners to conserve and create new habitat for our oystercatchers. They are an amazing species, and we hope that after you see one, you will agree!

Photo Credit: Alan Wilde

Photo Caption: An American Oystercatcher on the Upper Texas Coast