

# Ornithological Observations

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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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**Les G Underhill**

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## AFRICAN BLACK OYSTERCATCHER *HAEMATOPUS MOQUINI* SWIMMING IN THE SEA AS PART OF DISTRACTION BEHAVIOUR

*Les G Underhill\**

Animal Demography Unit, Department of Biological Sciences,  
University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701 South Africa

\* Corresponding author: [les.underhill@uct.ac.za](mailto:les.underhill@uct.ac.za)

Oystercatcher chicks swim (and dive) to avoid being caught (Hayes & Bennett 1985, Morgan 1994, Minton 2001, Calf 2002, Sitters 2002). They mainly do this in the period when they are feathered and too large to hide easily (pers.obs). Adult waders, including oystercatchers, have been recorded swimming (and, more rarely, diving), but this seems to be exceptional behaviour, recorded when escaping direct predation on the bird itself (eg Minton 2001, Sitters 2002).

On 27 December 2013, while monitoring the breeding productivity of African Black Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini* on Robben Island, I checked a nest which had two small chicks (Fig. 1). I was in the vicinity of the chicks, and was therefore subjected to the alarm calls and distraction behavior of the adults, for less than three minutes (the research permit specifies a maximum of 10 minutes). The chicks were within 50 cm of the nest site, so were not more than one or two days old. The nest site was above the spring high tide line on fairly steep shelving rocky shoreline; offshore was a series of reefs, so with the tide low, the coastal wave action was c. 30 m from the water's edge. The intervening intertidal area consisted at the time of a series of large, but entirely calm, rock pools.

Both adults engaged in distraction displays, adopting the classic "rodent run" and "broken wing" postures, trying to attract the "predator" away from the nest walking slowly and dragging one wing along the ground. One of the adults flew off, and landed in the sea adjacent to the nest site, and about 5 m from the water's edge (Fig 2). It swam strongly in the water, all the time calling and pretending it had a broken wing. It was in the water for less than a minute. Its feathers did not get wet, as visible in Fig 2). The bird swam ashore, and resumed the standard terrestrial methods of predator distraction.

This observation was the first of its kind in a research project to monitor the breeding productivity of African Black Oystercatchers on Robben Island, which started in the 2001/02 breeding season, and which has continued in most subsequent years (Spiby 2012). Levels of disturbance in the first three breeding seasons were larger than in 2013/14 because one of research objectives then was to establish growth curves for the species, which were then unknown, and the chicks needed to be weighed and measured several times during the period between hatching and fledging (Tjørve & Underhill 2009). The researchers then were particularly sensitized to the potential impact of human disturbance on breeding productivity because this was one of the things they wanted to measure (Tjørve & Underhill 2009). The experience then (and that of other researchers working on this species) was that oystercatchers are not impacted by short visits to breeding sites.

The context of this visit to a breeding pair was no different to hundreds of other visits made over the years to African Black Oystercatcher pairs with chicks, and the amount of disturbance far smaller than when chicks needed also to be weighed and measured



as part of the monitoring project. So intense disturbance was not a factor in the use of swimming as part of the distraction display.

This appears to be the first record of an adult oystercatcher swimming as part of distraction behaviour (Bruno Ens pers. comm.).

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### Acknowledgements

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**Fig 1** - African Black Oystercatcher chicks on Robben Island, 27 December 2013. The chick farther from the camera is in the spot where the eggs were laid and incubated. The chicks have dried after hatching, but the egg tooth is still visible.





**Fig 2** - Adult African Black Oystercatcher swimming as a distraction display. Robben Island, 27 December 2013.