



## MEDIA RELEASE

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### **Over 100 African Penguins released at De Hoop Nature Reserve during the past two years**

Cape Town, 7 July 2022 – In an attempt to re-establish an African Penguin colony at the De Hoop Nature Reserve, South Africa, BirdLife South Africa, CapeNature and SANCCOB have released over 100 juvenile penguins at the reserve over the past two years.

African Penguin numbers have declined by over 60% in the last 30 years, mainly due to a lack of food. In response, BirdLife South Africa partnered with CapeNature and SANCCOB to create a new breeding colony for African Penguins in an area of high fish abundance. The chosen site, at the De Hoop Nature Reserve, was the location of a short-lived penguin colony in the early 2000s which was abandoned due to predation by caracal. Since 2018, a predator-proof fence has been installed to make the site safe for penguins to breed. The first phase of the project involved the use of life-like penguin decoys and a speaker playing penguin calls to trick penguins into thinking a colony already existed there.

After two years of attempting to attract the penguins naturally, the next step was to release juvenile penguins at the site. “We released the first group of 30 penguins in June 2021. It was a very exciting day and was an important step in the progression of the project,” says Christina Hagen, the Pamela Isdell Fellow of Penguin Conservation at BirdLife South Africa, the project leader.

The released penguins come from existing colonies, mostly from CapeNature’s Stony Point Nature Reserve at Betty’s Bay. They were abandoned by their parents as eggs or chicks and subsequently hand reared by SANCCOB, a world-leader in seabird rehabilitation. “We need to release young penguins as they still need to choose a breeding colony. Once a penguin breeds somewhere, they are unlikely to move to a different colony, so the key is to get the young penguins to imprint on the De Hoop site,” says Dr David Roberts, Clinical Veterinarian at SANCCOB.

Since the first release, five other groups of penguins have been released, 148 birds in total. The last three groups have been released after spending the night in a pen on the beach to familiarise them with the area. Once released, they leave the colony site and are expected to spend the next few years at sea, learning how to fend for themselves, and prospecting at different colonies.

It was during the last release that an exciting discovery was made. After the penguins had been released, David Roberts came back from his vantage point where he’d watched the birds going to sea

and found an adult penguin under a boulder. On further inspection, it looked like an adult that may have recently moulted (replaced all of its feathers). After looking around the area cautiously, the team found two more adult penguins showing no signs of moulting. "I almost couldn't believe my eyes and had to make sure they weren't decoys! This is such a positive moment for the project. While we don't know if the penguins will stay and breed, it is a very encouraging sign," says Hagen. The penguins will be monitored carefully from a distance so as not to disturb them during this sensitive prospecting period.

"We are very encouraged by the presence of adult penguins at the De Hoop Nature Reserve colony site. While it is still early days, it provides hope that the project will be successful." – Dr Razeena Omar  
CapeNature's Chief Executive Officer.

**End**

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Photos available on request.

**More information:**

- Penguins are vulnerable to predation by terrestrial predators such as leopard and caracal when they breed on the mainland. There are no islands off the southern Cape coast, where the penguins could safely breed, which is why a mainland colony was chosen.
- A small number of penguins started breeding on a peninsula on the eastern edge of the De Hoop Nature Reserve in 2003 possibly in response to the shift in the distribution of their main food supply - anchovy and sardine. By 2008, there were at least 18 pairs breeding and larger numbers of penguins roosting at the site. Unfortunately, before anything could be done to protect them, predation by caracal caused the penguins to abandon the site.
- The rescued African Penguin eggs and chicks were cared for in SANCCOB's Chick Rearing Unit to begin with. Once chicks reach 1.2 kg in weight they are transferred to the facility's nursery until old enough to start swimming, and are then placed in the rehabilitation pens before being released. The penguins are checked to ensure their plumage is waterproof and a good body weight is achieved before they are released. They also undergo veterinary checks, which includes blood sample evaluation to ensure they are healthy enough for release.
- The majority of the project work is funded by Pamela Isdell, the Patron of the African Penguin.

## Notes for the editor:

### ***BirdLife South Africa***

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources.

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### CapeNature

CapeNature is a public institution mandated to promote and ensure biodiversity conservation within the Western Cape. The entity manages most of the mountain catchments and reserves that supply ecosystem services to the citizens of the Western Cape. This requires good scientific data, a sound understanding of fynbos ecology and commitment to the principles of integrated biodiversity management and planning. Most of this work is in remote areas out of the public eye, but has a direct bearing on the quality of life of millions of people in the province.

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### SANCCOB

The Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds is a non-profit organisation that rescues, rehabilitates and releases southern African seabirds, which have been oiled, injured, are ill or abandoned as chicks to bolster wild populations.

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