

## American Oystercatcher

(*Haematopus palliatus*)

### Range and Description

The eastern race of the American oystercatcher breeds on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts from New England south to Texas. In the winter they flock together along coastal habitat from New Jersey to Texas. They are found in every state along the Gulf Coast. In particular, northwest Florida supports 1,000 wintering oystercatchers. That's 15% of the total oystercatcher population.

The American oystercatcher is a common coastal salt marsh and sandy beach shorebird. They are large and showy, and a bit funny looking with a bright red-orange bill and a yellow eye and an orange-red eye ring. Their sturdy and laterally flattened bill is specially adapted for opening mussels and oysters. In young birds, the bill is a pinkish brown and dusky black toward the tip. Breeding and non-breeding plumages are almost identical in American oystercatchers. They have black heads and necks and dark blackish brown underparts. They have white wing and upper-tail patches. Their legs are a tan or sandy color.

### Behavior and Diet

Oystercatchers peck the surface or probe deeply in the mud and sand for oysters, clams, and mussels. They have two techniques for removing them from their shells. They might plunge their bill, which is a cross between a knife and a chisel, into the open shell of an unsuspecting clam. Or they can hammer the shell open with a few well-aimed blows.

### Nesting

Since oystercatchers are monogamous and most don't migrate, biologists think that these shorebirds may mate for life.

American oystercatchers nest on marsh islands, upland dunes, or right on the beach. Their nest is a simple scrape lined with tiny pebbles, bits of shell and seaweed. A pair of oystercatchers may make up to five nests before deciding on which one to use! In marshy spots the oystercatcher may line its nest with reeds. The 1-3 eggs are extremely well camouflaged. They are colored like the sand and marked with dark splotches that look like little bits of shell and stones. Oystercatchers are perhaps the most attentive of all shorebird parents. Without the need to migrate long distances, oystercatchers spend up to a year feeding and teaching their chicks how to find and open clams and mussels.

This is one of the few shorebirds that have actually expanded its range northward along the Atlantic Coast. Their success may have to do with the fact that they are such specialized feeders and attentive parents. It may also help that they are strictly coastal birds that migrate only short distances if at all.

### Migration

Most populations of the American oystercatcher are considered to be a resident, non-migratory. They will flock up in the fall and winter but only those birds from the Middle and Northern Atlantic regions migrate south in the winter.

### Threats

These shorebirds are shy and intolerant of people. Since coastal property is always in demand for recreation and development, people are perhaps the greatest threat to breeding oystercatchers.

The American oystercatcher builds nests in open, sandy areas that are very vulnerable to predators like red fox, cats, dogs, or predatory birds. Pollution is also a great threat to oystercatchers. It can contaminate both their food supply and their nesting habitat.

### Sources:

1. Shorebird Sister Schools Program Educators Guide "Explore the World with Shorebirds!". CD-ROM. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2003.
2. Gulf Coast Shorebirds. Excel File. Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserved Network. June 2010. <<http://www.whsrn.org/whsrnews/press-room>>
3. "Scientists Work to Protect Shorebirds from Gulf Coast Oil Spill." Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserved Network. October 14, 2010. PRWeb. <<http://www.prweb.com/releases/manomet/gulfshorebirds/prweb4052144.htm>>



## **Brown Pelican** (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

### **Range and Description**

The brown pelican is common along the southern portions of the Pacific and Atlantic Coasts, and throughout the Gulf Coast.

Measuring up to 54 inches long, weighing 8 to 10 pounds, and having a wingspan between 6-1/2 feet and 7-1/2 feet, brown pelicans are the smallest members of the seven pelican species found worldwide. They can be identified by their chestnut-and-white necks; white heads with pale yellow crowns; brown- streaked back, rump, and tail; blackish- brown belly; grayish bill and pouch; and black legs and feet.

### **Behavior and Diet**

Pelicans are long-lived birds. One pelican captured in Florida had been banded 31 years earlier!

Brown pelicans are strong swimmers; young ones barely able to fly have been timed swimming at 3 m.p.h. Rather clumsy walking on land, pelicans fly with their necks folded and their heads resting on their backs, using slow, powerful wing beats. Pelicans are primarily fish-eaters, requiring up to 4 pounds of fish a day. Their diet consists mainly of small schooling fish such as menhaden, herring, sheepshead, pigfish, mullet, grass minnows, topminnows, and silversides.

Brown pelicans have extremely keen eyesight. As they fly over the ocean, sometimes at heights of 60 to 70 feet, they can spot a school of small fish or even a single fish. Diving steeply into the water, they

may submerge completely or only partly—depending on the height of the dive—and come up with a mouthful of fish. Air sacs beneath their skin cushion the impact and help pelicans surface.

The pouch suspended from the lower half of the pelican's long, straight bill can hold up to 3 times more than the stomach. In addition to being used as a dip net, the pouch holds the pelican's catch of fish until the accompanying water—as much as 3 gallons— is squeezed out. During this time, laughing gulls may hover above the pelican, or even sit on its bill, ready to steal a fish or two. Once the water is out, the pelican swallows the fish and carries them in its esophagus. The pouch also serves as a cooling mechanism in hot weather and as a feeding trough for young pelicans.

### **Nesting**

Pelicans are highly social and gregarious. Adult males and females and juveniles congregate in large flocks for much of the year.

Brown pelicans typically begin to breed between the ages of 3 and 5 years, generally, nesting on protected islands. The birds nest in large colonies on the ground, in bushes, or in the tops of trees. On the ground, a nest may be a shallow depression lined with a few feathers and a rim of soil built up 4 to 10 inches above ground, or it may be a large mound of soil and debris with a cavity in the top. A tree-top nest usually consists of reeds, grass, and straw heaped on a mound of sticks interwoven with the supporting tree branches.

The male delivers material to the female, who builds the nest. She typically lays 2 to 3 chalky white eggs that hatch in about a month. In most of the nesting range of the pelican in the United States—from South Carolina to Florida in the East, in Southern California in the West, and in Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas on the Gulf—peak egg-laying usually occurs in March through May.

Parents share in incubating the eggs and raising the young. Like many birds, newly hatched pelicans are altricial, born blind and featherless, completely dependent upon their parents. They soon develop down that is soft and silky, followed by typical feathers. Average age at first flight is 75 days.

**Migration**

Some brown pelicans may migrate north along the Pacific and Atlantic Coasts in the spring.

**Threats**

The brown pelican was nearly wiped out by the insecticide DDT. By the 1970s only a small population remained. Thanks to banning DDT the population rebounded and the brown pelican was removed from the Endangered Species list in 2009. Brown pelicans are still vulnerable to habitat loss, oil spills and pollutants that can contaminate their food supply. Their colonies are also sensitive to disturbance by human activities.

**Source:**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife. Brown Pelican factsheet. November 2009.  
<[http://www.fws.gov/contaminants/pdf/brown\\_pelicanfactsheet09.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/contaminants/pdf/brown_pelicanfactsheet09.pdf)>.



## Laughing Gull

(*Larus atricilla*)

### Range and Description

Named for its loud laughing type of call, this gull is abundant along the Gulf Coast. In fact, scientists estimate that 25% of the total laughing gull population lives along the northern Gulf Coast (Mississippi Delta of Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle), the primary area impacted by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. They range along both the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts.

This bird species is well adapted to the presence of humans and their activities. You have probably seen them around picnic grounds, parking lots, following fishing boats, and at garbage dumps. Laughing gulls take advantage of dredge spoil islands for breeding. Dredging is the process of excavating sand from shallow sea beds to open up lanes for ships, to create or repair islands or to replenish coastal beaches.

They are 15 to 18 long and weigh 7 to 13 ounces. They are a medium-sized gull with a black head in the breeding season. In the non-breeding season, their head feathers molt to white and grey.

### Behavior and Diet

Laughing gulls are at home on the ground, in the water, or in the air. They are strong, graceful fliers and can hover in the air when feeding on insect swarms. They are strong swimmers and can rise rapidly into the air. They frequently bathe and preen. They may sleep within the nesting colony in the breeding season, and in rafts on the water

outside of the breeding season. Laughing gulls forage for a variety of foods including earthworms, flying insects, beetles, snails, crabs, crab eggs, fish, squid, garbage, and even berries. They will normally feed at the edge of the water, but will go inland during storms or high tides to find insects and worms in plowed fields. If on land, they will simply pick up food on the surface. If swimming, they will forage for food floating in the water or just below the surface. They can also eat insects while in flight and dive into the water for fish. Savvy gulls may hover over pelicans or even perch on their bill, while the water drains from the bird's mouth hoping to grab a fish. They may even chase terns hoping to steal their food!

### Nesting

Laughing gulls begin the breeding season in April and will lay 2 to 4 eggs. In the Gulf, they nest in large colonies on dry islands. Both the male and female will build the nest using grass and other plant material. The chicks are semi-precocial at hatching, which means their eyes are open, they are born covered with down and are capable of leaving the nest soon after hatching. They

remain close to their parents who continue to protect and feed them.

### Migration

Depending on their location on the Gulf Coast, laughing gulls may migrate a short distance or remain year-round at one site.

### Threats

Disturbance to their nesting colonies can threaten breeding success. Pollution of their food supply and their habitat is also a great threat. They are extremely vulnerable to oil on the water's surface and washing on shore.

### Sources:

1. Cornell Lab of Ornithology & American Ornithologist Union. "Laughing Gull." The Birds of North America Online. 2010. <<http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/225/articles/introduction>>.
2. Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "Laughing Gull." All About Birds. 2009. <[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Laughing\\_Gull/lifehistory](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Laughing_Gull/lifehistory)>
3. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Beach-nesting Birds of the Gulf factsheet, May 2010. <<http://www.fws.gov/home/dhoilspill/pdfs/DHBirdsOfTheGulf.pdf>>.
4. Thompson III, Bill. The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of Eastern North America. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.





## **Piping Plover**

(*Charadrius melodus*)

### **Range and Description**

The piping plover is listed as by the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service as a threatened species. During the breeding season piping plovers are found in scattered locations along the Atlantic Coast, and in the Northern Great Plains of the United States and Canada. In the winter, they can be found along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts from North Carolina to Texas. Piping plovers wintering along the Gulf Coast typically breed in the Northern Great Plains.

The piping plover is a small shorebird that grows to 7 inches in length. It has a sandy-colored back and white underparts, with a single black neck band, a short stout orange bill and orange legs. The chicks are extremely tiny and could be described as looking like cottonballs on legs.

### **Behavior and Diet**

Piping plovers feed along beaches and intertidal mud and sand flats. Primary prey for piping plovers includes worms, various crustaceans, insects, and occasionally bivalve mollusks. The plover's richest food sources are located in the intertidal zone, the wrack line, and in the sparse vegetation in the lower dunes. The intertidal zone is the sand area exposed during low tide and underwater during high tide. The wrack line is the beach area where organic material accumulates, including seaweed, seashells, driftwood and other natural materials.

Small sand dunes, debris, and sparse vegetation within adjacent

beaches provide shelter from the wind and extreme temperatures.

### **Nesting**

Piping plovers make shallow scrapes in the sand that they line with small pebbles or rocks. The female lays 3 to 4 eggs and both parents share in incubation duties. The eggs hatch after about 28 days, and the young leave the nest within hours. The chicks can forage for themselves immediately, but remain near their parents for several weeks for protection and brooding or shading for temperature control. Depending on food availability, it takes the young from around 18 to 28 days to begin flying. The tiny down-covered chicks are quickly able to follow their parents, learning where to find tiny worms, beetles, beach lice, sand fleas and other invertebrates.

### **Migration**

The sandy beaches of the Gulf Coast are important wintering habitats for the piping plover. The birds arrive on the Gulf Coast in August on migration from their Northern Great Plains breeding grounds.

### **Threats**

Piping plovers often nest on beaches where people like to live

and enjoy the shoreline. Their nests and young are often accidentally crushed by people walking or driving in vehicles. The presence of people also may cause the birds to desert their nest, exposing eggs or chicks to the hot sun and predators. Interruption of feeding may stress juvenile birds during critical periods in their life cycle. Free running dogs may harass or kill the birds. Many of the coastal beaches traditionally used by piping plovers for nesting, feeding, and roosting have been lost to commercial, residential, and recreational development. Also, development near beaches provides food that attracts increased numbers of predators such as raccoons, skunks, and foxes. The population of breeding adults is often determined by the availability of quality winter foraging and roosting habitat.

Along the Gulf in particular, piping plovers are at high risk from oil contaminating their food supply and oil cleanup workers disturbing their foraging and roosting areas.

### **Source:**

U.S. Fish & Wildlife. All About Piping Plover. Website. <<http://www.fws.gov/plover/facts.html>>



## **Redhead**

(*Aythya americana*)

### **Range and Description**

The redhead duck is widespread throughout the United States. It breeds in the northern latitudes of the United States into Canada. It winters on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts. A high concentration of redheads winter at Breton National Wildlife Refuge off the Gulf Coast of Louisiana.

This duck is aptly named for its vivid red head. It is a medium-sized duck with a distinct rounded head. However, only the male has the bright red head, blue bill with black tip, black chest and rear end, and gray back. The female is a drab brownish color.

### **Behavior and Diet**

The redhead prefers ponds, lakes, coastal bays and inlets. It is a diving duck and may dive to considerable depths. They can also travel great distances underwater. Aquatic plants are the food of choice including pondweed seeds, tubers, algae, wild celery, duckweeds, coontail, and water lily seeds. It tends to be a crepuscular feeder, active at dawn and dusk. It may float in rafts with other ducks during the day and night in deep water.

On the wintering grounds, redheads will gather with other ducks in large rafts in the thousands.

### **Nesting**

Females make basket-like nests of reeds, cattails, and rushes lined with downy feathers. Some redhead hens parasitize the nests of other redheads or other duck species, laying eggs in their nest

for the other hen to incubate and care for their young. This is generally not a successful nesting strategy, as in most cases the hosting duck will abandon the nest. Redheads do not nest on the Gulf Coast, only wintering there.

### **Migration**

Redhead ducks migrate from their Northern Great Plains breeding grounds to the Gulf Coast in early fall.

### **Threats**

On the breeding grounds, the greatest threat is the loss of nesting habitat due to agricultural development. On the wintering

grounds, the primary threat is pollution contaminating their food supply and the wetland and open water habitat they prefer.

### **Sources:**

1. "Redhead." *Bird Web. Seattle Audubon Society*. 2005. <[http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/bird\\_details.aspx?id=76](http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/bird_details.aspx?id=76)>.
2. "Redhead". *Wetlands for Tomorrow. Ducks Unlimited Canada*. 2009. <<http://wetlandsfortomorrow.ducks.ca/lwredhead>>
3. Elphick, Chris, John B. Dunning, Jr., David Allen Sibley. *National Audubon Society. The Sibley Guide to Bird Behavior*. New York. Random House. 2001.

