



MEDIA RELEASE

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Keeping track of penguins

Cape Town, 2 November 2012. Where do African Penguins go when they're not breeding? This may sound like the opening line to a lame joke, but currently it's a fascinating scientific question, the answers to which could help stop the precipitous population decrease of this endangered species.

Researchers from BirdLife South Africa and the University of Cape Town have a better idea of how to answer that question. The Charl van der Merwe Trust and the Mohammed bin Zayed Conservation Fund have provided funds for 20 satellite trackers. The study, which is the first of its kind, tracked penguins using the small, waterproof satellite transmitters. "This is the first time that anyone has tracked adult African Penguins that have just completed a breeding cycle," says Dr Ross Wanless, Manager of the Seabird Division at BirdLife South Africa. Previous tracking studies have focused almost exclusively on breeding penguins, because researchers can be sure that they will return to their nests, which allows the retrieval of small but quite pricey units. "With the advent of improved technology, satellite devices, which can send data directly to our computers, are now small enough to attach to penguins but still provide enough battery life to be useful" explains Dr Wanless. Satellite trackers were famously used to track how quickly Peter, Pamela and Percy, released at Port Elizabeth, returned to the Western Cape following the *Treasure* oil spill in 2000.

"The aim of the project is to find out where the penguins go once they have finished breeding. This is a crucial period because they need to fatten up to survive two weeks of moult," says Christina Moseley, BirdLife South Africa's Coastal Seabird Conservation Manager. During the moult, penguins stay on land, don't eat, and replace all their feathers. The lucky ones lose only half of their body weight. "By knowing if they stay close to their breeding islands or travel away from them, we can see if they are likely to come into competition for food with the sardine and anchovy fishery and if implementing special management areas will help" adds Ms Moseley.

In mid-September, 10 satellite trackers were deployed on penguins from the west coast, at Dassen Island, with the help of CapeNature, who manage the island. In the east, SANParks, UCT and BirdLife staff went to Bird Island in Nelson Mandela Bay and deployed the other 10 devices. "The birds went out to sea for about a month and we can now report that most of them have made it safely back home" says Mr Craig Harding, the UCT student who is leading the

study. “There are a couple that are a bit slower in getting back to their island but overall the project has been a success,” he adds. The penguins on Dassen Island travelled far from the island. One bird travelled north at 50 km/day for 10 days, almost to the border with Namibia. Most went south and then east, as far as 540 km to Mossel Bay, before returning to Dassen. The penguins from Bird Island tended to stay closer to the island, with the furthest travelling penguin going almost as far as East London, a distance of about 170 km. The team now have the tricky task of trying to recover the satellite transmitters so they can use them for further work, possibly to track penguins after they have finished moulting.

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Notes for the editor:

1. The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.
2. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Lewis House, 239 Barkston Drive, Blairgowrie, P.O. Box 515, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: info@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za
3. This project is a collaboration between BirdLife South Africa and the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology and is funded by the Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, the Charl van der Merwe Trust and the Percy FitzPatrick Institute for African Ornithology.
4. The penguin tracks can be viewed online at the BirdLife South Africa at www.birdlife.org.za
5. In 2010, the African Penguin was listed as Endangered on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species because of the rapid decrease in population numbers. The population in South Africa has decreased from about 141 000 pairs in the 1950s to less than 20 000 pairs in 2011.
6. It is vital the these declines are halted as the African Penguin is the only penguin species found in Africa and lives nowhere else but along the coast of South Africa and Namibia. The African Penguin breeds at 27 sites on the coast of South Africa and Namibia. The largest colonies are at Dassen and Robben Islands on the west coast and St Croix Island on the south coast. Several colonies have shrunk to almost nothing, and one colony, at Lambert’s Bay, went extinct when no pairs returned to breed in 2010.
7. The major threats to penguins include a lack of food, potential oiling from oil spills, predation by seals and egg and chick predation by gulls. In the past, they were affected by guano scraping on their breeding islands as well as egg collection.