

Status and distribution of Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* breeding along mediterranean coasts

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A detailed list of sites and an estimate of each local population are given for Oystercatchers breeding along the Mediterranean coastline. Nesting has been observed at only 21 sites, with a total breeding population estimated at 300-341 pairs. The most important sites are the French coastline (about 100 pairs), the Po Delta (56 pairs), the Büyük Menderes Delta (40 pairs) and the Ebro Delta (30-34).

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INTRODUCTION

The Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* is probably one of the best studied waders in Europe. Nevertheless, almost all published work deals with the abundant populations of northern Europe and, up to a decade ago, very little was known about birds breeding in southern European countries. Although recent papers have described the breeding ecology of the Oystercatcher in some Mediterranean coastal areas (Martinez-Vilalta *et al.* 1983; Goutner & Goutner 1987; Scarton *et al.* 1993; Valle & Scarton 1996a), its status and recent distribution in the whole area are still poorly known. This paper describes the distribution of breeding Oystercatchers along the coastline of the Mediterranean and provides a first estimate of the overall number of pairs.

METHODS

Data were collected in 1992-1996 through contact with scientific associations, institutions and experts with accurate information on the birds of Mediterranean countries. Detailed information was requested on breeding sites, number of pairs and, where possible, more general observations on the breeding of Oystercatchers in their area. For some sites there was no up-to-date information, and for some countries, no data were available. A site is defined as an area (of varying size, from a few hectares to several thousand) where a discrete population, *i.e.* a group of breeding pairs, of Oystercatchers exists. We arbitrarily defined as coastal any breeding site within 30 km of the coastline. Each site mentioned by the correspondents was recorded on a map of the whole Mediterranean; the English names for the localities are, whenever possible, those used by Grimmet & Jones (1989).

RESULTS

All the sites where breeding is known to have occurred in recent years are shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. Sites with records only of possible breeding are not included in the table. The list is intended to be provisional, since it is likely that

other sites, particularly in Greece and Turkey, have held breeding pairs in the last decade. In Table 1, the total for each country, if not provided directly by the national experts, has been estimated by the authors. Sometimes the country total does not agree with the sum of the site numbers, since only the most recent data were considered. The results for each country are reported separately and discussed briefly below.

Spain

The Ebro Delta is the main breeding site for the species (Velasco pers. comm.). This site held 23 pairs in 1980 and 30-34 pairs in 1992 (Martinez-Vilalta 1992). Some attempts to breed have been recorded in other coastal sites (Velasco pers. comm.).

France

Along the Mediterranean coast of France, Oystercatchers breed at several sites, with a total population estimated at about 100 pairs (Walmsley pers. comm). The major breeding area consists of the wetlands complex between Grau-du Roi and Fos-sur-mer, including the Camargue and the Fos-sur-mer salt-pans. In this area, breeding pairs fluctuated between 36 and 66 over the years 1956-1991 (Isenmann 1993; Pineau pers. comm.). West of this stretch of coast, pairs are found only in the department of Hérault, where 16-20 pairs breed at seven traditional sites (GRIVE 1993). East of the Camargue, the species occurs only at the Berre pond and salt-pans (two pairs in 1995); no record of breeding was found east of the Bouches du Rhône department (Dhermain pers. comm.). On the French Mediterranean coastline, salt-pans are extremely important as breeding sites: 42 pairs, on average, between 1980 and 1990 in the Salines of Aigues-Mortes (Walmsley pers. comm.), 1-3 pairs at the Fos and one pair at the Berre salt-pans (Dhermain pers. comm.).



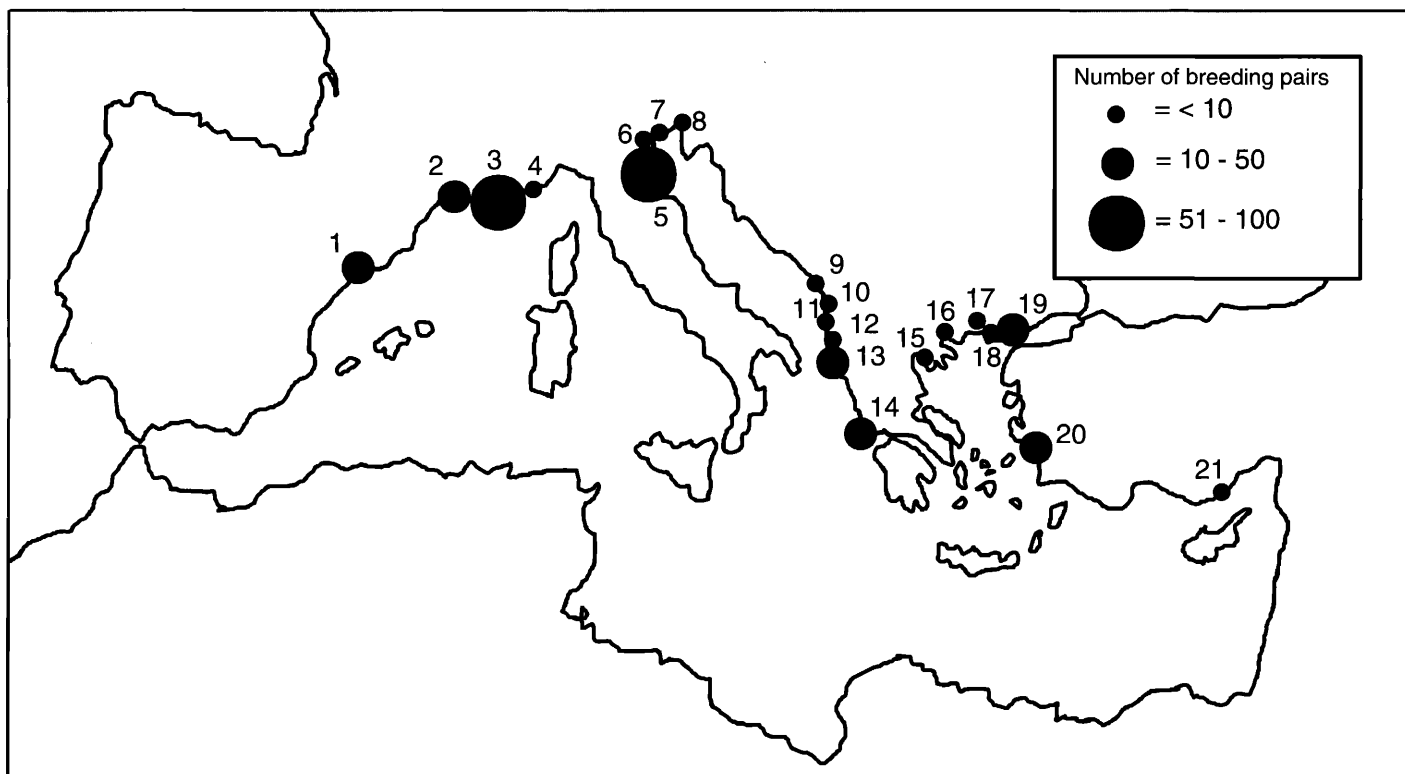


Figure 1. Distribution of breeding sites around the Mediterranean; Numbers refer to Table 1.

Italy

The Italian population, which is concentrated along the Adriatic coastline, has been counted regularly since 1991. The species has shown a steady increase, from 36 pairs in that year (Scarton *et al.* 1993) to 63 in 1996 (Valle *et al.* 1997). In the last decade, new areas have been colonised, such as the Lagoon of Grado-Marano in 1988 (Utmar 1989), the Lagoon of Caleri - at the northern end of the Po Delta - in 1995 (Valle *et al.* 1998) and, in 1996, the Lagoon of Venice where Oystercatchers used to breed until the beginning of this century (Ninni 1938). Most of the pairs (90%) are concentrated in the Po Delta, with a few in the Grado-Marano Lagoon and two in the Venetian Lagoon; breeding is irregular at the Isonzo river mouth. For several Sardinian wetlands, only records of possible breeding exist (Grussu pers. comm.). At other Italian coastal sites, where breeding has occurred in the past (Tinarelli & Baccetti 1989), it has not been confirmed in the present decade. Among other characteristics of the breeding biology, Oystercatchers have frequently been observed nesting near Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans* colonies (Valle & Scarton 1996a; Utmar pers. comm). They have also rapidly colonised dredge islands, so that about 30% of the Italian population nests on these sites (Scarton *et al.* 1998). These probably act as a substitute for barrier islands which are usually heavily disturbed by tourists.

Croatia

Bartovsky *et al.* (1987) reported that the species was seen at a coastal site during the breeding season but without further proof of nesting.

Yugoslavia

Six pairs bred at a coastal site near the Albanian border along the Montenegro coastline (Bartovsky *et al.* 1987). No further data have been obtained.

Albania

A survey undertaken in spring 1993 estimated the population at 18-36 pairs, entirely distributed on the coastline (Vangeluwe pers. comm.). More recently Bino (pers. comm.) estimated a total population of 11-25 pairs. The known breeding sites include the Karavastas lagoons (Haffner *et al.*, Bino in prep.), the Bay of Lalzi (Bino pers. comm), and the Kune-Vain and Fushe-Kushe Patok lagoons (Vangeluwe *et al.* 1994). In addition, they have bred (up to two pairs) on the Semani Outlet and on the Narta Lagoon (Zekhuis and Tempelman in prep.).

Greece

The Greek population has certainly declined and, nowadays, is found mainly in the coastal wetlands of north-western Greece, especially in Thrace (Hallmann pers. comm.). The largest population is in the Evros Delta with 27 pairs in 1980 and 30 in 1981 (Goutner & Goutner 1987). Other sites are the lagoons between Lake Mitrikou and Avdira; the Nestos and the Strymon Deltas which host a few pairs and the large Axios-Aliakmon Delta which is a possible breeding area (Hallmann pers. comm.). In the Pinios Delta, breeding was first proved in 1994; on the west coast. The species probably breeds in the Kalamas Delta (Hallmann pers. comm.), whereas about 25 pairs nested at the Mesolongi Lagoon in 1990 (Roussopoulos in Handrinos & Akkriotis 1997). The total population is estimated now at no more than 50-60 pairs (Handrinos & Akkriotis 1997).



Table 1. Breeding sites of Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* along the Mediterranean coastline.

COUNTRY/SITE	NO OF PAIRS	REFERENCE
SPAIN		
1) Ebro Delta	30-34	Martinez-Vilalta 1992
Total	30-34	Martinez-Vilalta 1992
FRANCE		
2) Herault ponds and lagoons	16-20	G.R.I.V.E. 1993
3) Camargue	66	Pineau pers. comm.
4) Berre pond and salt pans	2	Dhermain pers. comm.
Total	about 100	Walmsley pers. comm.
ITALY		
5) Po Delta	56	Valle <i>et al.</i> 1997
6) Lagoon of Venice	2	pers. obs.
7) Lagoon of GradoMarano	6	Valle <i>et al.</i> 1997
8) Isonzo river mouth	0-1	Valle <i>et al.</i> 1996
Total	64-65	Present estimate
YUGOSLAVIA		
9) Montenegro coastline	6	Bartovsky <i>et al.</i> 1987
Total	6	Bartovsky <i>et al.</i> 1987
ALBANIA		
10) Kune and Vain Lagoons	+	Vangeluwe <i>et al.</i> 1994
11) Fushe-Kushe Patok Lagoons	+	Vangeluwe <i>et al.</i> 1994
12) Bay of Lalzi	1-3	Bino pers. comm.
13) Karavastas Lagoon	10	Haffner <i>et al.</i> , Bino in prep.
Total	18-36 or 11-25	Vangeluwe pers. comm. or Bino pers. comm.
GREECE		
14) Mesolongi lagoons	about 25	Roussopoulos in Handrinos & Akriotis 1997
15) Pinios Delta	+	Hallmann pers. comm
16) Strymon Delta	+	Hallmann pers. comm.
17) Nestos Delta	+	Hallmann pers. comm.
18) Lake Mitrikou-Avdira coasts	+	Hallmann pers. comm.
19) Evros Delta	27-30	Goutner & Goutner 1987
Total	50-60	Handrinos & Akriotis 1997
TURKEY		
20) Buyuk Menderes Delta	40	Magnin pers. comm.
21) Goksu Delta	0-3	Schepers <i>et al.</i> 1989
Total	40	Kasperek pers. comm.
TOTAL FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN	300-341	Present estimate
-		
+ = breeding, but numbers unknown		



Turkey

The national population has been estimated recently at 100-1000 pairs, however, fewer than 40 pairs breed on the Mediterranean and Aegean coasts (Kasperek pers. comm.). The Büyük Menderes Delta with 40 pairs in 1989 (Magnin pers. comm.) and the Göksu Delta with up to three pairs in the same year (Schepers *et al.* 1989) are among the very few known breeding sites.

Other countries

Neither records of breeding nor reproductive behavior were observed in Israel by Blitzblau (pers. comm.) between 1980 and 1996. The species does not breed in Egypt (Goodman & Meininger 1989), in Slovenia (Vogin pers. comm.), or in Tunisia (Keijl pers. comm.). Finally, a recent survey did not find breeding Oystercatchers in Libya (Meininger *et al.* 1994). No information was obtained for Syria, Lebanon, Algeria and Morocco, where this species is not thought to breed (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

CONCLUSIONS

Although information is still lacking for some countries, a general picture of Oystercatcher distribution along the Mediterranean coasts can be drawn. The total number of breeding pairs may be estimated at 301-341, scattered over about twenty sites. This distribution is very restricted, and makes the Oystercatcher one of the rarest waders breeding along the Mediterranean coastline. For comparison, we have recently revised the distribution of Redshank *Tringa totanus* in the same area; this species breeds in at least 50 sites with 2,519-3,047 pairs (Valle & Scarton 1996b).

The main breeding areas for Oystercatchers are situated on the French (about 100 pairs) and the northern Adriatic Italian coasts (about 60 pairs). Smaller numbers are found on the Albanian, Greek, and Turkish coasts (between 20 and 60 pairs in each country). Along the coasts of the Mediterranean, the species breeds usually on barrier islands or sandy islets, located in lagoons, deltas or estuaries. Nevertheless important numbers may occur in salt-pans (France) and artificial dredge islands (Italy). Population trends over the last decades, as far as is known, seem to differ between countries with increases in Italy and Spain, fluctuations in France and a decline in Greece.

Due to the very restricted distribution, we believe that the few coastal sites with known breeding should be kept free from disturbance. One of the most important sites, the Po Delta, is still very poorly protected. In many southern European countries, there is still a clear need for accurate assessments of the populations as well as recent trends.

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