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NC State study directly links beach driving to bird mortality on Hatteras

Raleigh - A recent study done by members of the zoology department of NC State University shows a direct correlation between beach driving and mortality rates of American oystercatchers, a species of bird that nests on the shores of Cape Hatteras National Seashore and one of the species a recent lawsuit filed concerning beach driving on Hatteras aims to protect. “American oystercatcher research and monitoring in North Carolina” by Theodore Simons and Shiloh Schulte, part of the USGS NC



Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit in the zoology department of NCSU, examines the nesting and foraging habits of fledgling American oystercatchers along the Cape Lookout and Cape Hatteras National Seashores.

According to the study, which was commissioned by the National Park Service:

- vehicle collisions and disturbance are responsible for nearly 1 in 5 (16 percent) of known chick mortalities of American oystercatchers along the two Seashores although the authors suspect the number to be higher as often times the bodies of chicks are not found. Many of those opposed to a management plan to regulate driving on Cape Hatteras claim that birds are lost to predators, climate change and other factors as opposed to vehicular traffic.
- in areas of Cape Hatteras that are closed to vehicular traffic, 47 percent of Oystercatcher chicks survived, while only 27 percent survived in areas where an open lane for vehicles and pedestrians existed.
- between 1995 to 2007 nine chicks that were killed by vehicles were found on Cape Hatteras. The authors report that this is “only a fraction of the total number of chicks killed by vehicles during this time, as dead chicks were located by chance in most cases and many chicks died and were never found.”

The American oystercatcher has declined by 49 percent on Cape Hatteras National Seashore since 1999 according to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

“The NC State study of the American oystercatcher proves what we’ve long known to be fact: that birds along Cape Hatteras National Seashore have been killed by vehicles on the beach,” said Walker Golder, deputy director of Audubon North Carolina, which, with Defenders of Wildlife, is being represented by the non profit Southern Environmental Law Center in the beach driving lawsuit. “The only question that

remains is how to do we protect the oystercatcher as well as the other birds and turtles on the beach while preserving the ability for fishermen and others to access the beach.”

SELC is in negotiations with the Park Service over a settlement agreement that would regulate beach driving while protecting the natural resources of Cape Hatteras National Seashore. To comply with a court-granted continuance of the case, that settlement must be filed with US District Court Judge Terrance Boyle by the end of the day tomorrow.

“There’s no question that beach driving, when not managed properly, impacts the survival of nesting shorebirds and sea turtles. That’s why it’s so important that nests and chicks be protected during this critical breeding season,” said Jason Rylander, staff attorney for Defenders of Wildlife.

Simons and Schulte observed that oystercatchers spend their time walking between the dunes, where they spend the day, and the waterline, where they forage for food with their chicks putting the birds at “considerable risk” from vehicle traffic.

After two chicks were killed by a vehicle in 2005, Cape Lookout National Seashore closed sections of the beach to vehicular traffic and saw no additional deaths from vehicle traffic. Similarly, in 2005, Cape Hatteras closed sections of the beach with oystercatcher broods and saw no chick deaths by vehicle. However, when the policy was changed in 2006 to allow vehicle lanes past broods, two chicks were recorded dead due to vehicle traffic.

In addition to being run over by vehicles, Simon and Schulte observed chicks hiding in vehicle tracks in response to adult alarms calls and incidents of adult and young American Oystercatchers running and flying directly at headlights of oncoming vehicles at night. Furthermore, Simon and Schulte report incidents in which adults were disoriented by vehicle headlights, leaving their young to die of exposure, dehydration, and predator attacks that likely would not have occurred otherwise.

The National Park Service, which is charged with developing and implementing a plan to manage beach driving to protect and preserve the region’s natural resources, is currently undertaking a process to develop future rules for driving at Hatteras. However, NPS admits the process will take at least three years to complete. Scientists agree that several species could be eliminated from the Seashore in that time.

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