

Roof Nesting Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* on Tayside.

Bruce Lynch, 27, Luke Place, Broughty Ferry, Dundee, DD5 3BN.

The phenomenon of Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* using flat roofs in suburban areas as nest sites has been reported from Aberdeen and its surrounding districts and appears to have begun in the early 1970's (Pers. comm. Alistair Duncan, G.R.G.).

On 19 May 1994 I noted three adult Oystercatchers and four pulli on the sports fields of Grange Primary School, Monifieth, Angus (NO 487325). Observations on the behaviour of Oystercatchers at this location during previous breeding seasons had led me to suspect that they might be breeding locally as Grange Primary, at that time, had arable land adjacent to its west and north boundaries. These fields have had private housing built on them during the last three to four years. I also wondered if the birds could be roof nesting as the school roof has several flat areas which are covered with stone chips.

The presence of a pair of Oystercatchers on the flat roof of Monifieth High School, Monifieth (NO 483323) over the previous few weeks now took on a new significance and I wondered if they were attempting to breed there. The grounds of the two schools are on either side of the Dighty Water and less than 400m apart. That same afternoon I went up onto the flat roof of the science block and disturbed an Oystercatcher incubating a single egg in a scrape made in the accumulation of dry algae next to the low wall around the roof perimeter. The egg was in direct contact with the bitumen roof surface which is about 4m above ground level. Unfortunately essential roof repairs had been in progress for some days before this and next day, from a vantage point within the school, I could see that the egg was out of the scrape and a pair of Carrion Crows *Corvus corone corone* were nearby. This breeding attempt failed. There was another attempt later (same pair ?) on top of the much higher roof of the sportshall / swimming pool complex when at least one egg was laid. This attempt also failed.

I ringed the only remaining Oystercatcher pullus at Grange Primary on 22 May, 1994 and at that time I was informed by the janitor that Oystercatchers had been nesting on (and damaging!) the flat roof areas for several years. He also told me that when the children went out at break / lunchtime the adult birds did not alarm and the chicks fed within a few metres of the children playing on the sportsfields. However, as soon as an adult human appeared outside the school building the adult Oystercatchers would alarm constantly. Apparently the curiosity of some pupils had caused two of the pulli to go through the boundary chainlink fencing and into a green public space between the Dighty Water and the adjacent private housing estate. This area is regularly used by people to exercise their dogs. The fate of these pulli is unknown. The other pullus had been accidentally trampled to death on the sportsfields and the fate of the ringed pullus is also unknown.

During March 1995 I placed two one metre square metal trays on the roof of the science block at Monifieth High School and filled each with a pile of 20mm washed gravel obtained from the drive way of my house. During April 1995 there was considerable Oystercatcher activity on the science block roof and when I inspected the

trays on 4 May I found scrapes in the gravel in both trays. By 14 May there was a clutch of three eggs in the tray with the greater amount of gravel. On 7 June a change in the behaviour of the adults suggested that the eggs had hatched. A visit to the nest that day revealed that there were two newly hatched pulli in the scrape and the third egg was chipping. All three pulli were ringed on 23 June when about 17 days old. On 28 June (with only 40 minutes until the school closed for the six weeks summer holidays and it would have had the place to itself !) one of the chicks jumped off the roof and immediately went through the chainlink boundary fencing into the gardens of adjacent private houses.

In 1996 a pair of Oystercatchers again nested in one of the two gravel filled trays which had been left on the flat roof. Two eggs were laid sometime during the first week in May and small young were being brooded on 28 May. The two pulli were ringed on 4 June and one of them left the roof on 17 June and foraged in the short grass sward of the school grounds next to the science block. When the school closed on 26 June the adults were still alarming at my presence. This suggests that at least one chick was still being attended.

I was informed by Alan Barclay that Oystercatchers had attempted to breed on the roof of Barnhill Primary School, Dundee (NO 474323) in 1996 and possibly in previous years too. This school is 1km west of Monifieth High School. During 1996 I also noticed adult Oystercatchers on the roofs of low buildings in the West Pitkerro Industrial Estate, Dundee (NO 454333) but I was unable to prove whether they were roof breeding or not. This estate is 3km west of Monifieth High School. Also, I have lived at my present address for 8 years and for the first time a pair of Oystercatchers frequented the roofs of the large stone built houses on the north side of Fintry Place, Broughty Ferry during April to July, 1996. These houses back directly onto my garden in Luke Place (NO 461317). I believe these birds actually nested on a roof but failed (possibly at the small pulli stage) due to predation by Carrion Crows which nested nearby.

It would appear that roof nesting in Oystercatchers has been occurring locally for several years and may be spreading. If any group member has records of roof nesting attempts by Oystercatchers in Tayside and Fife I should very much appreciate the details for a fuller account of this behaviour (and its development ?) in a future report.