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## EDITORIAL

I write this editorial having just arrived back from a month in the USA, mainly Alaska and I have to marvel at the bird life here compared to the winter in the cold north. One may think that April is spring in the Northern Hemisphere but if you get far enough north, spring comes much later. Geese and ducks were arriving as the snow was melting but they met temperatures of  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the northwest of Alaska. Before we left the cranes were arriving and redpolls nesting but both the birds and humans were shocked to wake up May first to a blanket of 10–50 cm of snow which ranged from the coast to the interior.

Back in Namibia the late rains were well received by the birds and nesting continued. The first bird I caught in my mist net on 15 May was a recently fledged Yellow-breasted Bunting, the second a young Red-billed Quelea. The nest box I left with four tiny Carp's Black Tits was occupied by a dormouse. Another nest box had 3 small Grey Hornbills which is rather late for this species. In my absence, Pete Leonard visited the country from neighboring Zambia and he has written an account of his visit. He sends his apologies to Steve Braine and Keith Wearne for not having the time to visit. I would encourage everyone to ask their visitors to drop me a page-long account of their observations and memories.

This journal used to have more recent sightings published but I have not been receiving any from the members and I appeal to all to send in their observations directly to me via e-mail at [korie@iafrica.com.na](mailto:korie@iafrica.com.na). For those of you in the dark, snail mail also works at PO Box 22, Okaukuejo.

We reached this magnificent location at sunset and went to bed with high hopes. We had had a fantastic holiday and the birding had been rewarding without being difficult. At dawn we began to walk around the base of the main kopje, but after two hours of careful searching, we were three-quarters of the way around and there was still no sign of the chat. Then it all happened at once. We hit a loose bird party, heard a short flutey whistle and then a bird flew up to a scruffy nest in front of us – a beautiful male Chestnut Weaver. At the same time we heard the whistle again and another bird disappeared around a rock. It had to be the chat. After a bit of careful stalking and some quiet whistling a pair of Herero Chats appeared and gave us marvellous views. In the final stretch we found them in four more places, the last only a stone's throw from our tent. We couldn't have asked for a better end to the holiday.

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## A SURVEY OF AFRICAN BLACK OYSTERCATCHERS ON NAMIBIA'S DIAMOND COAST

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The African Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* is South Africa's second rarest coastal breeding bird and among the rarest on Namibia's coast. Recent ringing data have suggested that a large proportion of birds from South Africa make their way to Namibia, for 2–3 years before returning to their natal areas to breed (P.Hockey 1983, A. Leseberg pers. comm.). The world population of this southern African endemic is estimated at 4800 individuals,

most of which occur in South Africa (Hockey & Douie 1995). However, hotspots of density occur on the rocky shores around Lüderitz where breeding occurs and the bird ranges in ever decreasing numbers from there north through the southern Namib-Naukluft Park through Walvis Bay up to Angola where 35 birds were recently seen in Iona National Park, south-west Angola (A. Sakko pers. comm.). Breeding has been noted as far north as the Hoanib River mouth (Braine 1987), but this is unusual.

No systematic survey of the Namibian shoreline or population size has been published except from the Lüderitz peninsula and islands (Hockey 1983). Since information on population is important to the well-being of the species, we were asked by Phil Hockey of the University of Cape Town to search for African Black Oystercatchers (ABOs) in the rocky coastal regions near Ichaboe Island (55 km north of Lüderitz) and Dolphin Head in the Spencer Bay area (102 km north of Lüderitz). Our November 2000 trip through the northern Diamond Area extended from Lüderitz up to and beyond these sites and was undertaken by a 4WD bakkie and two four-wheel bikes. Since we encountered many more oystercatchers than had been predicted for these areas we considered it important to record our findings.

### Aims and methods

Our aims were to:

- (i) count all birds found with exact locations
- (ii) age all birds based on eye-ring colour, primary moult and plumage wear

We travelled the northern Diamond Area (and southern Namib-Naukluft Park) by motorbike allowing us to get to places inaccessible to four-wheel drive vehicles. All rocky shores were given special attention and all areas between Saddle Hill North, through Spencer Bay to the Arkona ship wreck (about 35 km) were visited as was the entire shoreline between Saddle Hill South to Hottentot's Bay south to Douglas Point (about 40 km). Rocky shores between Chameis and Baker's Bay (only 6 km surveyed of about 28 km) were less completely surveyed and only two (Flamingo and Halifax) of the four main islands in the Lüderitz Bay (Flamingo, Seal, Penguin and Halifax) were visited. We found flocks of ABOs extremely wary and liable to take flight on our

approach. Very strong winds in the Spencer Bay and the Hottentot's Bay area made telescope use almost impossible. We were thus limited in our ability to distinguish age classes on feather wear, but relied mainly on eye-ring colour and on holes in the wings from moulted feathers as birds took flight. Birds on Flamingo Island were easily classified given the better conditions allowing telescope use.

## Study Areas

We visited more sites than originally planned, including the following:

Chameis Bay to Baker's Bay	19–21 Nov
Saddle Hill North – Spencer Bay – Arcona Bay	22–23 Nov
Hottentots Bay – Douglas Point	24–25 Nov
Halifax Island (J. Kemper)	23 Nov
Flamingo Island	25 Nov
Wolf Bay (I. Wiesel)	27 Nov
Easter Point	17 Dec

## Results

### Numbers and age classes

The total number of oystercatchers located in these surveys was 429 birds (Table 1) or about 9% of the estimated world population of 4800 individuals (Hockey & Douie 1995). We failed to sample the Lüderitz peninsula, Seal Island or Penguin Island which are known to also hold large numbers of birds (Simmons & Cordes MS, J. Kemper and pers. obs.).

Of the 429 birds located, we were able to age 229 (53%). The majority were adults (i.e. 3-years old or greater: Table 1), 9% were 2-year-olds and 28% were first-year birds in moult. Because second-year birds were the hardest to distinguish, they may be slightly under-represented (by how much we do not know). A month later while travelling from Sylvia Hill to Easter Point RES encountered 3 adults and 16 second-year birds on the rocky shores near Easter Point and 2 adult pairs further south (Oyster Cliffs) alarm calling from steep cliffs. These birds are not included in the overall totals as they were outside the survey month.

**Table 1.** Number of African Black Oystercatchers, their location and age classes along the Diamond Coast, November 2000

Area	Total ABOs	Age classes
Chameis - Baker's Bay	15	5 of 15 1 <sup>st</sup> Year birds, 10 adults, no rings (at Baker's)
Wolf Bay	18	no data
Halifax Island	55	no data
Flamingo Island	92	92 ad, no younger birds, no rings
Ichaboe area/P.O.Bay, Douglas	111	21 ad, 48 1Y (no obvious 2Y) 42 unknown
Hottentot Point/Neglectus	104	4 ad, 18 2Y, 5 1Y 77 unknown (v. flighty)
Saddle Hill South (blow hole)	2	ad pair
Saddle N - Spencer - Arkona	32	15 ad (4 pairs), 3 2Ys, 7 1Ys. 7 unknown
<b>8 areas checked</b>	<b>Total birds 429</b>	<b>Ad:2Y:1Y = 144 : 21 : 65</b>

### Ringed birds

We encountered only 3 ringed birds. Two were in the group at Neglectus Island/Hottentot's Point.

- 1 Green/metal (R) Green (L) – seen twice – ringed on Possession Island
  - 2 Red/Metal (R) long white ring (L) – no numbers visible – ringed at Port Elizabeth
- At Douglas Point beach
- 3 Metal on (R) no colour rings.

There were no colour rings on the 92 adult birds viewed well through telescope on Flamingo Island.

### Conclusion

This study was designed to determine the number of young birds using roosting areas in southwestern Namibia, and thereby assist the South African conservation efforts of this rare near-endemic spearheaded by Phil Hockey. We were unable to age many birds because of the severe weather conditions in the study area. However, we determined that 86 of 229 birds (38%) were young birds 1 or 2 years old. We also determined that large numbers of ABOs are present in Namibia in November, since we encountered 429 birds

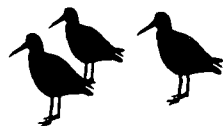
representing almost 10% of the world population. This is a very conservative estimate given that more than 220 birds have been seen at high tide on Flamingo Island alone (October 2000, T.G. Cooper – we encountered only 92 at low tide), hundreds of birds have been seen on Seal, Penguin and Halifax islands at other times (I. Cordes, J. Kemper), and the Lüderitz peninsula itself (not included here) is known to hold about 80 birds (RES) and Elizabeth Bay another 90 birds (RES) at this time of year.

A more realistic estimate of the importance of Lüderitz and the surrounding rocky shores for ABOs is as many as 950 birds which is about 20% of the world population. Alternatively the world population may have been underestimated!

A full and instantaneous count is required to be able to give more precise figures. We will leave it to Phil Hockey's group to ascertain its importance for young oystercatchers and thus its importance for South Africa's oystercatcher population. We appeal to all birders to report sightings of rings or large flocks of birds to us or to Phil Hockey

#### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Phil Hockey for initiating and funding this survey of oystercatchers and providing us with details of the ageing criteria, to NAMDEB for allowing us access to the diamond mining areas of the Sperrgebiet, to Mark Tapsell for bike hire and especially Volker Jahnke and Luffie Druker of Coastways Tours for some critical logistical support at crucial times at Saddle Hill. Trygve Cooper, Antje Burke, Jessica Kemper, Ingrid Wiesel and Imke Cordes added numerous useful observations and assistance.



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## NAMIBIAN WETLAND BIRD COUNTS: JANUARY, APRIL AND JULY 2000

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Good rains over Namibia in 2000 saw a successful – and unusual – breeding attempt of flamingos on Etosha Pan and record numbers of birds at the coast.

January rains were about average for northern Namibia but below average for the south. By the time the rains ended in April, however, all southern Namibia (bar the Namib Desert) had experienced over 120% of their long-term average and some areas had falls of over 240% (WHOT 2000). Four Namibian wetlands are now covered on a monthly basis (three at the coast and one inland dam) and long-term trends (figures 1.2) reveal clear seasonal changes with a general decline in peak bird numbers at the inland dam.

#### Highlights for 2000

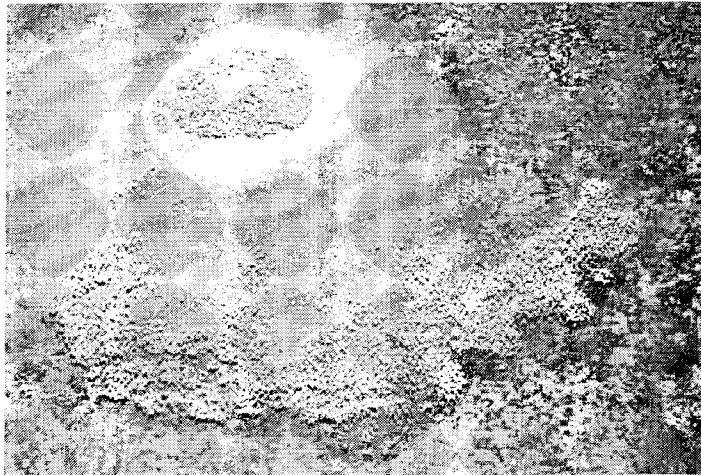
- Greater and Lesser Flamingos bred successfully on Etosha Pan in April.
- A juvenile with an engraved ring was spotted 500 km SW 9 months later.
- Walvis Bay reported record number of coastal wetland birds.
- A flamingo island was constructed in a newly flooded saltpan at Walvis.
- High species richness was recorded at the Orange River mouth.
- Rivers were well covered with counts from the Zambezi (2), Kavango, Chobe and Orange Rivers.

#### Flamingos

In December 1999 about 35,000 flamingos were found at the coast and by 20 January they had all but disappeared. Many were heard (at night) heading inland in late December in response to rains in Etosha. Once again they took an indirect route there – up Namibia's coast and then inland. As early as 2nd January 2000–3000 birds were seen constructing nests near the old drainage channels that cross the Pan (Rietfontein) and another of about the same

magnitude were seen at Okerfontein (see photograph).

The unusual thing about this was that only local rains had flooded the pan and no inflow from the northern or eastern feeder rivers was apparent. By early February a familiar sequence was emerging – no water remained around either colony and about 2000 adults at Rietfontein and 3000 birds at Okerfontein were tending just-hatching chicks that were destined to become jackal and vulture food. Just as both colonies were due to fail, 70 mm of rains fell in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of February and most hatched chicks were saved. On 12 April with water still on the pan a ringing operation was set up and about 2000 flightless chicks were rounded up to be driven into waiting holding pens of nets. The birds panicked however, escaping the enclosing circle leaving only two birds to be captured. The first engraved rings used in Namibia were put on these birds and remarkably 9 months later (12 Jan 2001), one birds was reported alive and well from Walvis Bay 594 km south west. A 50% resighting rate! [ a copy of the full report is available from Rob Simmons]

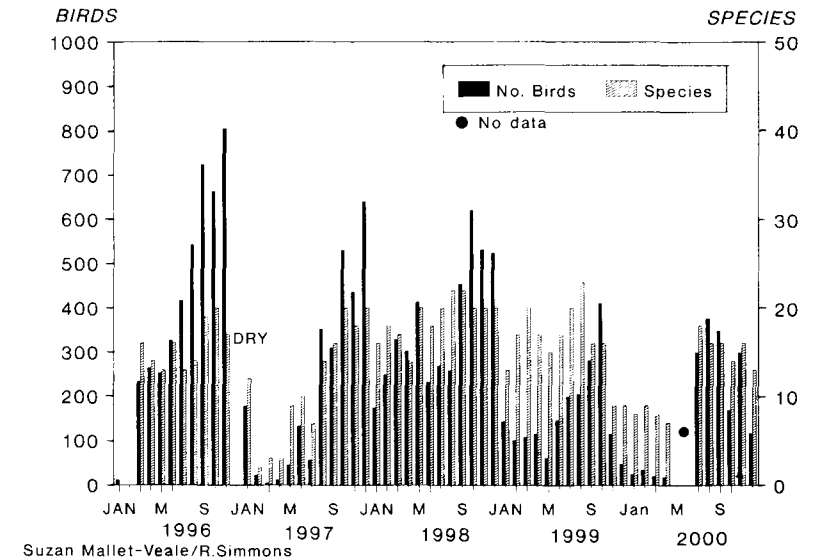


The Rietfontein flamingo colony on Etosha Pan, photographed in January 2000. A mixed colony of Lesser (~60%) and Greater Flamingos numbering 1550 nests.

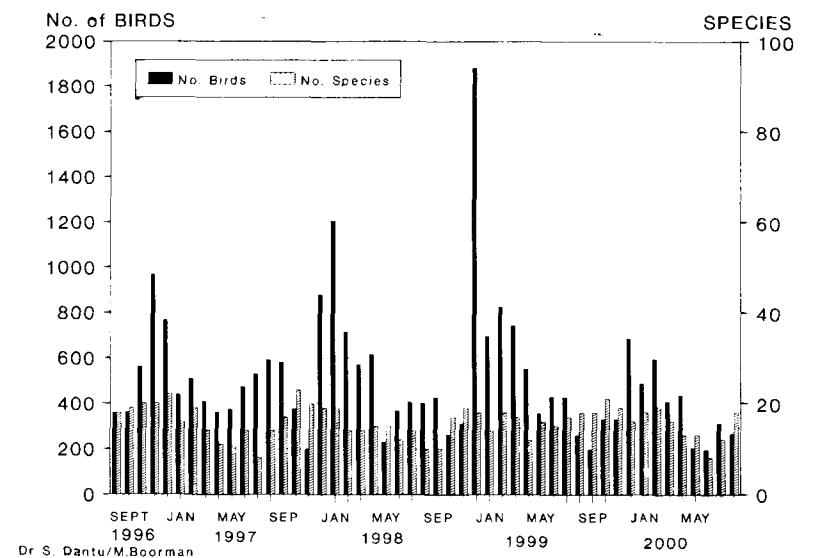
Photograph Wynand du Plessis

Monthly fluctuations in wetland birds recorded at one inland dam (Avis) and one coastal sewage works (Swakopmund) from 1996 to 2000. Both graphs indicate predictable increases in birds as the dry season progresses (drying up ephemeral wetlands elsewhere) with a sharp drop as the next rains begin between November and January. A gradual decline in peak numbers is evident at Avis Dam over the 5-year period.

### WETLAND BIRDS AT AVIS DAM 1996 - 2000



### WETLAND BIRDS AT SWAKOP SEWAGE WORKS 1996 - 2000



**A flamingo island** was constructed in September 2000 at a newly constructed salt pan on the coast in the Walvis Bay Ramsar site. It measures about 120 m by 50 m and has been constructed out of an existing raised beach. About 50 clay nests have been added to it to entice birds to come and breed. This was a collaboration between the Walvis Bay Salt Refineries (Roy Stanton), the Coastal Environmental Trust of Namibia (Keith Wearne) and the Ministry of Environment (RES). While flamingos have never bred successfully at the coast, they have tried twice in living memory.

The **Orange River Mouth Ramsar** site is counted up to three times a year in a collaboration between South African and Namibian ornithologists. Just to prove its worth as both an IBA and a Ramsar site, the counters (Mark Anderson and Holger Kolberg) recorded over 50 species at the mouth in January. The second most species rich site was the Kavango River with 44 species (Mark Paxton and Linda Sheehan).

The site with the most birds was **Walvis Bay** where a massive 156 000 birds were recorded in January. The bulk of this total was comprised of (30 000) Curlew Sandpipers, Common Terns (6000) with many unidentified terns (probably a mixture of Common and Black Terns) and 5600 Black-necked Grebes. Ever-increasing numbers of Rednecked Phalaropes (4) Franklin's Gull (2) and Black-tailed Godwit (2) made up the rarities.

**Namibia's rivers** were well sampled with Orange River counts in March, Zambezi River counts in April and July (Val Sparg), Chobe River in June (M. Paxton and L. Sheehan) and the Kavango River in July and August (MP and LS). These are valuable counts because they have shown that Namibia's tropical rivers support at least 10 times the number of birds (and more species) for every kilometre of river, than the two desert rivers (Orange and Cunene). We (Simmons & Allan 2001) have also shown that there is also a curious increase in abundance and species richness of birds from east to west in the two desert rivers, contrary to what might be expected as these rivers enter the Namib Desert.

**Of the cranes.** 45 Wattled Cranes were present in the Nyae Nyae pans in February but only 6 Crowned Cranes were seen in the grasslands north of

Etosha in January. Blue Cranes continue to breed in Etosha National Park.

Finally in an effort to encourage continuation of wetland counting, the Wetlands Working group of Namibia's Biodiversity Task Force, has set aside travelling money for wetland counters. This is enough to cover petrol costs for those not using government transport. Strangely it has been poorly utilised to date.

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## CARP'S BLACK TIT NESTING OBSERVATIONS

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During the past 18 months I have been watching a resident pair of Carp's Black Tits *Parus carpi* at our farm, Windpoort, in the Outjo District. At our house, 19° 21.489' S 15° 29.028' E, I imported a 2.5 m mopane stump with several nice nest holes, and erected it just off our stoep. I thought it might attract one of the hole-nesting local birds who might breed. The habitat for Carp's tits appears to be wooded rocky hillsides and hill tops.

A few days after I installed the stump a tit flew into one of the holes near sundown with a green caterpillar and roosted for the night. Over the next two months whenever I was having a sundowner on my stoep, I recorded the behaviour and time the bird roosted (Table 1). The tit would arrive and start calling from low bushes near the roost from 1-5 minutes before it flew into the hole. Once the bird flew onto the stump it would call a couple of times

and immediately pop into the roost hole and make no further sounds. The bird would usually roost near sundown but from Table 1 the times varied from 14 minutes prior to sundown to 7 minutes past. Only one bird would roost in the hole. The bird returned several nights in succession but would occasionally use other roosts.

Starting on the 18 February, a pair of tits arrived but only one roosted, with the other flying off east. On 19 Feb, 3 tits arrived, one roosted and the other two flew off. On 20 Feb, a pair of tits arrived, one went into the hole, the other flew off, then the one in the hole flew out and joined the other bird. Two minutes later it flew back again and roosted in the hole for the night. On 21 Feb, the tit arrived, checked out two holes, then flew east to some other hole for the night.

**Table 1.** Time of arrival, time of roosting for Carp's Black Tit and sundown times at Tandala Ridge, Windpoort Farm.

Date	Time of arrival	Time in hole	Sundown
27 Dec'99	n/a	1920	1934
28 Dec'99	n/a	1918	1935
1 Jan 2000	n/a	1925	1936
2 Jan	n/a	1935	1936
10 Feb	1922	1926	1932
11 Feb	n/a	1935	1933
12Feb	1926	1928	1929
13 Feb	1925	1929	1927
14 Feb	1925	1928 <sup>a</sup>	1927
18 Feb	1935	1936	1929
19 Feb	1920	1925	1929
20 Feb	1925	1928	1928
21Feb	1926	<sup>b</sup>	1927

<sup>a</sup> tit roosted in live mopane tree 25 m away.

<sup>b</sup> tit arrived and after checking out two holes flew to some other roost for night.

On 6 February 2001 while walking past a *Boscia albitrunca* a tit flew off from the mouth of a small hole in the trunk. The tree was situated on top of a dolomite hill on the farm at 19° 21.028' S 15° 25.129' E. The hole in the *Boscia* measured 25x35 mm. I returned on 8 Feb with a gyrogearloose torchlight soldered on to a wire attached to a torch battery. As I fed the light and wires into the hole the tit huffed and puffed like a snake and the sound

was very unsettling, as I was not sure that a bird was occupying the hole. I tried to see with the light and a dental mirror but had no success. I inserted a measuring tape into the hole and found the nest was 400 mm deep. In the process the female tit came out of the nest and flew off which was a bit of a relief to find it occupied by a bird.

I returned to the nest on 14 Feb with a better light setup and was able to see into the nest by standing on tiptoe and looking straight down into the nest. Four eggs were present. According to Wiggins (in C.H. Fry, S. Keith & E.K. Urban, 2000. *The Birds of Africa, Vol. VI*. Academic Press, London and New York) incubation is 13–15 days long. I returned to the nest on 18 Feb and after inserting the tape measure to flush the female, (I had a bag ready to capture the female but she squeezed out to freedom), I found two eggs and two day old chicks in the nest. The female stayed close to the tree and scolded at me. Two other adults, with food in their bills, arrived and joined in the scolding. From the three adults present I assume that the pair had a helper as in other members of the genus *Parus* (Robert's Birds of Southern Africa Maclean 1993).

I had installed three nest boxes in 1999, which were made by Thorsten Ludwig, and placed them in mopane trees near our house. In 2000, I was disappointed to find nothing nesting in them. On 8 March 2001 I walked past one of the boxes and flushed a female perched at the entrance. I opened the lid and found a clutch of four eggs. Richard Dean had asked me to take notes on the nest to supplement forthcoming edition of Robert's Birds of Southern Africa. I suspected that the female was perched at the entrance to the nest because she had just completed the clutch and I did not want to disturb the nest until the female was solidly incubating to avoid any abandonment. On 13 Mar. I opened the box, captured the female and measured the four eggs. The female weighed 19.4 g, had a wing 68.5 mm long and wing moult with primaries 1–4 new, 5 2/3 grown and 6–10 old and worn. The tail was also in moult with the new feathers in the middle. The eggs measured: 17.8x13.0, 16.8x13.7, 18.0x13.5, and 16.9x13.6 mm. The nest was lined with tree bark phloem.

Since the incubation is supposed to be 12–14 days I checked the nest again on

19 Mar (day 12) at 17h00 and found no female but c/4. On 21 Mar at 13h00 I checked the nest again and found no female but still c/4. On 22 Mar at 14h00 I checked the box and found c/1 and three new hatchlings but the female was not present. At 17h00 I opened the box and made notes on the three chicks. Their skin colour was pink (flesh) and they had almost no down. The down was light grey and the covering very sparse with less than 5% of the body covered. There was one down feather on each side of the middle of the back, over each eye and on the dorsal side of the humerus. The inside of the mouth colour was cream near the bill to pink deeper in the throat. The gape was cream colour. The three chicks weighed 2.4, 2.6 and 2.4 g. The female arrived with food five minutes after we had started to handle the chicks. The incubation period for this nest was at least 15 days. On 23 Mar at 18h45 I checked the nest and found four nestlings.

On 3 April I ringed the nestlings and their ring, weights and wing measurements were: AF42329, 19.0 g 40 mm; AF42330, 18.9 g 41.5 mm; AF42331, 19.1 g 38 mm and AF42332, 20.5 g 37 mm. Unfortunately I had to stop observations after 3 April. The fledging period is supposed to be 18 days but I highly doubt that the nestlings would have been able to fledge in the next 5 days.

On 24 May I caught one of the nestling AF42332 in a mist net and it weighed 21.8 g with a wing of 83 mm.



### A DILLY PENGUIN

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In May 2000, a weak underweight juvenile African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus* was found at Langstrand. It had been ringed by Pete Bartlett on Ichaboe Island as a fledgling in March 2000.

He was kept in captivity for supplemental feeding after being checked for injuries and initially did very well, eventually taking fish freely rather than being force-fed.

The day he was judged ready for release, he began displaying bizarre behaviour, thus earning the name Dilly. He would walk round in circles with his neck bent forward as if the muscles were in spasm. In between these bouts he would be normal.

Blood tests and smears were not very informative. There was no evidence of avian malaria but we could not exclude an intracranial infection such as meningitis or encephalitis. An attempt at ultrasound of the brain was unsuccessful because of the thick feathering. He would have lost waterproofing and insulation had we shaved his head.

Despite treatment with antibiotics and antifungals and vitamin supplementation, Dilly became worse. Any sort of stimulation would set off the spasms, and he began swimming in circles too. He was really not a happy penguin.

Despite being inundated by oiled Treasure penguins, SANCCOB accepted Dilly into their facility for further investigation and, we hoped, treatment. However, everyone there was at a loss for an explanation. Blood tests and tissue biopsies were all negative and it was decided to euthanase him. The autopsy was also negative.

Interestingly, in a 1964 issue of Ornithological News of the SWA Scientific Society was a report by a Mr. Kazmaier who had been involved with penguin rehabilitation in Lüderitz. He had a tame penguin that was confused and would swim in circles whenever attempts were made to release it. It would be fine one day, then confused the next. It died 5 months later from a lung infection.

The help received from Dr. D. Rodenwoldt, Dr. H. Winterbach, Dr. P. Murphy, the staff at SANCCOB, and Antje Leseberg is gratefully acknowledged.