



MEDIA RELEASE

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BIRD OF THE YEAR 2022

BirdLife South Africa is pleased to announce the Cape Gannet (*Morus capensis*) as Bird of the Year for 2022.

Gannets are spectacular high-speed diving birds. With their unusually narrow-set eyes and exquisitely painted faces, these birds are as unmistakable as they are beautiful. They feed primarily on sardine and anchovy; small schooling fish which form the basis of the food chain.

To compete with the many other seabirds, fish and mammals that also chase after these fish, they plunge dive to depths of over 20 metres. To do this they hover some 30 metres up in the air, spot a fish, and plummet headfirst towards it. They can reach speeds of up to 100 km per hour by streamlining their body, extending their wings backwards before literally cutting the water surface with their sharp beaks!

The Cape Gannet is an excellent ambassador to highlight two of the most pressing conservation issues facing South Africa's seabirds. Cape Gannets breed on only six islands across South Africa and Namibia. Their population has decreased by over 50% in the last 60 years, resulting in the species being listed as Endangered. Cape Gannets are threatened by the lack of sardine and anchovy due to the combination of a shift in the distribution of the fish populations and competition with one of the most important commercial fisheries in South Africa. To compensate, gannets often resort to feeding on hake discards thrown off the back of trawl vessels. This is however a double-edged sword; they are vulnerable to becoming tangled in the fishing nets and, while the discards are enough to support the feeding requirements of adults, the lower fat content of hake is not sufficient to raise healthy chicks.

Throughout 2022, BirdLife South Africa will create awareness about the Cape Gannet through the production of an informative poster, the development of learning resources for schools that are free to download from the BirdLife South Africa website (www.birdlife.org.za), articles in *African Birdlife* magazine, social media posts, presentations to interested groups, and the sale of merchandise. Cape Gannet merchandise (t-shirts, pin badges, plush toys) will be on sale through the Shop for the Birds! from January 2022 (<https://shop.birdlife.org.za>).

The Hans Hoheisen Charitable Trust is the sponsor of Bird of the Year 2022. **End**

For further information and for photographs, please contact:
Dr Daniel Keith Danckwerts, Daniel.Danckwerts@birdlife.org.za;
Dr Melissa Howes-Whitecross, melissa.whitecross@birdlife.org.za, or
Mark Anderson, ceo@birdlife.org.za.

Notes for the editor:

BirdLife South Africa strives to conserve birds, their habitats and biodiversity through scientifically-based programmes, through supporting the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources and by encouraging people to enjoy and value nature.

BirdLife South Africa contact details: Isdell House, 17 Hume Road, Dunkeld West 2196, Gauteng; Private Bag X16, Pinegowrie 2123, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: info@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za

Information about Bird of the Year will be made available from January 2022 at: <https://www.birdlife.org.za/bird-of-the-year-2022/>

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