

Information for the teacher

-The oystercatcher-

Occurrence:

The oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*) is one of the most characteristic birds living on the North Sea coast. It is found on several coasts all around Europe as well. Worldwide five different species exist. The biggest breeding grounds are located in the Wadden Sea and near the coast of the North Sea.

Recognition features:

The oystercatcher is approximately 45 centimetres tall and can reach 15 to 30 years of age on average. Its unmistakable features are its black and white plumage, red beak, red eyes and red legs. Because of its appearance it is also described as the Hallig stork.

Until sexual maturity at the age of four the beak and the legs are not yet red and the plumage shows several white spots. There is no gender dimorphism. Mostly the female's beak is longer but this is not necessarily the case.

Habitat:

In the Wadden Sea oystercatchers appear in large flocks. In order to find food the birds sit near the sea and wait for low tide.

The oystercatcher breeds once a year from May until July on mussel beds, between stones and, due to the adaptation process to humans, also on flat roofs. They lay three to four eggs each time. The male and the female oystercatcher keep an eye on the eggs for the whole period of 26 days. As soon as the bird notices any trouble it leaves the nest to distract attention away from the nest by yelling out loud noises.

The young oystercatchers are precocial birds. Once they are born and their plumage is dry they leave the nest together with their parents. The parents support their babies with food for another six weeks.

Food:

The food consists of mussels, slugs, lugworms, insects and earthworms. In contrast to its name the oystercatcher does not eat oysters because it cannot open them with its beak.

Predators:

There are several predators on the oystercatcher, e.g. foxes, martens, sea gulls, hawks and humans.

(Vgl. <http://www.brodowski-fotografie.de/beobachtungen/austernfischer.html>)

Decrease in occurrence:

“The oystercatcher is the sea bird of 2014. “Jordsand zum Schutze der Seevögel und der Natur”, located in Ahrensborg chose the black-white-red bird to draw attention to the strong decrease in its numbers.

There are only about 10,000 pairs of oystercatchers left in the Wadden Sea in Schleswig-Holstein. This means numbers have halved over the last 15 to 20 years. 25,000 pairs breed in the whole Wadden Sea, from Borkum to Sylt and near the coastal areas. Their numbers have also decreased throughout Europe (from a million to 800,000).

There are various reasons for this decrease. Scientific researchers found out that on the one hand the main food of the bird, the common mussel, is insufficiently available and, on the other hand, the oystercatcher itself rears fewer hatchlings. Foxes in particular raid the nests.

Another reason can be the change in sea-level due to climate warming. The birds have less time to search for food such as lugworms and mussels. The early summer flood increases as well between May and June during the incubation period. Nests are destroyed and the young birds drown. Moreover all kinds of leisure activities are disturbing the birds.

A further problem is caused by climate warming. The Pacific oyster is pullulating quickly in the Wadden Sea and eliminating native species. This might mean a food reduction for the bird because it is not able to open oysters with its beak.

All those changes in Wadden Sea nature not only affect the sea bird of the year. Other sea fowls which are protected by Jordsand suffer as well. International counts showed that 14 out of 34 tested birds are suffering from stock reduction.”

(<http://www.nationalpark-wattenmeer.de/natur/austernfischer-seevogel-des-jahres-2014>)