FEATURED PHOTO

IDENTIFYING HYBRID OYSTERCATCHERS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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The photo featured on the back cover of this issue was taken on 26 May 2005 on the south side of San Nicolas Island, Ventura County, California. Its subject appears to be a rather dark American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*). A large shorebird of sandy beaches, tidal mudflats and rocky shores, along the Pacific coast this species ranges from central Chile to central Baja California. In central Baja California it is replaced by the Black Oystercatcher (*H. bachmani*), a bird of rocky shorelines that ranges north to the Aleutian Islands. For a 300-mile stretch along the Baja California peninsula the two species interbreed, forming a stable hybrid zone (Jehl 1985). Any pied oystercatcher observed north of the international border had probably wandered north from Baja California and has to be examined closely. Of the 35 documented sightings of "American" Oystercatchers in southern California, 11 have proved to be of hybrids (Cole and McCaskie 2004).

So what constitutes a "good" American Oystercatcher? Jehl posed this question more than 20 years ago. Using techniques developed for studying hybrid populations devised by Charles Sibley and his students (e.g., Sibley and Short 1959), Jehl established a hybrid index for black and pied oystercatchers. Specifically, he scored the uppertail coverts, tail, chest, undertail coverts, thighs, greater secondary coverts, extent of white wing stripe, underwing coverts, and axillaries from 0 (black, as in *H. bachmani*) to 4 (white, as in *H. palliatus*). The character score for the belly ranged from 0 to 6. All ten characters totaled, a Black Oystercatcher would score 0, while an American Oystercatcher would score 42. Because all characters are variable, because the subspecies of the American Oystercatcher from western Mexico (*H. p. frazari*) has a more mottled chest than birds from the Atlantic coast (*H. p. palliatus*), and because Black Oystercatchers tend to have brownish bellies in the southern reaches of their range, Jehl considered a score of 0–9 to indicate a pure Black Oystercatcher and a score of 30–38 to indicate a pure Frazar's American Oystercatcher. He considered any bird with a score of 10–29 a hybrid.

So how do we rank the bird in the featured photo? Once I found this bird I observed it for 15 minutes and noted most of the characters necessary to score it. The uppertail coverts were black with a few white mottlings (score 1), the tail had the basal ¼ of the rectrices white (score 2), black extended from the chest onto the upper $\frac{1}{3}$ of the belly (score 1), the belly was ¾ white (score 5), the undertail coverts were not observed, the thighs were entirely white (score 4), the greater secondary coverts on the folded wing were not observed, the white wing stripe extended to the outer secondaries but not onto the primaries (score 2), and the underwing coverts and axillaries were not observed. The bird thus scored a 15 out of 28 possible and is therefore a hybrid. Although the combined scores of the characters not seen add up to 16, and a score of 14 more would push the bird into the minimum of the range acceptable for a Frazar's American Oystercatcher, it is unlikely that all such characters would score as 4. The portion of the undertail coverts visible in the photograph shows some black, suggesting that character wouldn't score higher than a 3. In this case the bird would score a 29 and still be considered a hybrid. If all its characteristics could be assessed, this bird would probably score in the high 20's, showing more influence of *palliatus* than of *bachmani* (Jehl pers. comm.).

San Nicolas Island is a naval installation 60 miles off the southern California coast with limited public access. I have surveyed the south side of the island 10–15 times since 1993 and first observed an American Oystercatcher there in 1996. During the past five years most individuals appear to be hybrids, with the last pure American Oystercatcher seen in May 2002. Although the island is surrounded by rocky shorelines and sandy beaches (habitat appropriate for the American Oystercatcher), the presence of a resident population of Black Oystercatchers, large numbers of California Sea Lions (*Zalophus californianus*) and Elephant Seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*) on the beaches, and a limited source population unite to push any vagrant American Oystercatcher into a mixed mating with a Black Oystercatcher. The individual photographed was paired with a Black Oystercatcher and is most likely two or more generations removed from any pure American Oystercatcher. Its offspring may disperse to the mainland, and we should therefore examine any "American" Oystercatcher on the California mainland carefully,

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