

STATUS OF THE AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER (*HAEMATOPUS PALLIATUS*) IN ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

FLOYD E. HAYES<sup>1</sup>, MICHAEL R. PAICE<sup>2</sup>, TONY BLUNDEN<sup>3</sup>, P. WILLIAM SMITH<sup>4</sup>, SUSAN A. SMITH<sup>4</sup>,  
GRAHAM WHITE<sup>5</sup>, AND MARTIN D. FROST<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago; e-mail: floyd\_hayes@yahoo.com; current address: Department of Biology, Pacific Union College, 1 Angwin Ave., Angwin, CA 94508, USA; <sup>2</sup>8d, Rochdale Way, Deptford, London, SE8 4LY, England; e-mail: mrpaice@yahoo.co.uk; <sup>3</sup>14 White Hill Ecchinswell, Nr Newbury, Berkshire, RG20 4UF, UK; e-mail: tony@epr.uk.com; <sup>4</sup>15917 NE Union Rd. #69, Ridgefield, WA 98642, USA; e-mail: birdsmiths@hotmail.com; <sup>5</sup>Waterloo Estate, Carapichaima, Trinidad and Tobago; e-mail: g-white@tstt.net.tt; <sup>6</sup>Featherbed Lane, St. John, Barbados; e-mail: mfrost@hornabbot.bb

**Abstract:** The American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) was first reported from the Grenadine islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 1950 by James Bond, who merely stated that it “evidently breeds in the Grenadines (Tobago Cays)” but provided no further information. We report recent sightings of: up to five oystercatchers at Bequia during 13-22 March 1993, one on 5 August 1999, and one on 25-27 June 2004; up to five at Mustique during January-February 1997, 1998, and 2001-2006; two at Petit Nevis on 5 August 1999; up to two at Mayreau on 25 May 1998, 27 December 2001, and August 2002; and three at Battowia on 26 June 2004. These observations provide evidence that either small numbers of non-breeding birds regularly visit the Grenadines or a small population may breed in the Grenadines.

**Key words:** American Oystercatcher, Battowia, Bequia, *Haematopus palliatus*, Mayreau, Mustique, Petit Nevis, status, St. Vincent and the Grenadines

**Resumen:** ESTATUS DEL OSTRERO (*HAEMATOPUS PALLIATUS*) EN SAN VICENTE Y LAS GRANADINAS. El Ostrero (*Haematopus palliatus*) fue registrado por primera vez para las islas Granadinas de San Vicente y las Granadinas en 1950 por James Bond, quien solamente señaló que “evidentemente cría en las Granadinas (Islas Tobago)” sin proveer más información. En este trabajo se registran recientes avistamientos de hasta cinco ostreros en Bequia durante el 13 – 22 de marzo de 1993, uno el 5 de agosto de 1999, otro entre el 25-27 de junio del 2004, hasta cinco en Mustique durante enero y febrero de 1997, 1998 y entre 2001-2006; dos más en Petit Nevis el 5 de agosto de 1999, hasta dos en Mayreau el 25 de mayo de 1998, el 27 de diciembre del 2001, y agosto del 2002, y tres en Battowia el 26 de junio de 2004. Estas observaciones proveen evidencias de que un pequeño número de aves visitan regularmente las Granadinas o de que una pequeña población puede estar criando en ella.

**Palabras clave:** Battowia, Bequia, estado, *Haematopus palliatus*, Mayreau, Mustique, Ostrero, Petit Nevis, San Vicente y las Granadinas

**Résumé :** STATUT DE L’HUITRIER D’AMERIQUE (*HAEMATOPUS PALLIATUS*) DANS ST. VINCENT ET LES GRENADINES. L’Huitrier d’Amérique (*Haematopus palliatus*) a été observé pour la première fois dans les îles Grenadines de St. Vincent et les Grenadines par James Bond en 1950. Celui-ci mentionnait juste que « il niche manifestement dans les Grenadines (Tobago Cays) » sans fournir plus d’information. Nous rapportons ici des observations récentes de, jusqu’à 5 huitriers à Bequia du 13 au 22 mars 1993, une le 5 août 1999 et une autre du 25 au 27 juin 2004 ; jusqu’à cinq à Mustique en janvier et février 1997, 1998 et de 2001 à 2006 ; deux à Petit Nevis le 5 août 1999 ; jusqu’à deux à Mayreau les 25 mai 1998, 27 décembre 2001 et août 2002 ; et trois à Battowia le 26 juin 2004. Ces observations révèlent que, soit un petit nombre d’oiseaux non nicheurs visite régulièrement les Grenadines ou alors qu’une petite population pourrait y nicher.

**Mots-clés :** Battowia, Bequia, *Haematopus palliatus*, Huitrier d’Amérique, Mayreau, Mustique, Petit Nevis, statut, St. Vincent et les Grenadines

IN THE CARIBBEAN REGION, the American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) breeds locally along the Atlantic coast of North America from Florida to the Yucatan Peninsula, the Bahamas, Greater Antilles, northern Lesser Antilles, and along the north coast of South America (Nol and

Humphrey 1994, American Ornithologists’ Union 1998, Raffaele *et al.* 1998). In the Grenadine islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which are seldom visited by birders or ornithologists, the status of the American Oystercatcher remains poorly known and is the subject of this note.



Fig. 1. American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) at Lagoon Bay West, Mustique, 28 January 2003. Photo by M. R. Paice.

#### HISTORIC STATUS

The American Oystercatcher was not mentioned in early chronicles of ornithologists visiting St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Wells 1902, Clark 1905, Bond 1936, Devas c. 1943), suggesting that it was either absent or overlooked. The first account of its occurrence appears to be that of Bond (1950:38), who briefly stated that it “evidently breeds in the Grenadines (Tobago Cays)” but provided no further details. The presumed breeding of American Oystercatcher in the Grenadines was mentioned repeatedly by the American Ornithologists’ Union (1957, 1983, 1998), but inexplicably the species was not listed by Raffaele *et al.* (1998) for St. Vincent and the Grenadines. None were seen during extensive ornithological field work within the archipelago by Joseph Wunderle (pers. comm.) during the mid-to-late 1970s.

#### RECENT OBSERVATIONS

In March 1993, Blunden visited Bequia for 12 days and briefly visited Mustique twice. In the evening of 13 March, five birds were noted in Spring Bay, Bequia, where they appeared to be roosting on exposed rocks. Presumably the same group of birds was heard after dark at the same locality on 22 March. At L’Anse Chemin, west of Bequia Head, Bequia, one was heard calling and another seen eating a shellfish on 16 March; presumably these individuals were different than the ones at Spring Bay.

In January and February 1997, Paice spent 19 days in Mustique and observed two at North Point on 4 February 1997. Paice returned to Mustique for 17 days in January and February 1998, and observed two fly past Pasture Bay on the east coast on 27 January, three at North Point on 1 February, three at South Point on 4 February, and two at Lagoon Bay West on the west coast on 6 February.

On 25 May 1998, while traveling past the northwestern tip of Mayreau aboard the St. Vincent mailboat, the Smiths observed a pair along the shoreline. These were the only birds seen by them during 4 days on Bequia, 2 days on Union Island, and their passage of several islands in the Grenadines, including Canouan.

During a 6 day visit to Bequia in August 1999, White found a single bird along the rocky coast between Friendship Bay and the Fishing Depot opposite Petit Nevis on 5 August 1999. About 2 hr later, two were seen foraging on a rocky shelf on the northeast side of Petit Nevis; one of the two may have been seen earlier on Bequia.

During a 15 day visit to Mustique in January and February 2001, Paice observed one on the west side of Cape Lookout, on the north coast, on 25 January, two at Britannia Bay on the west coast on 28 January, two at North Point on 3 February, and

Table 1. Monthly summary of the maximum number of American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*) observed on each island of the Grenadines.

Island	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Bequia	–	–	5	–	–	1	–	2	–	–	–	–
Battowia	–	–	–	–	–	3	–	–	–	–	–	–
Mayreau	–	–	–	–	2	–	–	1	–	–	–	2
Mustique	2	5	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Petit Nevis	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2	–	–	–	–

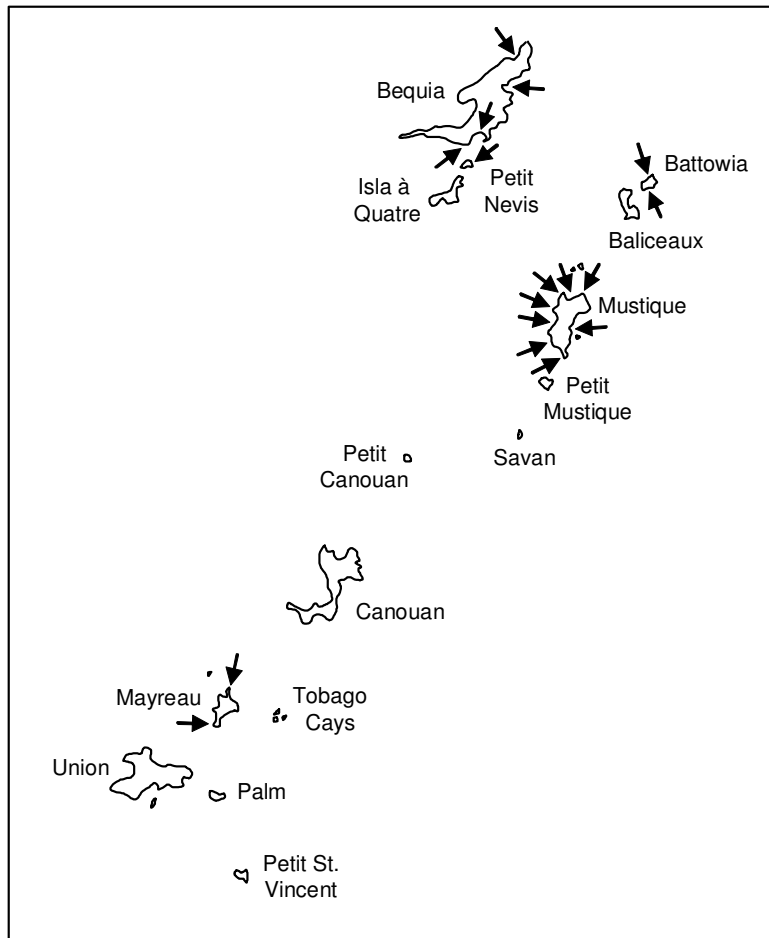


Fig. 2. Map of the Grenadine islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, with arrows indicating localities of recent American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) sightings.

three at South Point on 6 February.

While traveling aboard the yacht *Hurricane* on 27 December 2001, Hayes observed a pair at Monkey Point, Mayreau, which flew eastward over Saline Bay and then returned to Monkey Point. These were the only birds seen during brief visits by boat to Bequia, Canouan, Mayreau, Tobago Cays, Union Island, and Palm Island on 23, 27, and 28 December 2001.

During 2002-2006, Paice returned repeatedly to Mustique during January and February, spending 16 days on each occasion. In 2002, one was seen at Lagoon Bay West on 23 and 27 January, one flying south at Britannia Bay on 29 and 31 January, and two flying south at Britannia Bay on 4 February. In 2003, three were at Lagoon Bay West on 28 January (Fig. 1). In 2004, two were at Lagoon Bay West on

28 January and one on 7 February, and five were at Lovell, at the north end of Britannia Bay, on 8 February. In 2005, one was on a rocky islet off L'Ansecoy Bay, on the north coast. In 2006, two were seen at Lovell/Britannia Bay on 18 and 19 January, and one on 22 January. Two were seen on the rocky islet off L'Ansecoy Bay, on the north coast on 21 January and one on 27 January, and two were seen on Wilkes Island (another tiny rocky islet) off the west coast towards the southern end of Mustique on 26 January.

In August 2002, Wayne Burke (pers. comm.) saw one at the northern tip of Mayreau. In 2004, Frost and Wayne Burke observed one on St. Elairs, a cay at the mouth of Friendship Bay, Bequia, on 25 June, and one on Semples Cay off Bequia on 27 June. On 26 June, Frost and Burke observed three on the

north side of Battowia and one (possibly one of the three) on the south side. A visit by Frost to Tobago Cays and Mayreau on 20 and 21 January 2006 failed to produce any.

#### DISCUSSION

In the northern Lesser Antilles, small oystercatcher populations apparently breed locally and may be increasing in St. Martin, St. Bartholomew, Guadeloupe, and St. Lucia (Benito-Espinal 1990, Leck and Norton 1991, Keith 1997). Our observations of up to five birds on multiple islands of the Grenadine islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Fig. 2) at various months of the year with no apparent seasonal pattern (Table 1), provide evidence that either small numbers of non-breeding birds regularly visit the Grenadines from an unknown source population (northern Caribbean or northern South America) or a small population may breed in the Grenadines, potentially comprising the southernmost breeding population in the Lesser Antilles. Given the increasing anthropogenic threats to the marine and littoral ecosystems of the Grenadines (Anonymous 1991), a thorough survey of breeding seabirds and shorebirds in the islands is urgently needed.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank E. Nol and J. Wunderle for reviewing an earlier version of the manuscript. F. E. Hayes was funded by a travel grant from the University of the West Indies. M. R. Paice thanks Basil Charles and Dana Gillespie and their charity, the Mustique Blues Festival, which promotes the education of disadvantaged St. Vincent children through the Basil Charles Foundation, for making visits to Mustique possible. We thank W. Burke for providing an unpublished observation, J. C. Eitnienar for providing a pertinent reference, and A. Levesque and F. Providence for comments on the status of American Oystercatcher in Guadeloupe and St. Vincent, respectively.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1957. Checklist of North American birds. Lord Baltimore Press, Baltimore, MD.
- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1983. Checklist of North American birds. 6th ed. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, DC.
- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1998. Checklist of North American birds. 7th ed. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, DC.
- ANONYMOUS. 1991. St. Vincent and the Grenadines: environmental profile. Caribbean Conservation Association, St. Michael, Barbados.
- BENITO-ESPINAL, E. 1990. Oiseaux des Petites Antilles. Editions du Latanier, St-Barthelemy.
- BOND, J. 1936. Birds of the West Indies. Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia.
- BOND, J. 1950. Check-list of birds of the West Indies. Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia.
- CLARK, A. H. 1905. Birds of the southern Lesser Antilles. Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History 32:203-312.
- DEVAS, R. P. C. 1943. Birds of Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines (British West Indies). Advocate Co., Ltd., Barbados.
- KEITH, A. R. 1997. The birds of St. Lucia. British Ornithologists' Union Check-list No. 15.
- LECK, C. F., AND R. L. NORTON. 1991. An annotated checklist of the birds of the U. S. Virgin Islands. Antilles Press, Christiansted, St. Croix.
- NOL, E., AND R. C. HUMPHREY. 1994. American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*). In The birds of North America, no. 82 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia; American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, DC.
- RAFFAELE, H., J. WILEY, O. GARRIDO, A. KEITH, AND J. RAFFAELE. 1998. A guide to the birds of the West Indies. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- WELLS, J. G. 1902. Birds of the island of Carriacou. Part I. Water birds. Auk 19:237-246.