



MYSTIC AQUARIUM

African Penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*)

Size: African penguins range from 18 to 25 inches tall and weigh up to 11 pounds.

Range/Distribution: The only penguin to breed in Africa, the African penguin ranges from Namibia to South Africa. Young penguins have been known to migrate north and west along the coastline between Southern Angola and Namibia, and are sometimes found off Gabon, Congo, and Mozambique, but generally reside in South Africa.



Appearance: African penguins have a robust, torpedo-shaped body with black feathers on their back, flippers, and head while white feathers cover their front with the exception of horseshoe-shaped black stripe on the chest. Following a penguin's first few molts a white stripe will develop around its cheek and throat. These birds have a bare patch above their eyes to assist with regulating their body temperature.

Habitat: When not hunting for food in the water, African penguins are found along rocky shores or brushy coastal areas.

Prey: African penguins feed on 25 species of fish, such as sardine and anchovy but also prey on squid and krill. A penguin may eat up to one pound of food or up to 14% of their weight.

Predators: African penguins face predation by gulls, feral cats and mongoose while nesting on land, sharks and fur seals prey on African penguins in the water.

Life Span: The African penguin may live more than 30 years in an aquarium or zoo but averages of 15-20 years are typical in wild populations.

Mating Behaviors: There are no set breeding seasons for African penguins; however, most penguin pairs are monogamous and will remain together over several breeding years. The male will prepare a nest by digging a shallow burrow in sand or in brush using guano (penguin waste) and any materials nearby to complete the nest for the female to lay two eggs. Both the male and female share the nesting and chick duties, keeping the young safe from predators and warm temperatures. The chicks will hatch between 38 and 42 days and will leave the nest when they are between 60 to 130 days of age.

Conservation Status: In 2010, the African penguin was re-classified as Endangered on the IUCN red list. The population size has decreased 90% over the past 60 years with numbers falling to around 100,000 birds in the wild.

Threats: Threats include oil spills, over fishing of surrounding waters and changes in the environment, such as loss of habitat and global-warming-induced shifts in currents and atmospheric conditions

What's being done?

- SANCCOB (The Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds) partners with organizations around the world and is known as a leader in seabird conservation and rehabilitation. Through rehabilitation of sea birds, public education and conservation programming, SANCCOB is responsible for making a positive, direct impact on the wild seabird populations (the African penguin population is proven to be 19% higher due to SANCCOB's rehabilitation efforts).
- Mystic Aquarium has responded to the population decline by uniting researchers, husbandry staff, educators, and concerned citizens. These groups work to provide information on aquarium colonies of African penguins paired and field studies in South Africa to better understand the African penguin population both in aquariums and wild settings. This is accomplished through the support of research conducted at Mystic and directly in the field, hosting educational penguin programs, and raising funds to support African penguin programs.
- Zoos and aquariums (including Mystic Aquarium) around the country work to maintain a healthy genetic diversity among penguin populations in these facilities through the support of the Species Survival Plan.

Fun Facts:

- There are no external characteristics to distinguish between females and males so a blood test is used by aquariums and zoos.
- The pattern of black spots on a penguin's chest is as unique as a human finger print. Scientists are now using photographs to identify penguins in the wild when conducting population surveys.
- Every feather of a penguin is controlled by a small muscle. This allows the penguin to keep feathers close to their body to conserve heat when they are in cold water or lift their feathers to release heat when they are warm.
- African penguins, like other penguins, cannot fly due to their solid bone structure and lack of flight feathers on their wings. However, they can "fly" through the water at speeds up to 15 mph and regularly dive for 2.5 minutes.
- African penguins have earned the nicknamed of the "jackass penguin" because of their donkey-like bray used to communicate.