Workshop summary: Effective conservation of the Eurasian Oystercatcher

International Wader Study Group Meeting, Santiago de Compostella September 2026 -- notes by Eva Kok

Purpose and scope

The workshop reviewed the status and conservation of the Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*. It followed the earlier international workshop in La Rochelle in 2007. The intended output is a new scientific paper with all contributors as co-authors. The paper will update the earlier assessment, but it will use new population data, research results, and management experience. Bruno Ens explained that the review must answer four questions:

1. Are breeding populations declining, and why?
2. Are wintering populations declining, and why?
3. Which measures can protect breeding populations, and how effective are these measures?
4. Which measures can protect wintering populations, and how effective are these measures?

References relate to the speakers at the workshop. In due course, all contributions will be incorporated in a major review of the conservation status of the Eurasian Oystercatcher, including contributions from a sizable number of scientists who could not attend the workshop.

Abstract

Many breeding and wintering populations have declined, but trends differ among countries and regions. The workshop also showed that the causes are not the same at every site. Effective conservation must therefore combine European coordination with measures that respond to local conditions.

1. Breeding population trends

Denmark

The Danish breeding population has declined strongly. Surveys in the Danish Wadden Sea show a decline of 64% between 1996 and 2024. National point counts show a decline of 41% during the same period. Coastal and inland populations show similar declines. Unlike several other countries, Denmark has no clear evidence of a population increase before 1990 (Thorup and Bregnballe 2026). An unresolved remark during the discussion asked whether Oystercatchers experience more predation than Lapwings?

France

The French breeding population is stable in the long term. It was estimated at 1,274 to 1,432 pairs in 2021 and 2022. Between 50% and 90% of the population breeds in special protection areas. Most birds breed on coasts, rocky shores, or islets. Only a small proportion breeds in meadows. The main population is in Normandy. Small populations in northern France are increasing, while larger populations further south are stable. The national trend has remained stable during the past ten years (Joyeux et al. 2026).

A strong local increase has occurred in the Gulf of Morbihan. The number of breeding pairs associated with oyster farms increased from three pairs in 2010 to 93 pairs in 2026. The origin of these birds is not known. The local birds appear to be residents (Cabelguen et al. 2026). Breeding Oystercatchers were reported to eat Pacific oyster in the oyster farms.

Ireland

Ireland has an estimated 750 to 1,000 breeding pairs. However, the available data do not permit a reliable assessment of the breeding trend. This lack of information was one reason why breeding status was not assessed in detail when the species was placed on the Irish Red List in 2021 (Murphey 2026).

The Netherlands

The Dutch breeding population increased during the twentieth century and reached a peak around 1990. It has declined since then. More than 70% of the breeding population has been lost since 1985. Agricultural intensification is considered an important cause of the national decline (Arts and Ens 2026).

Agricultural populations continue to decline because breeding success is too low to maintain a stable population. This applies to the Dutch Delta and to other inland agricultural areas. Monitoring in the Dutch Delta recorded 24 successful nests and 146 unsuccessful nests in 2025. Of the failed nests, 108 failed during the egg stage (Arts and Ens 2026).

Oystercatchers have increasingly moved to urban roofs. The estimated proportion of the Dutch population breeding on roofs increased from approximately 4% in 2008 to 20% in 2023. Roofs are now the only common Dutch breeding habitat where reproductive output is often high enough to maintain the population. Some birds might return to roof habitats because they were raised on roofs, but natal dispersal between roof and ground habitats requires more research (de Vries 2026).

Norway

The Norwegian breeding population was estimated at 100,000 to 200,000 individuals in 2015. Birds breed along the entire Norwegian coast and often use nearby agricultural land. Some pairs also breed inland in southern Norway. The national trend is uncertain because data from northern Norway are insufficient. Declines in southern Norway resulted in the species being classified as Near Threatened in Norway (Wilson 2026).

Germany

Germany holds approximately 6% of the global Eurasian Oystercatcher population. About half of the German population breeds in Schleswig-Holstein. Numbers in this region have declined by more than 50% since the 1990s. Fewer than 10,000 breeding pairs remain. Low reproductive success, caused mainly by nest and chick predation, is the probable driver of this decline (Cimiotti et al. 2026).

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom had an estimated 100,408 breeding pairs in 2022. The total population declined by 22.6% over 29 years. The decline was smaller during the most recent decade, at 2.6%. There are strong differences between countries. Scotland declined by 40.6%, while England increased by 65.6% over the same period (Bowgen 2026).

Habitat-specific trends also differ. Oystercatchers on lowland wet grassland increased by almost 50% between 1982 and 2002. In contrast, populations on upland pasture and arable land declined by approximately 95% over 25 years. The "Life on the Edge" project recorded an increase of 24%, but this increase could represent a sink effect rather than a self-sustaining population (Douglas 2026).

2. Threats and conservation measures for breeding populations

Low reproductive success

Low reproductive success is a common problem across countries. It is linked to losses during both the egg and chick stages. Important causes are predation, farming operations, livestock trampling, recreational disturbance, flooding, poor food availability, and habitat change. These pressures differ between regions and breeding habitats (Arts and Ens 2026; Cimiotti et al. 2026; Short 2026; Bray 2026).

Predation and predator management

Predation is a major threat in Germany, the Netherlands, and England. Large terrestrial predators include Red Foxes and Raccoon Dogs. Smaller predators include Brown Rats and Stoats. Gulls are important predators on islands and saltmarshes (Cimiotti et al. 2026).

In the Beltringharder Koog nature reserve, volunteer hunters used lethal control for approximately 20 years. This measure alone was not sufficient. Since 2021, managers have combined targeted control by professional hunters with additional measures, including electric predator-exclusion fences and habitat management. Losses caused by large terrestrial predators declined and breeding success increased. However, predation by rats and stoats then increased. This result shows that predator management must be adapted when the predator community changes (Cimiotti et al. 2026).

On Hallig Langeneß, most recorded losses were caused by aerial predators, especially gulls. Chicks also grew more slowly than chicks in Beltringharder Koog. They needed approximately 45 days to reach fledging, compared with approximately 30 days in Beltringharder Koog. Food conditions are likely to contribute to this difference, but follow-up studies are needed for further investigation (Cimiotti et al. 2026).

Predator management can therefore improve breeding success, but it does not remove all causes of failure. It can also change which predators cause the greatest losses. Real-time radio telemetry, nest cameras, and diet analyses can help managers to identify the remaining causes of loss or slow growth (Cimiotti et al. 2026).

Nest cages and electric fences

Nest cages can provide some protection against foxes. In southern England, during a two-year experimental field trial, monitored caged nests had an estimated survival rate of 65%, compared with 22% for uncaged nests. Caged nests were three times more likely to survive incubation. However, cages can make nest defense more difficult; they do not exclude all predators and cameras have recorded foxes killing adults at cages (Short 2026).

Electric fences appear to provide stronger protection than nest cages. They can protect both nests and the area used by chicks. Further trials of nest cages and electric fences are due to take place in eastern England between 2027-2029. In agricultural areas, chicks might not be able to leave a fenced area. However, the Dutch delta did not show that food inside the fenced areas was insufficient (Short 2026; Arts and Ens 2026).

Nesting platforms and nest boxes

Elevated nesting platforms can protect nests against flooding, farming operations, and some terrestrial predators. In many areas, occupied platforms have high nest survival. Chick survival can also be high, although chicks usually leave the platform within one or two days after hatching (Ens 2026).

Results differ between countries and regions. In England, 50% of 40 platforms were occupied within two years. Pairs using these platforms produced 0.74 chicks per pair. Typically, chicks remained within 50 to 100 meters of the platform after they jumped down. No evidence was found that chicks were taken directly from the platforms (Short 2026).

Nest boxes are a traditional conservation measure in Norway (Wilson 2026; Gjerstad 2026). Norwegian nest boxes produced approximately 1.1 chicks per breeding attempt.

In the Netherlands, approximately 470 platforms were available. Occupancy was 13%, and occupied platforms produced approximately 0.45 fledged chicks per pair. Results were better in some areas. On Terschelling, the number of breeding pairs using platforms increased over time. In Zeeland, occupancy was low, but hatching success was high when platforms were occupied (Ens 2026).

Platform success can depend on the surrounding habitat. Dutch agri-environment packages can include delayed mowing. This can improve chick survival after chicks leave the platform. Platforms must therefore be combined with suitable chick-rearing habitat. Platform placement alone is not sufficient (Ens 2026).

Agricultural management

Agricultural intensification is an important threat in Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Farming machinery can destroy nests and kill chicks. Livestock can trample nests. Intensive land use can also reduce earthworm biomass and the availability of other invertebrates (Arts and Ens 2026; Wilson 2026; Short 2026).

In the United Kingdom, breeding success was higher in taller and wetter grassland with light sheep grazing when predation pressure was high. The absence of farming activities within fields was also important for nest survival. These findings show that vegetation structure and the timing of agricultural work can change breeding outcomes (Douglas 2026).

Possible measures include delayed mowing, fewer activities around nests, electric fencing, protection of chick-rearing areas, and changes to landscape structure. Arts and Ens proposed landscape-level changes rather than protection of individual nests only. Movement from crop fields to nature reserves might also provide safer breeding habitat (Arts and Ens 2026).

Exotic species

The Faroe Islands may face a new ecological pressure from the introduced New Zealand flatworm. This flatworm eats earthworms, which are an important food source for inland-breeding Oystercatchers (Ens 2026). The New Zealand flatworm has also been present in the United Kingdom since the 1990s.

Roof breeding

Roof breeding can reduce exposure to terrestrial predators and agricultural machinery. It currently produces enough chicks to maintain some local populations in the Netherlands. However, roof chicks face specific risks. They can enter downpipes, fall from roofs, or lack safe access to nearby feeding areas (de Vries 2026).

The working group "Oystercatchers on the Roof" collects public reports and provides practical advice. Between 2019 and 2025, people reported an average of approximately 920 nests per year. In 2025, the working group answered 530 requests for advice.

Oystercatchers tend to breed in similar places where they are born. There is some evidence that chicks breed at roofs may also breed on roofs. Studying natal dispersal is high on the wish list for future research in the project 'together for the oystercatcher'.

Flooding and climate change

Coastal nests face a growing risk of flooding due to sea-level rise and extreme water levels. Platforms can provide protection where high tides flood saltmarshes and other low breeding sites. This is one reason why platforms are used in the United Kingdom and why Oystercatchers in the Venice Lagoon use pole tops (Arts and Ens 2026; Ens 2026).

The notes indicate that poor breeding success caused by storms was discussed but not confirmed as a general explanation. Flooding can cause local losses, but it is unclear if it explains the full population decline (Arts and Ens 2026).

Recreation and disturbance

Recreation is an important threat on beaches and in coastal breeding areas. People, loose dogs, and drones can cause adults to leave nests and reduce the time available for care and feeding. The increase in outdoor recreation after the COVID-19 pandemic has increased this pressure in parts of the United Kingdom (Bray 2026).

In Norway, the law of free access for camping anywhere in nature away from agricultural land and 100 m from houses etc is doing damage to bird populations due to the increase in tourism (Wilson 2026).

Wardens who speak to visitors can change visitors' behaviour. Information and direct interaction can therefore reduce disturbance. Birds can also become accustomed to disturbance that is predictable and not threatening. Drones, however, caused strong disturbance responses (Bray 2026).

Beach monitoring, access management, wardening, and public communication can support breeding birds. Local recovery has occurred where intensive protection was used (Bray 2026).

3. Wintering population trends

Denmark

The number of Oystercatchers counted in the Danish Wadden Sea in January showed no clear trend between 1988 and 2026. Counts varied from approximately 1,500 to 55,000 birds. Variation in survey coverage contributed to these fluctuations. Severe cold before the January count was associated with lower numbers. Counts from 2023 to 2026 were lower than in most earlier winters (Thorup and Bregnballe 2026).

France

France held an average of 43,966 Oystercatchers in January between 2016 and 2025. The national wintering trend is stable in the short, medium, and long term. Historically, France acted as a refuge during severe winters farther north. Peak winter counts coincided with the two most recent Dutch Elfstedentochten, suggesting an effect of severe winters. A series of mild winters has contributed to the stabilization of numbers (Joyeux et al. 2026).

Regional trends differ. Numbers increased over 49 years along the Channel coast. They were stable or declined along the northern coast of Brittany. They increased overall along the southern coast of Brittany and declined along the Atlantic coast. During the most recent ten years, numbers were stable at 23 regularly monitored sites. They increased in the Orne Estuary, Pont-l'Abbé, and the Gulf of Morbihan, and declined in the Bay of Audierne (Joyeux et al. 2026).

Ireland

The Irish Red List assessment identified a national decline in wintering numbers. Dundalk Bay remains an important site and can hold approximately 6,000 Oystercatchers at high-tide roosts. Tagged birds using the bay originated from, or were connected with, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Norway.

The Netherlands

The Dutch wintering population has declined strongly. Approximately 60% of the wintering population has been lost. Most Dutch breeding birds winter in the Wadden Sea and Delta area. A smaller proportion moves to the United Kingdom and France (Arts and Ens 2026).

The decline continues in the Southwest Delta, and started earlier than in the Wadden Sea, probably due to the Delta works. Changes in the shellfish community differ between these regions. Pacific Oysters arrived in the Southwest Delta around 1980, much earlier than in the Wadden Sea. This difference could influence regional food availability and trends (Arts and Ens 2026).

Norway

Most Norwegian Oystercatchers leave the breeding areas in August. They winter mainly around the North Sea. Smaller numbers winter around the Irish Sea and along the French coast. Only a small number remains in Norway (Wilson 2026).

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom had an estimated 292,087 wintering Oystercatchers. Numbers declined by 19% over approximately 25 years. Scotland and Northern Ireland each declined by as much as 40%. Wales increased by approximately 5% and has shown long-term stability with fluctuations (Bowgen 2026).

Across the United Kingdom, wintering numbers increased strongly from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. They then declined to levels closer to those recorded in the early 1980s. Wetland counts show the same general pattern. Wales is the main exception because it has not shown the later decline (Bowgen 2026).

Winter counts must be interpreted with care. Poor breeding success can leave more non-breeding birds in wintering areas. This can create an apparent increase in winter counts even when the breeding population is not healthy. Changes in winter distribution between countries can also affect national trends (Bowgen 2026).

European pattern

The workshop described a broad European pattern. Wintering populations increased steeply until the 1990s, remained high for a period, and then declined after approximately 2000. Numbers have appeared more stable in recent years. Country-level differences remain large, and changes in distribution can affect the observed national trends (Bowgen 2026).

4. Threats and conservation measures for wintering populations

Shellfish availability

Winter survival depends strongly on shellfish stocks, especially during severe weather. Cockles, mussels, and other bivalves provide the main winter food. Reduced prey availability can increase foraging effort and reduce body condition. Poor winter condition can also affect reproduction in the next breeding season through carry-over effects (Murphey 2026; Arts and Ens 2026).

The evidence for carry-over effects in the Dutch Wadden Sea was discussed during the workshop. Poor body condition is a possible mechanism, and direct carry-over effects have been demonstrated clearly for this area (Arts and Ens 2026).

Shellfisheries

Commercial shellfisheries can compete with Oystercatchers for food. The scale and method of fishing determine the likely effect. Fisheries management must use information about prey biomass, prey accessibility, bird distribution, and foraging locations. Roost counts alone are not a reliable measure of the relationship between Oystercatchers and cockle density (Murphey 2026).

Dundalk Bay contains a cockle bed of approximately 30 square kilometres. Four of Ireland's five cockle fisheries use hand collection. The fishery in Dundalk Bay uses mechanical dredging. Management includes 28 licenses, a minimum landing size of 22 millimeters. Fishers did not usually reach the daily catch limit.

Management also includes a seasonal closure from November. However, November closure might start too late for migrating birds. Advancing the closure date is under discussion (Murphey 2026).

GPS tracking of 25 adult Oystercatchers in Dundalk Bay showed that cockles and thin tellins were preferred prey. Birds preferred foraging areas close to their roosts. Home ranges increased when prey was more widely available across the large cockle bed. These results can support fisheries decisions that consider both prey location and the birds' access to feeding areas (Murphey 2026).

The relationship between fishers and researchers in Dundalk Bay was described as constructive. This cooperation can support adaptive management. However, the sale of licences to fishers outside the local community can make cooperation more difficult (Murphey 2026).

In the Netherlands, mechanical dredging of cockles was allowed until 2004. It directly decreased the food supply of Oystercatchers, but there is no evidence for long-term effects. Complete removal of virtually all intertidal mussel beds from the Dutch Wadden Sea in 1990 had a big and long-lasting negative effect.

Exotic shellfish

Exotic shellfish can have positive and negative effects. The American Razor Clam is suitable food, but it usually occurs below the intertidal zone. Birds can access it mainly during very low tides. The Manila Clam also appears to be suitable food, but it might compete with native cockles (Bowgen and Ens 2026).

Most Oystercatchers can open only small Pacific Oysters. Large individuals are generally not available as food. In the Oosterschelde, Pacific Oyster beds have replaced many intertidal mussel beds and provide little direct food. In the Wadden Sea, Until 2003, only mussels were reported from the relevant intertidal area. Pacific Oysters increased after that point. Mixed oyster and mussel beds are increasing, but mussels are less accessible in these beds than in pure mussel beds (Bowgen and Ens 2026). A massive mussel spatfall was recorded in the Wadden Sea in 2024.

Pacific Oyster beds can also create sediment and habitat for other animals. This can provide indirect feeding opportunities. Oyster farms in the Gulf of Morbihan offer an additional food source. Tagged birds spent 6% to 32% of their time in oyster-farming areas and ate open, filtering oysters through the mesh bags. The feeding rate was low, at approximately 0.25 oysters per minute, and unsuccessful attempts were frequent. However, the amount of flesh ingested was not estimated. Oyster farms may be a predictable, but complementary, food source (Cabelguen 2026).

The capacity to use Pacific Oysters might require learning. The workshop discussed whether the loss of experienced mussel-opening birds could slow the development of new feeding techniques. American Oystercatchers in the United States were said to need seven years to learn to open oysters.

Habitat change

Changes to intertidal habitats can reduce carrying capacity. In the Dutch Delta, habitat change affects the area and duration of exposed feeding habitat. In the Wadden Sea, changes in shellfish beds reduce the accessibility of mussels. These changes can continue even when direct exploitation is reduced (Arts and Ens 2026; Bowgen and Ens 2026).

Illegal sand removal was identified as a threat in Norway.

Habitat restoration can help, but Oystercatchers use many different habitats. This adaptability makes their response to restoration difficult to predict. Conservation projects must therefore monitor the actual use of restored areas and not assume that habitat creation will result in population recovery (Douglas 2026).

Recreation and disturbance

Human disturbance can reduce the time that wintering birds spend feeding or resting. Walking, dogs, and drones can cause birds to leave feeding areas or high-tide roosts. Increased recreation after the COVID-19 pandemic has added pressure at some sites (Bray 2026).

Overall conclusion

The workshop showed a common pattern of decline, but the causes and rates differ between countries. Breeding declines are strongest in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland, and several agricultural landscapes in the United Kingdom. France is broadly stable, and England shows an increase at the country level. Reliable breeding trend data remain unavailable for Ireland and large parts of Norway (Thorup and Bregnballe 2026; Joyeux et al. 2026; Murphey 2026; Wilson 2026; Bowgen 2026).

Low breeding success is the main immediate problem in many declining populations. Predation, agricultural operations, disturbance, flooding, and unsuitable chick-rearing habitat often act together. Electric fences, nest cages, platforms, nest boxes, adjusted mowing, wardening, and roof protection can improve local success. Their effectiveness depends on local predators, food availability, surrounding habitat, and continued management. No single measure is effective in all situations (Cimiotti et al. 2026; Short 2026; Arts and Ens 2026; de Vries 2026; Bray 2026).

Wintering trends are negative in the Netherlands and most of the United Kingdom. They are broadly stable in Denmark and France, although Danish counts have recently been low and French trends differ between regions. The Irish population is declining, but the exact national rate is unclear. Food availability, shellfisheries, changes in shellfish communities, habitat change, and disturbance are the main winter pressures (Thorup and Bregnballe 2026; Joyeux et al. 2026; Murphey 2026; Arts and Ens 2026; Bowgen 2026).

The results support a coordinated European approach. Monitoring must connect breeding success, survival, winter food conditions, migration, and habitat use. Conservation measures must be evaluated with standard methods. Local success must also be tested against population trends to determine whether it is sufficient to stop or reverse the decline (Ens 2026).

Writing approach

Microsoft 365 Copilot was used as a writing assistant. It helped to combine information from the workshop program, abstracts, presentation, and notes into a structured summary. The workshop abstracts provided and the notes taken during the presentations remained leading, and Eva Kok and all workshop participants reviewed and edited the final text.