

Penguins cont.

The survey assessed the percentage cover of the substrate in each quadrant; vegetation, bare ground, sand, rocks, and dead roots. Additionally, all plants were counted, and their average and maximum heights measured.

Preliminary classifications using iNaturalist identified a total of 13 plant taxa contributing 86% of low (<1m) vegetation cover. This was dominated by two indigenous species, *Mesembryanthemum aitonis* (sea spinach) and *Tetragonia* sp. (sea corals), which collectively provided 80% cover through their densely interconnected root system. The maximum height of the vegetation recorded was 43.5 cm, with an average height of 20.2 cm. Six taxa identified as non-native were likely transported by wind or inadvertently brought to the island on shoes.

On average, five non-native plants/m² account for approximately 4% of overall vegetation cover, suggesting that they are not (yet) invasive. *Chenopodium murale* (nettle-leaved goosefoot), belonging to the Amaranthaceae family, was the most abundant non-native species (342 plants). Originating from Europe, parts of Asia, and northern Africa, it contains diverse chemical constituents that have phytotoxic and insecticidal properties which deter the growth of other plants around or beneath its canopy. At the end of the growing season, the ground below these plants becomes exposed and vulnerable to flooding, which will require management intervention.

Penguins use the lush vegetation to make their nests in the undergrowth and/or use dried roots and stems of the two dominant plant species to line their nests. Magellanic Penguins (*Spheniscus magellanicus*) in Argentina, and Little Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) in Western Australia have similarly benefited from higher vegetation nest cover, resulting in greater reproductive success. The presence of vegetation is thus crucial for improving penguin breeding by providing protection against predators and heat stress.

Recognizing the significance of vegetation cover for African penguins, and implementing long-term monitoring coupled with experimental approaches, including assessing the effects of alien species, can help gain deeper insights into the intricate factors influencing penguin nest selection.

Many hands make light work: Increasing capacity for the monitoring of African penguins on Bird Island

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SANPARKS SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED MONITORING, COMPLIANCE AND MAINTENANCE EFFORTS ON BIRD ISLAND WITH THE HELP OF SEVEN DEDICATED SEABIRD MONITORS FUNDED BY AN IUCN-SOS GRANT TO WILDERNESS FOUNDATION FOR A YEAR



Additional monitoring support funded through Wilderness Foundation has greatly increased monitoring efforts on Bird Island, Addo Marine Protected Area.

Area of nests monitored in a portion of the Cape gannet colony on Bird Island, Addo Marine Protected Area. Cape gannets are endangered and intensive monitoring contributes to effective conservation of these birds.



The iconic African penguin is facing a crisis. These charismatic birds, once abundant along the west coast of South Africa and Namibia, have experienced a significant decline over the past century.

While historical factors like guano and egg harvesting played a role, the current decline is primarily attributed to a scarcity of food near colonies. SANParks has the responsibility of safeguarding 55% of the remaining African penguin population found on St. Croix and Bird Islands in Addo Elephant National Park Marine Protected Area (MPA). Ongoing declines in these populations have been linked to increased shipping activities associated with ship-to-ship bunkering operations in Algoa Bay. The rising frequency of large vessels entering the bay has led to elevated noise levels, disturbance, displacement, and pollution, all of which negatively impact penguins.

SANParks, in conjunction with Wilderness Foundation, have increased monitoring and compliance efforts on Bird Island through the appointment of seven dedicated seabird monitors funded by an IUCN-SOS grant for a year. Stationed on the island on a three week rotation, these passionate individuals play a crucial role in increasing monitoring and surveillance efforts, while also assisting with law

enforcement and maintenance on the island.

Monitors have helped gain a clearer understanding of Kelp gull abundance and activity within the penguin colony. They have noticed a greater number of gull adults before the penguins start to breed (Sep-Nov) followed by an increase in gull juveniles during the breeding season (Jan-Mar) with the highest abundance recorded in January.

Additional capacity on the island has also made monthly counts of nesting Cape gannets possible. While these counts were previously conducted only 1-2 times a year when researchers visited the island, seabird monitors have enabled consistent monthly data collection, and a more reliable estimate of gannet breeding success. In addition, they assisted in ringing 1000 Cape gannets this year alone. The presence of the monitors in the colony has also greatly boosted observational capacity, notably for injured or distressed birds, which would otherwise go unnoticed.

Apart from ensuring that data gathering progresses with little to no gaps, monitors also support SANCCOB (Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds) with rescue and rehabilitation efforts.