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What is the correct ring size for female African Black Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini*?

Bo Bonnevie[1] & Sophie Kohler[2]

1. Information Technology Division, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, 6140; B.Bonnevie@ru.ac.za
2. Department of Zoology & Entomology, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, 6140

Female African Black Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini* are larger than the males (Hockey 1981, Maclean 1993). De Beer et al. (2000) recommend a size 8mm stainless steel (SS) ring for this species. During a study of blood and feather isotopes of African Black Oystercatchers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, we have ringed both males (n = 9), females (n = 14) and chicks (n = 19) of this species, as well as 11 unsexed adults. We found that the 8mm ring was suitable for males, but that it was generally too small for females in this area.

We have re-trapped females with constricted tarsi clearly caused by rings that are too small (Fig. 1). The damaged tarsus is thinner than that of the other leg and discoloured because of reduced blood circulation (the colour of the tarsus under a loosely fitted ring is much darker). An additional problem is that when rings are fitted they are often closed into a round shape. The tarsi of African Black Oystercatchers are not round, so the rings should be flattened to fit the leg properly. This will also provide a looser fit for the same ring size. We flattened the ring on the female tarsus shown (Fig. 1) after which it could move up the leg, although it was still a tight fit.

SAFRING does not supply 9mm SS rings at present. We, therefore, started using 10mm SS rings on females as this is the next largest size available from SAFRING after the 8mm ring. Many African Black Oystercatchers are, however, ringed as chicks which cannot be sexed in the field. We, therefore, recommend that a 9mm SS ring should be sourced and used for both sexes of the African Black Oystercatcher in the Eastern Cape.

During this field work we have seen quite a number of oystercatchers with one foot missing and one was also caught (Fig. 2). It is possible that tightly fitted rings could cause this sort of injury. We have also caught birds with fishing line tangled around their feet and this also could possibly cause such injuries. It would be interesting to survey missing feet on oystercatchers: if there are more injuries on the right foot (where the ring is typically fitted) this could be an indication that too small a ring size contributes to these kinds of injuries.

References

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Fig. 1. Tarsus of a female oystercatcher damaged by a constricting ring (photo: Sophie Kohler)

Fig. 2. Dr Paul Martin holding an oystercatcher with a missing right foot (photo: Sophie Kohler)