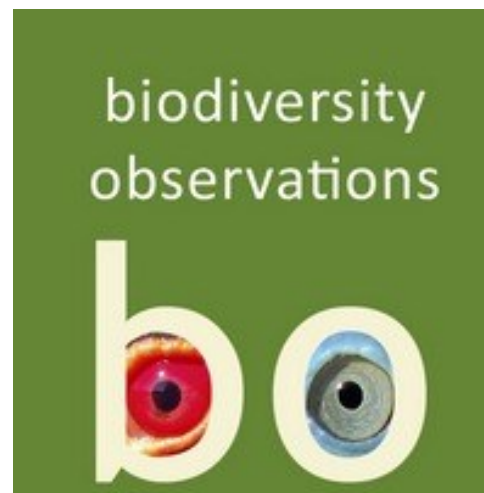


# The concepts of floater and hooligan, with a focus on the African Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini*

Les G Underhill



**Underhill LG** 2025. The concepts of floater and hooligan, with a focus on the African Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini*. Biodiversity Observations 15: 118–119.

13 October 2025

DOI: 10.15641/bo.1942

## ORNITHOLOGY

### **The concepts of floater and hooligan, with a focus on the African Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini***

*Les G Underhill*

*Department of Biological Sciences, University of Cape Town,  
Rondebosch, 7701 South Africa*

*Biodiversity and Development Institute, 25 Old Farm Road,  
Rondebosch, 7700 South Africa*

*Email: les.underhill@uct.ac.za*

### **Abstract**

The primary idea behind the concept of a floater is the occurrence of non-territorial individuals which move over large areas, waiting for an opportunity to join the breeding population. A hooligan is defined here as a floater which behaves aggressively, even engaging in fighting to disrupt breeding pairs in order to gain a territory.

### **Perspective**

Although the concept of a “floater” in a population had been in use for decades, the term had had a variety of unsatisfactory definitions (Winker 1998). A precise definition was therefore provided: “An individual member of a largely territorial population who is not defending a territory, and whose movements encompass an area substantially larger than those of the average territorial conspecific” (Winker 1998).

Winker (1998) considered that floating was a widely occurring phenomenon in territorial species, but it was a poorly known. He noted that the presence of floaters could be used as a metric to monitor populations in relation to conservation concerns. The exclusion of individuals from the component of the population which is territorial provides evidence that resources are limiting. He suggested that floaters would increase in numbers when populations increase and resources are static.

Oatley & Arnott (1998) discussed the existence of floaters in relation to the age structure of populations. They were writing in the context of robins which are relatively long-lived species in the forest habitats of eastern South Africa. Thus, an adult robin which is a floater might wait multiple years before it is “in the right place at the right time” and has the opportunity to become part of the “select club of breeders” and are “set for life” (Oatley & Arnott 1998).

An example of strongly territorial species breeding in the context of limited resources is the African Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* on Robben Island (33°47'S 18°21'E), Table Bay, South Africa (Quintana et al. 2021). In terms of the concepts of Winker (1998) it is therefore a strong candidate for the development of floaters as the population increases beyond the level the resources can support. This likelihood is strengthened by the fact that African Oystercatchers defend their territories throughout the year, and not only during the breeding season. The African Oystercatcher is a long-lived species; even within the context of oystercatchers it has the largest estimated annual survival rate, 0.96 (Ens & Underhill 2014). In terms of the ideas put forward by Oatley & Arnott (1998), it is not unexpected that

the age at which African Oystercatchers join the “select club of breeders” is in the range 3–10 years (Ens & Underhill 2014).

The picture painted by Oatley & Arnott (1998) was that floaters “skulk around in other birds’ territories, keeping a low profile.” But floaters in African Oystercatcher do not maintain low profiles. They are continually involved in skirmishes and fights with territorial pairs (pers. obs). The term “hooligans” was coined by Sophie Kohler (pers. comm.) to describe this disruptive behaviour. We prefer this term to “floaters” (Winker 1998) because it captures the aggressive thuggery which characterises this component of the population.

Surveys of numbers of African Oystercatchers were conducted on Robben Island between 2001 and 2024 (Underhill et al. 2025). The results suggested that in the first two years, all adults were territory holders. Thereafter, the population increased resulting in a steady growth in the number of adult individuals that were not territory holders. These birds would be described as floaters by Winker(1998). However, aggressive interactions between breeding pairs and these floaters became increasingly frequent (pers. obs), and the term hooligan became a better description than floater. The number of hooligans increased to a peak of c. 250 birds during 2020 and 2021; so that the number of hooligans was estimated to be similar to that of territory holders (Underhill et al. 2025).

The term hooligan could equally well have been invented by Ens (1992) who, for the Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, provided graphic descriptions and photographs of fights between territorial pairs (breeders) and what he termed intruders. The outcomes of these fights often included broken feathers, which could not immediately be replaced; and which increased cumulatively during the breeding season. The proportion of male hooligans with broken wing or tail feathers reached 68% (based on a sample size of 80) by the end of the breeding season (Ens 1992).

A working definition of a hooligan would encompass Winker’s (1998) definition of a floater, to which must be added aggressive and disruptive interactions with territory holders as features of the behaviour.

The extent to which the term hooligan is appropriate for the floaters in other species is not known. Potentially it can occur in territorial bird species, and in other territorial taxa. It seems more likely to occur in species with high survival rates than in short-lived species.

## Acknowledgements

The term hooligan was invented by Dr Sophie Kohler. Even though she did not use the term in her PhD thesis (Kohler 2011), she used it in conversation and in presentations.

## References

- Ens BJ** 1992. The social prisoner: Causes of natural variation in reproductive success of the oystercatcher. PhD thesis, University of Groningen.
- Ens BJ, Underhill LG** 2014. Synthesis of oystercatcher conservation assessments: general lessons and recommendations. *International Wader Studies* 20: 5–22.
- Kohler S** 2011. Trophic ecology of the African Black Oystercatcher (*Haematopus moquini*) on the southern African rocky shores, in relation with its habitat variability. PhD Thesis, Université de la Réunion, France.
- Oatley TB, Arnott G** 1998. Robins of Africa. Acorn Books and Russel Friedman Books, Randburg.
- Quintana, I., R. Button & L.G. Underhill.** 2021. African Oystercatchers on Robben Island, South Africa: The 2019/2020 breeding season in its two decadal context. *Wader Study* 128: 209–219.
- Underhill LG, Daniel K, Dowdle A, Quintana I, Spiby J** 2025. Trends in population size of African Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini* on Robben Island, Table Bay, South Africa: 1977–2024. *Wader Study* in press.
- Winker K** 1998. The concept of floater. *Ornitologia Neotropical* 9: 111–119.