The Ecology of Two Vulnerable Shorebirds (*Haematopus f. fuliginosus* and *H. longirostris*) in Sub-tropical Northern NSW, Australia: Implications for Conservation and Management

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Shorebirds around the globe have become increasingly threatened as a result of burgeoning human populations, increased coastal development and habitat loss, recreational activities, predation, and climate change. Australian Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers (*Haematopus longirostris* and *H. fuliginosus* respectively) are two such species, both coastal residents listed as threatened in New South Wales, Australia. Both rely upon the narrow coastal fringe for foraging, roosting and breeding. Both have undergone declines over recent decades, occur in low numbers, have patchy distributions, are specialist foragers, and are thought to exhibit low breeding success. Despite this, there is a paucity of detailed information on their distribution, population size, key habitat attributes, reproductive biology and ecology, or the impact that various threatening processes have upon these species. Previous work in Australia has focused on counts and movements, with banding programs in Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia where the species is more common. This thesis examines the distribution, habitat use, breeding biology, ecology and impact of threatening processes for both species in northern NSW to provide a basis for effective management of these species.

Population estimates for both species were generated during 2003 to 2005 and compared to past counts and estimates. Australian Pied Oystercatchers had declined dramatically following the late 1990s, and continued to do so, with a net loss of 13% between 2003 and 2005. Adult mortality was estimated at minimum of 10% annually. Declines were evident in all cohorts, and indicated that although breeding adults were being replaced, immature birds were not, and that the rate of adult loss may have been higher than estimated. Sooty Oystercatchers on the other hand, had remained fairly stable over the past decade. However, numbers fluctuate widely between seasons and years. Although almost 70% of the Australian Pied Oystercatcher population were breeding individuals (from a total of 112 individuals), only six Sooty breeding pairs were found (from a total of 45-49 individuals).

Various factors were identified as good predictors of presence for each species, based on generalised linear modelling, and broadly included food supply, habitat structure and human disturbance. The Clarence River represented a divide between the majority of northern Australian Pied Oystercatchers that primarily forage and nest on beaches and the southern birds that use estuaries (39% of birds within the study region). Conversely, Sooty Oystercatchers rarely occurred north of the Clarence. Two primary areas were used by the latter species, one for foraging and one for breeding. Unoccupied suitable nesting habitat was
identified for the Sooty, suggesting that the population may be below carrying capacity. However, productivity of the six island nesting Sooty Oystercatcher pairs was high for the years surveyed, ranging from 1.00 to 0.83 fledglings per pair.

Reproductive success of the 41 breeding pairs of Australian Pied Oystercatcher varied between seasons and between habitat types, with an average of 0.90 and 0.31 fledglings per pair annually (over three years) for estuarine and beach nesting pairs respectively. Therefore, although the majority of pairs occurred on beaches, estuarine pairs produced approximately 70% of all fledged birds. Variation in breeding success and the overall population decline were attributed to several limiting factors, primarily risk of predation, food availability and disturbance.

Predation by the Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), was the largest identified source of egg loss (accounting for 34% of lost eggs), and significantly more beach nests were lost to predators than estuarine nests. Beach and estuarine nesting habitat also varied. Estuarine nests were more complex, possibly offering more protection from predators, whereas beach nests were open, surrounded by little vegetation. Conversely, the risk of tidal flooding was higher for estuarine nesters. Continuing fox control is critical to reduce failure of clutches and should commence in July prior to egg-laying.

Abundance of primary prey species also varied between habitats. The density of *Donax deltoides*, the primary prey species on beaches, has undergone a severe long-term decline that continued through to 2005, with a net loss in stock of 75% between 2003 and 2005. Declines in commercial catches also reflect this trend. Estuarine prey on the other hand, are not harvested and remained abundant during the period of survey. The sustainability of removing bivalves (*Donax deltoides*), from NSW beaches should be investigated as stocks appear to be falling rapidly, and this practice has major ramifications for the reproductive potential and survival of Australian Pied Oystercatchers; in the interim this practice should cease.

Human activity and that of their pets occurred in both habitats, accounting for egg, chick and adult loss. Recreational disturbance also caused birds to depart from nests for 21.5% of incubation time (survey n = 176 hrs, pairs n = 23). Non-incubating partners foraging on shoreline close to nests were also disturbed and lost 18.4% of foraging time. With limited food availability, the impact of disturbance would be exacerbated, likely resulting in fitness costs. Human recreation, particularly involving dogs, was most threatening to incubating Australian Pied Oystercatchers, resulting in significantly higher frequencies and durations of absences than disturbance by researcher approach, slow moving
vehicles and natural stimuli. Human disturbance should be minimised at beach and estuarine breeding sites. Sign-posted buffers with a radius of 195 m should be enforced surrounding nests, in which recreation and pets are excluded.

Population analysis for the Australian Pied Oystercatcher, using the finite rate of increase equation, supported the observed population decline. To reverse the decline managers must focus not only on productivity, but on survivorship of immature and adults. If the currently managed level of productivity can be maintained, and adult survival maintained at 10%, the goal should be to achieve at least \( \geq 35\% \) of female fledglings surviving to breeding age. However, further monitoring and colour-flagging is required to determine the survival of fledglings to breeding age, the dynamics of floater populations and the long-term population trends of the population as a whole.

Management of the Australian Pied Oystercatcher in northern NSW has been guided by many of the recommendations made within this thesis in the development of a Threatened Species (Australian Pied Oystercatcher) Management Strategy, and more recently in the preliminary determination by the NSW Scientific Committee to upgrade the species from Vulnerable to Endangered. Measures for mitigating human disturbance also apply to the Sooty Oystercatcher where near-shore islands are used for nesting. However, most off-shore breeding territories are in marine parks and are less accessible to people.

**Key words:** shorebirds, disturbance, breeding biology, nest predation, population trends, sustainability, management.
CERTIFICATION of ORIGINALITY

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

I certify that all text, maps, figures, tables and images included in this thesis are my original work. Guidance regarding text revision for each of the chapters of this thesis has also been provided by Professor Hugh A. Ford.

____________________  ____________________  
Candidate            Date

8th March 2009
STATEMENT of AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTION

Chapter 4 is the only chapter submitted for publication prior to submission of this thesis. The two authors include myself (the candidate), and my Principal supervisor (Professor Hugh A. Ford).

We, the PhD candidate and the candidate’s Principal Supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis (Chapter 4) and they have accepted the candidate’s contribution as indicated in the Statement of Originality.

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Name/title of Principal Supervisor: Professor Hugh A. Ford

8th March 2009

[Signatures]
### DEFINITION of TERMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anthropogenic</td>
<td>Anthropogenic effects, processes, materials or objects derived from human activities, as opposed to those occurring in biophysical environments without human influence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>APOC</td>
<td>Australian Pied Oystercatcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austral</td>
<td>Australian spring includes the period between September 1 and November 30, while summer includes the period between December 1 and February 31.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austral spring/summer</td>
<td>30, while summer includes the period between December 1 and February 31.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissipative Beach State</td>
<td>One of three beach state categories, dissipative beaches include those with a flat beach face comprised of fine sand particles, fronted by nearshore sand bars and a wide surf zone. Spilling waves are dissipated as they travel through the shallow water over the bars; this surf zone may be 100 m wide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floaters</td>
<td>Generally immature and/or non-breeding, non-territorial birds that move around locally, tending to occur in small groups in a range of regular locations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fledgling</td>
<td>Oystercatcher chicks that are able to take flight (generally 5-8 weeks of age), but that generally remain with parents, rather than fledging or leaving the nest as for other species.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immature</td>
<td>Non-breeding birds, generally less than four years of age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate Beach State</td>
<td>One of three beach state categories, intermediate beaches include those with a gently sloping gradient and fine sand particles, wide beach face and large surf zone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pipi</td>
<td>Bivalve (<em>Donax deltoides</em>), also known as the Goolwa Cockle or Surf Clam, one of the best known molluscs occurring on ocean beaches of Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Beach State</td>
<td>One of three beach state categories, reflective beaches include those with a steep and often narrow beach face comprised of coarse sediment, where small (but plunging) waves break. The zone where these high energy waves break is often &lt; 10 m wide; waves are reflected seaward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>A taxon is Vulnerable when it is neither Critically Endangered nor Endangered, but is facing a high risk of extinction in the wild in the medium-term future. Includes those that are likely to become endangered unless the circumstances and factors threatening their survival or evolutionary development cease to operate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE of CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1:
General introduction ...........................................................................................................1

1.1 Shorebirds in Australia ..............................................................................................1
1.2 The Oystercatchers ....................................................................................................3
   1.2.1 Taxonomy ............................................................................................................3
   1.2.2 Physical description ............................................................................................3
1.3 Australian oystercatcher distribution .........................................................................5
1.4 Oystercatcher habitat use ..........................................................................................6
   1.4.1 Australian Pied Oystercatcher .............................................................................6
   1.4.2 The Sooty Oystercatcher ......................................................................................7
1.5 Life history ...................................................................................................................8
   1.5.1 Reproductive biology ..........................................................................................8
   1.5.2 Foraging ecology ................................................................................................9
1.6 Movements and flocking ..............................................................................................11
1.7 Population estimates and conservation status ..........................................................12
   1.7.1 Population estimates ..........................................................................................12
   1.7.2 Conservation status ............................................................................................13
1.8 Threatening processes ...............................................................................................13
   1.8.1 Increasing human populations and recreational disturbance ................................14
   1.8.2 Removal of food resources ...............................................................................16
   1.8.3 Predation ............................................................................................................17
   1.8.4 Climatic conditions and coastal pollution ..........................................................19
1.9 Objectives and aims of thesis .....................................................................................20
   1.9.1 Objective ............................................................................................................20
   1.9.2 Aims of specific chapters ....................................................................................20
   1.9.3 Content of appendices .......................................................................................22

CHAPTER 2:
Abundance, habitat use and aspects of breeding biology of the Sooty Oystercatcher (Haematopus f. fuliginosis) in sub-tropical northern New South Wales ........................................23

2.1 Introduction ...............................................................................................................24
2.2 Study area ..................................................................................................................25
2.3 Methods ....................................................................................................................28
   2.3.1 Broad-scale distribution and abundance ..............................................................28
   2.3.2 Behaviour and movements ...............................................................................28
   2.3.3 Breeding biology ...............................................................................................29
   2.3.4 Habitat assessment ............................................................................................29
   2.3.5 Statistical analysis ............................................................................................29
2.4 Results ......................................................................................................................31
   2.4.1 Abundance .......................................................................................................31
   2.4.2 Distribution .......................................................................................................31
   2.4.3 Group size and habitat use ...............................................................................34
   2.4.4 Breeding biology ...............................................................................................35
   2.4.5 Habitat assessment ............................................................................................36
2.5 Discussion ................................................................................................................40
   2.5.1 Population trends ...............................................................................................40
   2.5.2 Breeding pairs ...................................................................................................41
   2.5.3 Foraging habitat ...............................................................................................42
   2.5.4 Nesting habitat ................................................................................................43
   2.5.5 Breeding biology ...............................................................................................43
   2.5.6 Productivity .......................................................................................................44
   2.5.7 Implications for management ............................................................................44
CHAPTER 3:

Population trends and habitat use of Australian Pied Oystercatchers (Haematopus longirostris) inhabiting beach and estuarine habitats in sub-tropical NSW .................................................46

3.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 47
3.2 Study area ................................................................................................................................. 48
3.3 Methods .................................................................................................................................... 49
  3.3.1 Large-scale distribution and abundance .............................................................................. 49
  3.3.2 Small-scale breeding distribution – South Ballina Beach ....................................................... 51
  3.3.3 Habitat assessment .................................................................................................................. 51
  3.3.4 Statistical analysis .................................................................................................................... 52
3.4 Results ...................................................................................................................................... 52
  3.4.1 Abundance............................................................................................................................. 52
  3.4.2 Distribution (large-scale) .................................................................................................... 53
  3.4.3 Distribution (small-scale) .................................................................................................... 55
  3.4.4 Habitat assessment .............................................................................................................. 55
3.5 Discussion ................................................................................................................................. 63
  3.5.1 Australian Pied Oystercatcher population and trends ........................................................... 63
  3.5.2 Influence of beach morphology and prey density ................................................................. 65
  3.5.3 Influence of dune flora ........................................................................................................ 66
  3.5.4 Influence of disturbance ..................................................................................................... 67
  3.5.5 Experience of birds ............................................................................................................. 68
  3.5.6 Implications for management ............................................................................................. 68

CHAPTER 4:

Breeding success of beach- and estuary-nesting Australian Pied Oystercatchers (Haematopus longirostris) in relationship to predation and food availability ...........................................71

4.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 72
4.2 Methods ................................................................................................................................... 73
  4.2.1 Study area ............................................................................................................................ 73
  4.2.2 Monitoring of breeding ...................................................................................................... 74
  4.2.3 Nesting micro-habitat ......................................................................................................... 76
  4.2.4 Invertebrate densities .......................................................................................................... 76
  4.2.5 Statistical analysis ................................................................................................................ 76
4.3 Results ..................................................................................................................................... 77
  4.3.1 Breeding biology ................................................................................................................... 77
  4.3.2 Causes of mortality .............................................................................................................. 79
  4.3.3 Nesting micro-habitat .......................................................................................................... 80
  4.3.4 Invertebrate prey density ................................................................................................... 81
4.4 Discussion ................................................................................................................................. 81
  4.4.1 Breeding season .................................................................................................................... 81
  4.4.2 Clutch size and incubation .................................................................................................. 82
  4.4.3 Variation in breeding success between seasons and habitats .............................................. 82
  4.4.4 Predation and disturbance ................................................................................................. 83
  4.4.5 Nesting habitat .................................................................................................................... 84
  4.4.6 Food availability ................................................................................................................ 84
  4.4.7 Food availability ................................................................................................................ 85

CHAPTER 5:

The impact of recreational and natural disturbance on the behaviour of incubating Australian Pied Oystercatchers (Haematopus longirostris) in sub-tropical New South Wales .........................................................97

5.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 98
5.2 Study area ............................................................................................................................... 100
5.3 Methods .................................................................................................................................. 100
  5.3.1 Field surveys ....................................................................................................................... 100
  5.3.2 Statistical analysis .............................................................................................................. 103
5.4 Results........................................................................................................................................ 104
  5.4.1 Reactions to observer created disturbance................................................................. 104
  5.4.2 Sources of disturbance............................................................................................ 106
  5.4.3 Response to anthropogenic and natural disturbance............................................. 106
  5.4.4 Duration of nest absences.......................................................................................... 108
  5.4.5 Response distances.................................................................................................... 112
5.5 Discussion........................................................................................................................ 112
  5.5.1 Impacts of anthropogenic and natural disturbance ................................................ 112
  5.5.2 Different responses between habitats....................................................................... 115
  5.5.3 Management implications........................................................................................ 116

CHAPTER 6:
General discussion................................................................................................................... 118
6.1 The original intent............................................................................................................ 118
6.2 Abundance and population trends............................................................................... 118
6.3 Distribution and habitat use.......................................................................................... 119
6.4 Population parameters and limiting factors for the Australian Pied Oystercatcher.... 120
  6.4.1 Adult mortality rate..................................................................................................... 120
  6.4.2 Reproductive rate....................................................................................................... 121
  6.4.3 Population consequences.......................................................................................... 122
  6.4.4 Survival of immature birds....................................................................................... 123
6.5 Calculations of the finite rate of increase: population sustainability......................... 123
6.6 Implications for management ....................................................................................... 124
6.7 Future research............................................................................................................... 128

REFERENCES:
REFERENCES....................................................................................................................... 129

APPENDICES:
APPENDIX A .................................................................................................................... 154
APPENDIX B ...................................................................................................................... 161
APPENDIX C ...................................................................................................................... 202
LIST of FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Distribution of the two races of the Sooty Oystercatcher. ........................................ 5

Figure 2.1: Map of survey region within northern NSW .......................................................... 27

Figure 2.2: Map of the two major sections of coast used by breeding and foraging Sooty Oystercatchers in northern NSW and, the 13 areas primarily used within these ......................... 33

Figure 3.1: Distribution of breeding and non-breeding territory holding Australian Pied Oystercatchers in northern NSW, between Bonville Estuary and the Richmond River .......... 50

Figure 3.2: Location of Australian Pied Oystercatcher territories on South Ballina Beach. .. 56

Figure 3.3: Density per cubic meter of sand of invertebrates found at a) beach and b) estuary habitat, where birds were either present (location n=8) or absent (location n=6). Note scale is different between a) and b). .............................................................. 57

Figure 3.4: Regression plots of a) mean D. deltoides length (cm) and b) D. deltiodes density (per metre squared) across beach location/latitude. Note: beaches are plotted on a north to south gradient. Location 1 = South Ballina Beaches combined, 2 = Ten Mile Beach, 3 = Iluka/ Pipi combined, 4 = Sandon Beach, 5 = Wooli Beach, 6 = Boambee Beach.......................... 59

Figure 3.5: Mean beach slope and fore-dune width and beach length (consistent beach lengths, thus no SE bars) of all beach sites surveyed. Beswicks and Boundary are both beaches making up the South Ballina Beach location. Oystercatchers indicate presence at least once during counts, ☐ indicates beaches where nesting occurred................................. 60


Figure 4.1: Locations of breeding pairs and territory holding pairs of Australian Pied Oystercatcher in northern NSW, Australia between 2003 and 2005. Note: five pairs to the immediate north of Ten Mile Beach, were not monitored due to logistical difficulties........... 92

Figure 4.2: Phenology of Australian Pied Oystercatcher breeding on the north coast of NSW during: a) 2003, b) 2004, C) 2005, including number of pairs nesting and eggs laid per month and fledglings to result from those nests ............................................................... 93

Figure 4.3: Mean density of invertebrate species occurring at a) beach and b) estuary locations in northern NSW during 2003 and 2005. Standard error bars indicate very little variation between years for most species. However bivalve and gastropod density appears to be significantly less with polychaetes showing a reverse trend in 2005 at beach sites. Note also that data are presented on a logarithmic scale ................................................................. 94

Figure 5.1: Location of incubating Australian Pied Oystercatchers monitoring for disturbance (estuary pairs n=8, beach pairs n=15). ......................................................................................... 101
Figure 5.2: Sandy beach profile identifying major features including dune and foredune areas (supra-littoral zone) generally used by shorebirds for nesting, intertidal zone and surf/swash zones (where waves meet the shore). Within the intertidal zone, the beach can be further divided to include high, mid and low beach zones (ranging from entirely dry to entirely wet sand).……………………………………………………………………………...……………103

Figure 5.3: Mean distance (and standard error) of observer, at which birds left the nest, i.e. flushed, and then returned to nests.......................................................... 105

Figure 5.4: Reactions given by oystercatchers departing from nests in response to observer approach.......................................................... 105
LIST of TABLES

Table 2.1: Population estimates for Sooty Oystercatchers in northern NSW, including comparison of the number of resident adults and total numbers during 2003, 2004 and 2005. Estimated area totals are based on numbers of residents within each area (divided in table), plus estimated number of floaters considering movements among locations. 32

Table 2.2: Flora and fauna recorded on rocky shores of northern NSW. Primary species consumed by Sooty Oystercatchers during focal animal surveys at different locations are also indicated. Location codes: 1 = Woody Head, 2 = Diggers Camp, 3 = Wooli, 4 = Red Rock, 5 = Arrawarra, 6 = Emerald Beach, 7 = Moonee, 8 = Muttonbird Island, 9 = Sawtell Island, 10 = Bonville and Boambee Estuaries. 37

Table 2.3: Summary of generalised linear modelling using rocky shore macrofauna and flora as predictors for Sooty Oystercatcher presence. 38

Table 2.4: Physical characteristics of islands and reefs within northern NSW. 39

Table 2.5: Summary of model analysis with various combinations of factors (islands characteristics) as predictors for suitability of islands for nesting (n=14). 40

Table 3.1: Breakdown of Australian Pied Oystercatcher numbers in northern NSW between 2003 and 2005, including numbers of fledglings and adult losses. 54

Table 3.2: Total number of Australian Pied Oystercatcher resident pairs (to hold a territory) in northern NSW between 2003 and 2005 and the number to actually breed in those territories during that period. The later is also presented as a percentage of the total number to hold a territory. 54

Table 3.3: Generalised linear regression results for sandy shore macrofauna variables as predictors of presence or absence of Australian Pied Oystercatchers. 58

Table 3.4: Generalised linear regression results for physical characteristics of beaches as explanatory factors for the presence of Australian Pied Oystercatchers. 60

Table 3.5: Generalised linear regression model results for beach dune flora as predictors of presence or absence of Australian Pied Oystercatchers. The response variable for all models tested is oystercatcher presence/absence. Sample size (number of beaches assessed) = 11. 61

Table 3.6: Physical characteristics of all estuaries within northern NSW that fall within the current study area, of these 13 sites, eight are used as breeding sites by Australian Pied Oystercatchers. 62

Table 3.7: Generalised linear regression model results for physical characteristics of estuaries within northern NSW as predictors of presence or absence of Australian Pied Oystercatchers. The response variable for all models tested is oystercatcher presence/absence. Sample size (number of estuaries assessed) = 13. 63

Table 4.1: Breeding summary for each year for Australian Pied Oystercatchers nesting at beach and estuary sites in northern New South Wales. 95
Table 4.2: Analysis of hatching success, fledging success and productivity compared between birds nesting in either beach or estuary habitat during 2003 – 2005........................ 95

Table 4.3: Breakdown of factors responsible for eggs lost during 2003-2005 at beach and estuary sites in northern NSW. ........................................................................................................ 96

Table 4.4: Overall MANOVA results for the comparison of beach and estuary nesting micro-habitat, both univariate and the overall multivariate results are displayed................................. 96

Table 5.1: Percentage of encounters with various stimuli while incubating. ....................... 107

Table 5.2: Number of encounters with a variety of stimuli during hour-long observations of incubating Australian Pied Oystercatchers (pooled across pairs), and number that caused a standing or departure/absence response. Expected frequencies for nest absences in response to these stimuli were calculated using chi-squared analysis, these are also presented, along with the chi-squared value and associated p-value. ........................................................................ 108

Table 5.3: Maximum and average duration (also standard error) of absences, in minutes, in response to single stimuli of various types. Total time spent off nests in response to these stimuli is also presented, along with the percentage of total time that was lost due to each stimulus. ................................................................................................................................. 110

Table 5.4: Summary matrix of results of pair-wise Tukey’s tests comparisons made between periods spent off the nest in response to disturbance factors.................................................. 111

Table 6.1: Projections of finite rates of increase for the north coast Australian Pied Oystercatcher population, assuming the productivity of female young remains at the average 0.30 female young per female per year (i.e. $N_f = 0.60 / 2 = 0.30$), at varied adult and juvenile survival rates. Bold values are those where populations are replacing themselves or will start to increase. ............................................................................................................................ 125

Table 6.2: Projected finite rates of increase for varied rates of production of female young, assuming an adult survival rate ($S_f$) of 90% and varying survival rate ($S_i$) for young to breeding age........................................................................................................................................ 125