

In eating, pecks may be repeated (such as when a bird is taking different leaves from the same plant), but are not usually rhythmic: some pecks may follow one another quickly, such as when prey items are small, while others only after a pause, such as when larger items are taken that need more than a moment's handling.

Given that the observed behaviour was unlike the normal eating behaviour, that very little food (if any) was present where the bird was seen but water *was* present, and that the behaviour showed similarities to the drinking behaviour of other birds, in our view it is most likely that this particular seedsnipe was drinking. As such, it is the first record of probable drinking in the wild for any species of seedsnipe.

While it is likely that drinking water is normally to be found in the habitats used by seedsnipes, in some circum-

stances it may be unavailable, such as when water is frozen or saline or in times of drought. By virtue of an ability to live on water retrieved from food, seedsnipes are able to occupy habitats in which few other birds could survive. Given that seedsnipes do drink in captivity and apparently also (but probably rarely) in the wild, we suggest that they (or certainly Least Seedsnipes) are opportunistic in their behaviour: they may drink when suitable water is available, but can do without it too.

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Polygyny in American Black Oystercatchers: the better option or the only option?

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Twenty years ago this journal published (Briggs 1984) one of the first observations of polygyny in the Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*. In Europe, researchers have continued to gain insight into this unusual breeding behavior for a typically monogamous species using multiyear studies of colour-banded birds. In the well-studied oystercatcher population at Schiermonnikoog in the Netherlands, only 28 polygynous territories were documented over 14 years of study, involving less than 3% of the breeding females (Heg & van Treuren 1998). Meanwhile the life history of a North American congener, the American Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus bachmani*, has remained comparatively less well known, particularly in Alaska where more than half the population breeds (Andres & Falxa 1995). Here I describe the first observation of polygyny in the American Black Oystercatcher.

I began colour-banding American Black Oystercatchers breeding in Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska in 2003 as part of a study investigating the effects of recreational disturbance on oystercatcher productivity. Oystercatchers were captured during early incubation at the nest site using noose mats or a dipnet. I marked individuals with unique colour band combinations, and collected a 1 cc blood sample from the wing for DNA-based sex identification (Griffiths *et al.* 1998). Forty-five adults were banded in the first year of study; with the exception of two pairs, at least one member of all pairs breeding in the study area (150 km of shoreline) was banded.

I observed strong site and mate fidelity of American Black Oystercatchers, as have other researchers (Hartwick 1974, Hazlitt & Butler 2001). Forty-three of the 45 banded adults returned to the study area in 2004; most banded pairs ($n = 11$) reunited, and all but two birds used the same nesting territory. Mate switching was observed in two pairs, both of which involved widows (the banded mate was never resighted). Divorce is known to have occurred in only one case where a banded male abandoned his mate and nest during early incubation and paired with a widowed female on her nesting territory 12 km away. This incidence of divorce is similar to the average annual divorce rate of 7.9% observed in Eurasian Oystercatchers (Heg *et al.* 2003).

A polygynous trio was observed in both the 2003 and 2004 breeding seasons. The male of this trio was observed incubating eggs at two nest sites separated by 1.2 km. Throughout both breeding seasons this male was observed incubating and performing territorial displays with the females at the two nest sites. We did not observe any copulation behavior, nor do we have genetic data from the chicks to confirm extra pair copulations, but all three birds were colour banded and sexed making identification of the birds involved unambiguous. Rarely was the trio observed together, and only once was one female observed near the other female's nest site.

In 2003, female one initiated a nest on approximately 10 May and produced one chick that had died by 7 July, approximately 25 days post hatch. The first nest of the second female was initiated on approximately 15 May and was abandoned



by 10 June; she re-nested on 12 July but that clutch was depredated during laying. In 2004, the same two nest sites were used and each female laid only one clutch, both of which failed likely due to avian depredation. The nest of female one was active from 17 to 31 May. Again, the second female initiated a week later; her nest was active from 25 May to 5 June.

This observation represents the “classical” form of polygyny, where two females maintain different territories and lay separate nests; a more “cooperative” form of polygyny has also been observed in Eurasian Oystercatchers where two females lay eggs in the same nest (Heg & van Treuren 1998). The most striking difference between Briggs’ (1984) observation of polygyny and this one is the distance between nest sites; he observed nests of a polygynous trio 1.2 m apart whereas in Kenai Fjords nests were 1.2 km apart. However, breeding densities of American Black Oystercatchers on rocky coastlines in general are much lower than Eurasian Oystercatchers nesting adjacent to a vast mudflat. Probably this arises because of differences in the availability of food resources.

Despite the potential energetic costs incurred by the male in incubating two nests far apart, and the potential cost of lacking an attending mate for both females, this trio was observed in successive years engaging in this unusual behavior. Heg & van Treuren (1998) suggested the most likely explanation for polygyny in the Eurasian Oystercatcher was habitat saturation. Under this scenario, females may use a polygynous territory as a stepping-stone to a higher-quality neighboring territory. Similarly, the better option hypothesis promoted by Ens *et al.* (1993) suggests that divorce in oystercatchers may result from competition for good mates and/or

good territories. The low density of breeding birds at Kenai Fjords (0.26 nests/km) could imply that good breeding habitat is limited. However, it is interesting to note that non-breeding birds were seldom observed in the study area. Thus, in contrast to observations of polygyny in Eurasian Oystercatchers, low density and a potential lack of breeding partners may promote polygyny in American Black Oystercatchers. However with such little data, why polygyny persists in this low-density population remains a source of intrigue and merits further investigation.

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A tenacious American Black Oystercatcher incubating a nest on a rocky coastline in Alaska.

