



## MYSTERY PHOTOGRAPHS



▲ 209. Mystery photograph 209A.



▲ 210. Mystery photograph 209B.

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**209** American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus* is less common and less migratory than Eurasian Oystercatcher *H. ostralegus*. Though its breeding range includes the eastern seaboard of the USA, from Florida north to New England, the species has yet to be recorded in the Western Palearctic.

In flight, the white tail-base, uppertail-coverts, rump and back of Eurasian Oystercatcher and its long, white wing-bars, which extend to at least the middle primaries and often to the outer primaries, contrast with the otherwise glossy black upperparts to give the species its familiar pied appearance. American Oystercatcher's upperparts are only superficially similar. The white is confined to the uppertail-coverts and to the comparatively short wing-bars, which, even on the nominate North American race, reach only as far as the inner primaries. Furthermore, the mantle, back, rump, scapulars and inner upperwing-coverts are dark brown and thus contrast with the black head, neck, tail, primary coverts, primaries and tips of the secondaries. From below, the tail of Eurasian Oystercatcher is white and its primaries and secondaries are largely so, while the undertail and undersides of the primaries and secondaries of American Oystercatcher are extensively dark. Some of these identification characters are quite subtle, however, and the most eye-catching difference between the two in flight is the Eurasian species' striking whiteness above, from the tail to the upper back, where the American species is dark except for a slender, curving, white band across the uppertail-coverts.

Distinguishing these oystercatchers at rest is less straightforward. Mystery photograph A shows an adult Eurasian Oystercatcher in Anglesey in July 1988, while mystery photograph B shows an adult American Oystercatcher in Florida, USA, in January 1987; both photographs were taken by Dr Richard Chandler.

In a European context, observation of the glossy black upperparts of adult Eurasian Oystercatcher is sufficient to allow a firm identification to be made. The dark brown upperparts of adult American Oystercatcher, are, however, shared by juvenile and first-year Eurasian Oystercatcher and by all ages of Eurasian



▲ 211. First-summer Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Islay, Argyll, August 1993 (Richard Chandler)

Oystercatcher of the eastern race *longipes*. Juvenile Eurasian Oystercatcher is easily identified by its very dull-coloured bill, legs and feet, its normally pointed bill tip, its dark eyes and the buff fringes to its upperparts, upperwing-coverts and tertials. First-year Eurasian Oystercatcher can be separated from adult American Oystercatcher by its less colourful bare parts and usually, in addition, by its broad, white foreneck-collar. This collar, though of varying extent among individuals, is a character of most second-winters and non-breeding adults too, but not of American Oystercatcher of any age at any season. The Eurasian Oystercatcher in plate 211 displays this distinctive feature. Adults of all races of Eurasian Oystercatcher, including *longipes*, have deep red irides; those of adult American Oystercatcher are lemon-yellow. The Nearctic species also has the paler pink legs.

In Europe, the positive identification of a non-adult American Oystercatcher at rest would be more difficult than that of an adult at rest. This is because the diagnostic iris colours of the adults of the two species take two years to develop fully, both species initially possessing brown irides, and because juvenile and first-year Eurasian Oystercatchers have brownish-black upperparts and all juveniles and some first-years do not show the characteristic white foreneck-collar. Juvenile American Oystercatcher's black head and neck are liberally spotted with buffish-white, however, while juvenile Eurasian Oystercatcher's head and neck are unmarked dull sooty-black. The heads and necks of first-years of both species are uniformly black, but the distinctive iris colours begin to appear during the year. The clearer iris colours of second-years and differences in upperparts coloration between the two species at that age enable them to be separated fairly easily.

Whatever the age of an American Oystercatcher, the observation of its upperparts pattern in flight would be a priority accompaniment to the appreciation of its characters of separation from Eurasian Oystercatcher visible when at rest in order to establish the impeccable credentials necessary for a first for the Western Palearctic.

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#### References

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