

BIRD OF THE YEAR 2022

# CAPE GANNET

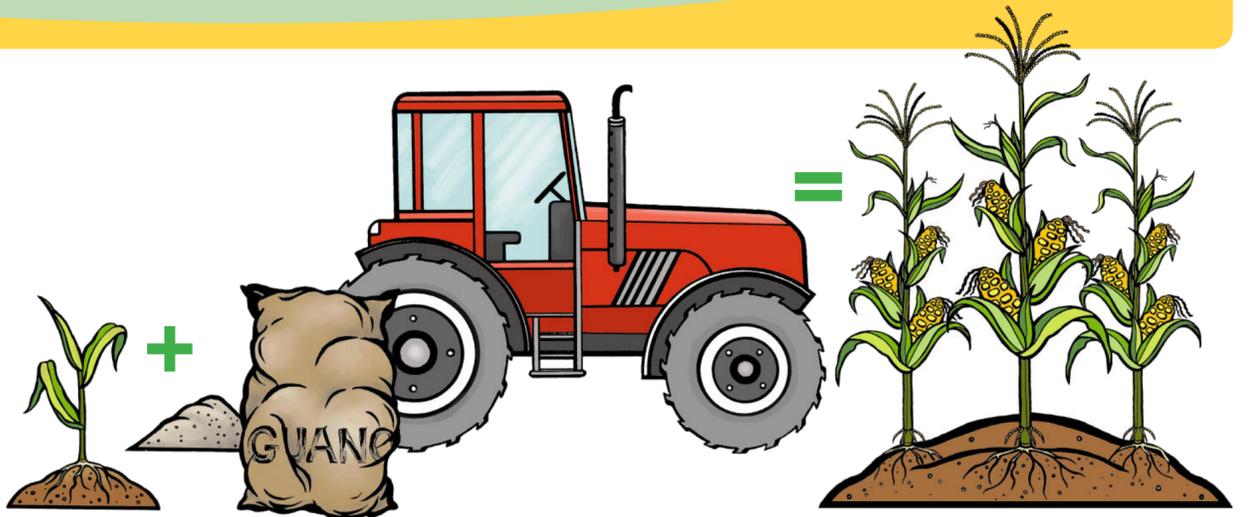
## THE GREAT GUANO RUSH



### WHITE GOLD

**Guano**, the smelly seabird poop that we wash off our cars in disgust, has been used by humans for centuries as a powerful **fertiliser**.

The use of guano in agriculture to promote healthy and vigorous growth of crops has been recorded as far back as the ancient Inca Empire of South America. The Incan rulers highly valued and fiercely protected their sources of precious guano.



### STINKY RICH

#### THE GREAT GUANO RUSH

During his travels in South America (1799-1804), the great naturalist Alexander von Humboldt came across the use of guano in crop farming. He sent a sample to his colleagues in France and its value was revealed. In 1840, Justus von Liebig, a pioneering organic chemist, discovered that nitrogen added to soil doubled, or even tripled, crop harvests. With these discoveries, demand for guano, a rich source of nitrates, rapidly increased. The resulting boom in agricultural production triggered the great guano rush of the 1840s. It became so valuable that prospectors travelled far and wide to find ancient and rich deposits of guano, calling the stinky seabird excrement 'White Gold'.

In southern Africa, the **guano rush** of the 1840s led to the removal of about 1.8 million tons of guano from islands that had large gannet, penguin, and cormorant colonies. Using picks, shovels and brooms, thousands of workers scraped, swept, and bagged the guano, which was then loaded onto ships to be transported all over the world to be sold as fertiliser. During the height of the guano rush, vast fortunes were made. It was a tough and dirty business, with frequent outbreaks of violence. Wars were even fought over this highly valued fertilizer.

Who would ever have thought that wars would be fought over bird poop?



"Super Poopers"

#### FUN FACT

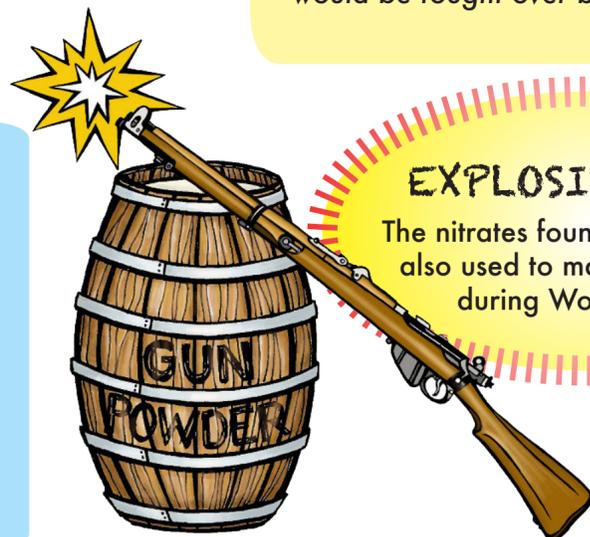
Gannets are one of nature's best poopers, producing more poo per square metre than other seabirds like penguins and cormorants.



### STRIPPED BARE

The seabird islands were stripped bare of valuable guano in just two short years. The constant scraping of guano led to a rapid drop in the numbers of seabirds, whose breeding **habitat** was destroyed. Their breeding cycles were also interrupted, leading to the total abandonment of some breeding colonies.

Fortunately, in southern Africa, these important islands are now protected conservation areas and the destructive guano harvesting no longer takes place. Modern **synthetically** produced chemical fertilisers have largely replaced expensive **organic** guano in the agricultural industry, allowing the seabird colonies time to recover from this historical threat.



#### EXPLOSIVE stuff

The nitrates found in guano were also used to make gunpowder during World War 1!

#### References:

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