



## MEDIA RELEASE

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Honey badger wreaks havoc at De Hoop's new African Penguin colony**

17 April 2024, Cape Town. On 26 March 2024 during a routine inspection of the penguin colony, BirdLife South Africa's Christina Hagen and SANCCOB's Katta Ludynia were devastated to find the remains of 11 African Penguins, all killed by a honey badger. This was an unexpected event as it had been thought that the main predators of concern for the colony were leopard and caracal. It seemed as if the badger was able to get through the fence, which was constructed to keep predators away from the headland which was identified as a suitable site for an African Penguin colony to be established. Improvements to the fence have already begun to ensure the fence is secure. Conservationists are saddened by this unfortunate incident at the newly-established De Hoop Nature Reserve African Penguin colony but remain resolute in their efforts to conserve this highly threatened species.

BirdLife South Africa, CapeNature and SANCCOB have been working to re-establish a penguin colony in the De Hoop Nature Reserve since 2018. The chosen site is important because there is a good supply of fish for the penguins. Mainland sites are not readily colonised because breeding penguins are vulnerable to predation from terrestrial animals, such as leopards, caracals and now, honey badgers. To mitigate this risk, a fence was designed and constructed in consultation with experts on the behaviour and biology of mammalian predators. Penguins were attracted to the site over several years using penguin decoys and an audio speaker playing penguin calls. More than 200 hand-reared fledgling penguins have been released at the colony.

In 2022, wild penguins arrived at the site and one pair successfully bred. The following year, this increased to four pairs which, between them, raised six chicks. The penguin activity, unfortunately, attracted the attention of a honey badger, which managed to get past or through the fence and kill 11 penguins that were present at the colony at the time.

Honey badgers are known to prey on birds, reptiles, and small mammals, and do not just have a predilection for bee hives as their name suggests. They are also known to kill more prey than they can eat when they encounter prey (such as domestic chickens or, in this case, penguins) that either cannot escape or are naïve to predators. They are also notoriously inventive and determined!

While it isn't obvious exactly how the honey badger entered the colony area, the project team has already begun improving the fence in potentially vulnerable areas, such as where the fence ends at the high tide line and where dassies have damaged the fence. "We have also started consulting with experts on honey badger behaviour and predator management," says Christina Hagen, Pamela Isdell Fellow of Penguin Conservation at BirdLife South Africa, and the project leader. "There are several short- and long-term solutions that can be put in place to secure the colony area, and we have started working to refine and implement these ideas as a matter of urgency. In the meantime, the speaker which plays the calls of African Penguins (used to attract penguins to the site) is not running

as we do not want to attract additional penguins to the colony if there is the potential for a predator to get in.”

The loss of these penguins is a big setback to the establishment of the colony, but it is not unprecedented when looking at how other African Penguin colonies on the mainland started. The Stony Point colony at Betty’s Bay experienced several predation events of similar magnitude as the penguins were colonising the area naturally in the 1980s and it is now the third largest penguin colony in South Africa.

“We are committed to ensuring that we make this a safe breeding space for African Penguins, said Dr Alistair McInnes, Seabird Conservation Programme Manager at BirdLife South Africa. “We have shown that it is possible to attract penguins to a site and for them to start breeding. Once the fence improvements and other measures have been put in place, we are confident that more penguins will come.”

“Over 200 penguins have been released, after being hand-reared at SANCCOB, and some of these birds may still return to the colony when they are ready to breed in a few years. We had already started seeing a few of these young birds coming to the colony, likely prospecting for a breeding site” says Katta Ludynia, Research Manager at SANCCOB.

African Penguins are Endangered and their numbers are at their lowest ever and continue to decrease. Very sadly, the population has declined from about one million pairs 100 years ago to about 9900 pairs today.

“CapeNature, BirdLife South Africa and SANCCOB, along with many other organisations, are working hard to conserve this species. We need to do everything we can to ensure their long-term survival and creating new colonies can contribute hugely to those efforts” says Dr Ashley Naidoo, CEO of CapeNature.

**End**

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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 78% 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***

SANCCOB is registered as a non-profit company, non-profit organisation and public benefit organisation in terms of the laws of South Africa, operating from two facilities in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape. SANCCOB's primary objective is to reverse the decline of seabird populations – flagship species being the endangered African penguin - through a multi-faceted conservation approach that includes rehabilitation and release of seabirds, implementation and consultancy of

preparedness and response in the event of oil spills affecting marine wildlife, carrying out integral scientific research, provision of in-situ support to conservation managing authorities, skills development, and public awareness via environmental education.

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