



MEDIA RELEASE

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Penguins breeding at new colony: a world-first for African Penguins

17 Nov., Cape Town. A pair of chicks has been seen at a nest at the site of the new African Penguin colony in the De Hoop Nature Reserve and Marine Protected Area, near Bredasdorp in the Western Cape, South Africa.

BirdLife South Africa, CapeNature and SANCCOB, have been working to re-establish a penguin colony in the De Hoop Nature Reserve to allow breeding penguins better access to moving fish stocks. The project has now reached an important milestone with the first penguin pair successfully hatching and raising two chicks, providing new hope for the future of African Penguins. The African Penguin breeding colony at Stony Point, adjacent to the Bettys Bay Marine Protected Area, also started with very few birds and is now a flourishing breeding colony.

African Penguins, categorised as Endangered on the IUCN Red List, attempted to breed at De Hoop Nature Reserve between 2003 and 2008, but predation by caracal resulted in them abandoning the colony. In 2015, BirdLife South Africa in partnership with CapeNature, began investigating whether the colony could be re-established there. In 2018, a predator-proof fence was constructed, and penguin decoys and a speaker playing penguin calls were installed. Over 140 juvenile penguins from SANCCOB have been released from the site since 2021. These birds were released at the new site to encourage them to return to breed when they have matured in 3-6 years' time.

In June 2022, three adult penguins were found roosting at the site. These birds had arrived spontaneously and were not any of the released birds. The numbers of penguins fluctuated with a maximum of seven being seen in one day. It appeared that some penguins had formed pairs, but no nests were confirmed.

"I was there to do some maintenance on the fence and was casually observing the penguins sitting on the rocks. I was stunned when I realised there was a chick standing next to an adult. On closer inspection, I saw there were actually two chicks," said Christina Hagen, project leader and the Pamela Isdell Fellow of Penguin Conservation at BirdLife South Africa. "This is a very long-term project, and we hadn't expected to see any breeding yet, but we are thrilled that it has happened now," continued Hagen.

"This success of the project is an important step in the conservation of the Endangered African Penguin," says Mark D. Anderson, Chief Executive Officer of BirdLife South Africa. "It has created a new safe breeding habitat in an area of good food availability and proves that it is possible to establish new land-based African Penguin colonies, something that has never been done before".

"The chicks are two to three months old, and will likely take another few weeks to fledge," says Dr David Roberts, Clinical Veterinarian at SANCCOB. Penguins fledge between about 75 and 120 days

after hatching. “The nest is in a very rocky area and the chicks would have stayed hidden in the nest for much of the time, which explains how they weren’t seen before,” explains Dr Roberts.

“The presence of an African Penguin nesting site on De Hoop is a significant step towards the establishment of a viable African Penguin breeding colony at De Hoop and holds promise for the future success and contribution to African Penguin conservation,” says Dr Razeena Omar, CapeNature’s Chief Executive Officer.

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Photos available on request.

Additional 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 penguin decoys and speaker playing penguin calls were used to simulate the presence of an active colony.
- The African Penguin is Endangered and undergoing dramatic population decreases. The population has decreased by over 60% in the last 30 years. The cause of the decrease is thought to be a lack of available prey (sardine and anchovy) caused by a shift in the distribution of fish and competition with the fishing industry. Other threats include predation, oiling, disease and noise pollution from increased shipping traffic.

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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