

African Penguins

A Plummeting Population



Summary

- African penguins are the only species of penguin to breed on the continent of Africa.
- African penguins have breeding sites on the mainland of South Africa as well as the surrounding islands.
- African penguins eat about 25 different types of small fish.
- Both human and environmental factors are causing the population to decline at an alarming rate.
- Oil pollution and depleted fish stocks are among the top causes of the decline.

What We Know About African Penguins

African penguins, *Spheniscus demersus*, are known by a number of names including; the black-footed penguin, cape penguin and jackass penguin.

The only penguins that breed and nest on the continent of Africa, they range from Namibia to South Africa.

As adults, African penguins are between 18-25 inches tall and can weigh up to 11 pounds. They can live for 15-20 years in the wild, or up to 30 years in zoos and aquariums.



African penguins eat small fish such as anchovies and sardines, but also prey on squid and krill. An adult penguin can eat up to one pound of food, or 14% of its body weight.

Spending time on land and in the sea these birds have a variety of natural predators. These include gulls, feral cats, mongoose, sharks, and fur seals.

The familiar black and white coloration of African penguins assists in the camouflage from predators when swimming as well as for thermoregulation. Additionally, the bare spot above each eye can also aid in regulating body temperature by providing an area for heat loss.

Like most birds, penguins will molt annually to replace old feathers with new ones. During this molting period, the penguins will stay ashore for approximately 20 days and will feed off of body fat. Interestingly, the pattern of black spots on each penguin's chest is unique to that individual and will remain the same following each molt.

Although there is no distinct mating season for African penguins, most pairs remain monogamous and will return to the same nesting site year after year. Males will prepare the nest by digging a shallow burrow in sand near brush or boulders. The nest is covered with guano (penguin waste) as well as any nearby materials such as feathers or twigs. Average clutch size is usually two eggs and both parents take turns incubating the eggs for about 40 days. Heat is efficiently transferred from the adult to the eggs through a brood patch (an area free of feathers on the lower abdomen). Juvenile penguins will leave the burrow between 60 and 130 days after hatching.

The population of Africa's only penguin species is currently declining at an alarming rate of about 2% each year. It has been estimated that the present population is less than 10% of what it was in 1900.

African penguins have been classified as Endangered by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and as Vulnerable in the South African Red Data Book. They have also been listed under Appendix II of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) and the Bonn Convention for the conservation of migratory species.

Why is the African Penguin Population Declining?

Although natural predators affect African penguin populations, humans have proven to have the greatest influence on species decline. An always-increasing demand on both fishing and oil supplies worldwide are among the leading pressures.

Depleted Fish Stocks

Overfishing, pollution, global warming, and other environmental factors are causing a decrease in fish populations. Limited food sources can result in starvation, decrease in reproduction rates, and ultimately population loss. An increasing human population can lead to a heavier demand on fishing, creating an even smaller food source for these penguins.

To help slow the depletion of wild fish stocks in the world's oceans, you can be a more responsible fish consumer. You can also support legislation that incorporates fishing quotas for threatened species.

Oil Pollution

With an increase in demand on fossil fuels such as oil, there is a greater possibility for spills as it is shipped across oceans. Oil spills pose a risk to numerous marine species. Penguins will search the ocean for food and may become oiled as the surface to breathe. Penguins will preen (groom their feathers) prior to swimming to ensure they stay warm in cold waters; it is during this time they will ingest the oil.

Oil is used to fuel automobiles, pave roads, make plastics, and so much more. With both a local and worldwide shift from oil dependency the risk of oil pollution will decrease.

Human disturbance

Penguins will build their nests on local beaches and even people's backyards. The incidence of human disturbing penguins and the nesting sites may result in not laying eggs or no longer caring for chicks. By limiting watching time of wild animals and maintaining a safe distance, many species will be able to safely cohabitate.

Natural Causes

Almost all animals have a natural predator. Sharks and Cape fur seals are two of their natural predators. Cape fur seals also compete with these birds for food and for breeding sites. With a diminishing food supply plus competition for it a positive growth in the penguin population cannot be expected. This is especially true when added competition for breeding grounds is also introduced.

