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Editorial

With funding for research projects becoming ever more difficult to secure more and more reliance is placed on the citizen scientist to help collect the data required for research. You and I who participate in atlassing, ringing, wetland counts, raptor road counts etc. are the citizen scientists, the amateurs, who provide much of the data from which the professionals are able to conduct their research.

In a way the wheel has turned a full circle. Some years ago (as far as I am aware around the mid 1970's) the school of thought was that research was purely the domain of the professionals and amateurs or citizen scientists were actively discouraged from data collection. A case in point is bird ringing where a policy was introduced whereby amateur ringing was only permitted if a project was registered. The immediate result of this was that many amateur ringers lost interest and threw in the towel. One cannot help wondering how much valuable data was lost through this short sighted approach. How many birds, that might have been ringed by

Shirts with the 50 year logo embroidered on them are still available but must be ordered from Holger Kolberg (holgerk@mweb.com.na) as they are made only to order and we do not keep stocks on hand. The price is N\$ 220.00 per shirt irrespective of size or type.

Of Sleepless Nights, Howling Wind and an Uncooperative Penguin: Tracking African Penguins at Halifax Island, Namibia

Jessica Kemper

African Penguin Conservation Project;
formerly Ministry of Fisheries and Marine
Resources (MFMR)

Dr. Katrin Ludynia, aka “Katta”, post-doctoral fellow at the Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town, and I are seasoned veterans. Veterans at deploying GPS data loggers on unsuspecting breeding African Penguins. These loggers regularly record the position of the penguin as well as other pertinent information such as time, dive depth and water temperature. This in turn provides important insights on penguin foraging areas, habitats, ranges and behaviour which are vital for guiding conservation management of this endangered species.

The general idea is to equip a penguin with such a device for about two days to obtain precise details of one foraging trip. At about 75 g the device is small enough not to be a burden to the penguin but it also means that it is limited in terms of how much data can be stored; depending on what settings are chosen, its battery life span is about three days. The device has to be retrieved in order to download the data and great care is therefore needed to choose a penguin which is likely to return to the colony after a foraging trip. Katta and I have done this many times and by now are pretty good at choosing the right penguin to carry our €2 300 piece of equipment.

How to select the perfect candidate...the trick is to find an accessible (but not isolated) nest with a relaxed-looking penguin caring for one or two well-fed, medium- to large-sized downy chicks (i.e. about 30-40 days old). At this stage of chick development, African Penguins are strongly bonded with their offspring and the chicks are still small enough to be looked after by one parent (while the other one is away foraging, usually for about a day). Choosing smaller chicks is unwise, as the disturbance created by catching the parent may cause nest abandonment at that stage. Small chicks are also at greater risk of being viciously attacked by upset penguins nesting close-by while the parent is being equipped. Choosing chicks close to fledging age may also be problematic; at that stage the parents tend to stay at sea longer because they need to work harder to feed their chicks, and parental commitment may be abating as the chicks are subtly encouraged to start fending for themselves.

Monday 23 February 2009: It is 07h00 and Katta and I just paddled to Halifax Island from Guano Bay on our paddle-skis, a 10 - 15 minute trip, just as the sun is rising. The weather is still calm, but the south wind, for which this region is world-famous, is about to come up, making the paddle back to the mainland difficult, if not plain dangerous. We are scanning penguin colony 2 for a potential candidate to carry our GPS logger.



Katta paddling to Halifax Island – Photo : Jessica Kemper

After a short discussion we settle for a penguin at the northern edge of the colony. Easily accessible, in good condition, two healthy downy chicks. I leopard-crawl into the colony, trying not to upset the general peace, and slowly grab our penguin. An easy catch. After retreating some 20 m from the colony, with my victim held securely under my arm, we quickly weigh and measure the bird, a female. While I gently but firmly hold the bird across my lap, her eyes covered, her heart racing, but not struggling to get away, Katta expertly fixes the small device to the lower back of the penguin by weaving strips of Tesa® tape into the feathers and wrapping the loose ends over the logger. The beauty of this method is that the logger can be taken off again without any damage to the feathers; that is important because feather damage would seriously compromise the bird's waterproofing and therefore its survival, clearly not what we intend. The seawater will eventually take its toll on the effectiveness of the tape and after a week or so the tape will start to come apart. But that's not a problem for us, because we will collect our logger again long before this becomes an issue. Five minutes later the logger is securely affixed and I slowly walk back to the colony and release our penguin next to her nest. Usually a penguin quickly settles back at the nest with the chicks, breathes a sigh of relief and carries on contemplating life, but this time our bird just takes off, dashing through the colony, panic-stricken, away from me, away from her chicks. From a distance we watch the nest for a while, hoping our penguin would return, but she is nowhere to be seen. With the south wind picking up we decide to call it a morning and paddle back to land and a hot cup of tea. I am left with a niggling feeling that we have a particularly nervous bird on our hands. Catching her again to take the logger off might be tricky now that she knows what to expect.

Tuesday, 24 February 2009: We are quite sure that our bird is not back at the colony yet, so there is little point in getting up at 05h30 to drive to Guano Bay and to squeeze ourselves into damp wetsuits and paddle to the island at the crack of dawn. We get to sleep in. Bliss.

Wednesday, 25 February 2009: We arrive at the colony just before 07h00, fully expecting our penguin to be there. Alas, no sign of her. Her chicks have teamed up with the neighbour's chicks and all four are guarded by one adult penguin. Oh well, it's only day two, we'll try again tomorrow morning.

Thursday, 26 February 2009: We arrive at Guano Bay at 06h30, as usual, but discover that the wind is already too strong to paddle to the island. The sea is whipped into foamy curls all over the bay and we don't think it is worth the risk of getting blown straight to Brazil. Besides, we've got plan B, the use of the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources' research vessel, the RV/!Anichab, later that day to do a routine bird census on Halifax Island with the help of my colleague Elmareen Snyders. Of course the odds of seeing our penguin in the middle of the day are not that great; the best chances are around dawn and at dusk when penguins arrive back from sea to feed their chicks. And, as expected, our penguin is not around. Again the four chicks are huddling in a group, guarded by one adult. "Our" chicks are looking well; they are obviously being fed. That's good news. We do our census in the howling wind, occasionally returning to colony 2 and associated landing beach, in the hope that our penguin is back. No luck. We are now getting slightly worried. What if the wind stays strong and we can't paddle across again the next morning? What if our penguin abandoned her chicks after being manhandled by us? What if we lost our only GPS logger? The one we borrowed from Kiel University. How would we pay it back? Staying overnight at the island is not really an option, considering that there is no shelter on the island and that it is covered in bird ticks which seem to love us. They don't seem to be carrying any diseases, but cause us to break out in massive, itchy welts. We are not really too keen on that prospect.

Friday, 27 February 2009: Back to Guano Bay at 06h30. Wind conditions are marginal and we risk the paddle. Katta misjudges a wave and gets bucked off her paddle-ski. Our equipment is packed in waterproof backpacks,

so no harm done. On the island we don't bother to change into our dry clothes but head straight for colony 2. Surely, she has to be back. She isn't. We stand and wait. Freezing in our wetsuits. Scanning the beach. Scanning the colony again from all angles. Then the wind picks up and we head back. This time I get dumped in the surf, but that's not unusual. We drive back with the car heater on full blast, trying to regain core temperature. And now we are really getting worried.

The wind remains strong throughout the day, but we give it another try in the late afternoon. We drive out to Guano Bay, armed with paddle-skis, wetsuits and my telescope. Perhaps, if we are lucky, we might get a glimpse of her from the shore. We take turns scanning the colony and the landing beach until it is too dark to see anything. Still no sign of our penguin. Neither of us sleeps well that night.

Saturday, 28 February 2009: We drive to Guano Bay at the usual time. The early mornings are starting to take their toll on us and we are feeling tired and despondent. Again the wind is pretty strong and we are reluctant to paddle. We've brought the telescope along and start scanning again. Suddenly, at about 07h00, we see her. No doubt, it's her. The logger is still on her back and she is standing with her chicks. Strangely enough, the wind has calmed down a bit (or is it just our imagination?), so without hesitation we climb into our wetsuits, jump on our paddle-skis and paddle as fast as we can. We arrive at colony 2...our penguin is gone! We check the beach, hoping that she is still socializing with the beach crowd, but no, she has already left to sea. We return home, disappointed but hopeful. At least we know that she is alive and well, that she has obviously not abandoned her chicks and that she is still carrying our logger. Phew.

Sunday, 1 March 2009: We cunningly revise our strategy; clearly our penguin is a very early riser. We briefly consider staying overnight on the island, then opt for a pre-dawn raid instead. As we leave town at 05h30, we get enveloped in thick fog. So thick that it

is hard to even guess where the road is heading, although we know the route by heart. We arrive at Guano Bay in foggy darkness. Daylight somehow never comes. We can't see a thing from where we are parked. Not the shore, not the sea and certainly not the island. Way too dangerous to attempt a crossing. We patiently wait for the fog to lift, even just a little bit, but it doesn't. It just sits there. An hour later we give up. No point in waiting; our penguin would have left the colony by now.

The fog hovers over the Lüderitz peninsula for most of the morning. As soon as it begins to clear, the south wind returns with its usual vengeance. At 17h00 we repack the vehicle for the umpteenth time and head for Guano Bay. It's windy, but the wind seems to be dropping. Again we take turns staring through the telescope, scanning the colony and landing beach from the shore. At 18h45, the sun is setting; Katta calmly announces "there she is, she just arrived at the beach".



Logger penguin arriving and greeting partner - Photo : Jessica Kemper

We are on Halifax Island in record time. I am not taking any chances and have brought my catch-net along. Normally I catch directly by hand because it is a calmer approach, but with a nervous penguin it can be less stressful with a net. We carefully move toward colony 2. We spot her with our binoculars. She is lying next to one of her chicks, looking in our direction. All we can see are loose tape ends

fluttering on her back. Our hearts stop. Has the logger fallen off? Is she just wearing the lattice of tape strips? We slowly shift position to see her back, but still can't confirm whether the logger is still attached or not. I slowly tip-toe closer, focused, catch-net at the ready. I am about 2 m away from her when she becomes aware of me. She gets up and moves away. Before she has a chance to run, I put the catch-net over her. Got her.



Catching a logger penguin – Photo : JP Roux

And yes, the logger is still attached. Just. Her chicks must have had fun undoing and playing with the tape ends, but our precious logger is there. We quickly take off the logger and tape.



Removing the device - Photo : JP Roux

I carry her back to her nest and fully expect her to make another dash through the colony.

Not so. She calmly settles next to her chicks. All is well. On our way back we are overcome by a giggling fit; must be the relief kicking in. It is now getting dark. And for the first time in ages we both catch the perfect wave to the shore.

Epilogue, 28 November 2011: Despite the sleepless nights our penguin caused us, she did provide us with valuable information. After we equipped her on 23 February 2009, she left the island at 07h40 and headed in a north-westerly direction. She only arrived back at the colony 62 hours later, at 21h40 on Wednesday 25 February, just before the device's battery went flat. During the time she spent at sea, she travelled 183.95 km and ventured as far as 58 km from the island. This is quite an unusually long foraging trip compared to the other 53 foraging trips we have recorded at Halifax Island so far, although trip lengths and distance covered can be highly variable. While at sea, our penguin dived 1 479 times, or 24 times per hour. Her maximum dive depth was 71.2 m, not the deepest dive we have recorded so far, but still respectable.

Food appeared to be scarce around Halifax Island at the time, with large numbers of chick mortalities due to starvation noticed all over the island and chick condition generally poor. The data we collected that summer showed that the penguins at Halifax Island were working harder than usual to feed their chicks. This is precisely the type of information we need in order to find ways to improve the tenuous conservation status of African Penguins in Namibia. The information emanating from this project has been instrumental in defining the shape and size of Namibia's first Marine Protected Area, the Namibian Islands' Marine Protected Area (NIMPA), of which Halifax Island and the surrounding waters are part. Our project continues to play a vital role in monitoring and evaluating the NIMPA's effectiveness. Katta will be back in the summer of 2011/12 and once again we will be deploying GPS loggers at Halifax and Mercury Islands, together with staff from MFMR.

Thank you to Dr. Stefan Garthe, University of Kiel, for lending us the GPS Tdlog data logger (earth&OCEAN technologies, Kiel, Germany) in question and to Jean-Paul Roux for putting up with two nervous wrecks for days on end.

I was bitten by a Tiger Fish whilst swimming in the Okavango Swamps

Paul Gascoigne
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The Colwick Maggot Farm and Eastcrofts Chimney in the Nottingham City Centre are fine locations responsible for such gems as Black Redstart and Peregrine Falcon. They undoubtedly add sparkle to our bird lists. However, if like me you occasionally need somewhere a little more exotic for birding and preferably a location where a cold east wind does not make your eyes water, Botswana's Okavango Delta in February seemed just the place. Certainly exotic with no chance of a cold east wind to blur the view through my binoculars.

This magnificent wetland of global importance with its unpolluted crystal clear waters is host to an abundance of creatures. Yes, there are insects and crocodiles and a vast array of other wildlife but there are, of course, the birds. If you are into herons, storks, ibises, ducks, geese or rails this has to be your paradise. In amongst this huge wetland are islands and they provide a habitat for yet more species. The African Green-Pigeon, rollers and bee-eaters all show off remarkably colourful plumage. We must not forget the infamous "little brown jobs," cisticolas and warblers as together they form a list that can seem almost endless.

Amongst this bounty of birds any visitor must identify a few targets - those mega ticks. It is in this area that the Okavango Delta really delivers. Arnot's Chat, a beautiful black bird which sports a white cap and shoulder patch, is a mopane woodland speciality. Moving up a notch is the Slaty Egret. Almost endemic to the region this has to be a major target. Then

we come to the Premier League contender, and perhaps the Manchester United of the Premier League, Pel's Fishing-Owl.

This large rufous coloured owl, although found in many parts of Africa, is most likely to be found in the Okavango region. Surely as far as targets are concerned this has to be the bull's eye.

I battled my way to Heathrow, flew overnight to Johannesburg and drove to Maun in Botswana, the gateway to the Delta. Our little group assembled in Maun and with a 4 x 4 we headed off on the final leg of the journey into the Moremi Game Reserve. In our company was Lucky, our local guide, boatman and bird expert who was confident we would hit our targets.

Our journey along sand roads twisted and turned through forests of mopane woodland. Frequently we stopped to view a herd of elephant or buffalo which take with them an accompanying flock of oxpeckers. Impala and lechwe antelope were prolific along the entire journey and in a clearing we sighted a cheetah. By now Arnot's Chat had become common place and we turned our attention to the hornbills, wood-hoopoes, starlings and orioles.

On the second day we arrived at our boat. The drive had taken us by many waterholes and had introduced us to many of the waterbird species. Herons and egrets were plentiful but the Black Heron which folds its wings like an umbrella when fishing was both a comical and pleasurable sight. The Greater Painted Snipe probing in the mud wallow, what a beautiful bird.

Civilization was now well behind us and it really did seem to be a lonely planet, as we headed off into the swamps. The temperature climbed with the sun and we saw it register 100°F (*about 38°C - Ed*). Our boat trundled along and we scanned the papyrus and tall grasses that line the river channels unable to take account of the many species, such were their numbers. As we pushed through lily clad lagoons disturbing African Jacanas our search