



helping hands

The mass abandonment of more than 2000 endangered Cape Cormorant chicks on Robben and Jutten islands saw the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB) once again come to the rescue.

On 12 January 2021, Andile Mdluli, SANCCOB's penguin and seabird ranger on Robben Island, was conducting his routine island patrol when he observed Kelp Gulls feeding on Cape Cormorant chicks close to the Blue Stone Quarry. He noticed that many chicks had been deserted by their parents, despite being not old enough to be left alone by them. In addition to being attacked by Kelp Gulls (and later also by Sacred Ibises), the chicks were exposed to extreme heat as the temperature that day exceeded 30 degrees Celsius.

SANCCOB and Robben Island Museum's environmental unit were alerted and in consultation with the seabird scientists at the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), it was decided to wait until the evening to see if parents returned to their nests once it had cooled down. Andile rescued a few chicks that had wandered off, but he remained on the lookout in case parent birds returned.

Unfortunately that didn't happen. The following day even more chicks were

abandoned, so it was decided to start rescuing the remaining chicks and rear them at SANCCOB. With the help of Robben Island Museum, Two Oceans Aquarium and the NSRI, more than 1800 Cape Cormorant chicks were rescued from Robben Island over three days. Hundreds of others were lost to predation, heat stress, dehydration, starvation and hypothermia during the night. A week later a similar situation unfolded on Jutten Island, off Saldanha Bay on the West Coast, and another 173 chicks were rescued with the help of SANParks and the PelicanWatch volunteers.

With 2030 Cape cormorants admitted to SANCCOB, this was the largest seabird rescue in the Western Cape since the MV *Treasure* oil spill in 2000. SANCCOB staff and volunteers worked around the clock to hydrate, feed and care for the cormorant chicks.

Cormorants are known to be a challenging species to care for and rehabilitate. Many chicks were in extremely poor condition when they were rescued and many of the severely compromised chicks did not survive the first week.

However, more than 1200 rescued birds were hand-reared at SANCCOB and prepared for release back into the wild.

The reasons suspected for the mass abandonment were a lack of food as a result of diminished levels of small pelagic fish stocks, primarily sardines, a mismatch in timing of breeding and food availability, and hot weather conditions. With the predicted increase in heat events as a result of climate change, which will also further negatively affect fish availability, these mass abandonments may become more frequent. Cape Cormorants are listed as Endangered by the IUCN and further reductions in their main prey, extreme weather events and other threats might push this once abundant species to the brink of extinction.

SANCCOB is committed to improving its rescue, rehabilitation and release efforts to prevent a further decline in this species and post-release monitoring is currently under way to assess the long-term survival of the rehabilitated cormorants. SANCCOB's seabird and penguin rangers are always on the lookout for seabirds in trouble.

KATTA LUDYNIA



TANYA CHUTE

When rehabilitated Cape Cormorants are released, they are fitted with metal rings and the majority also with alpha-numeric colour rings. If you see any of these ringed Cape Cormorants, please report the sightings to SAFRING, so that the long-term survival of these birds can be assessed.



shore leave

Beach closure allows Cape Cormorants to rest on Muizenberg beach

PETER RYAN

Cormorants have partly wettable plumage that prevents them from remaining in water for extended periods. Most species come ashore to rest between foraging bouts. Cape Cormorants are unusual in being able to roost for one to two hours on the water, which frees them to forage far offshore in pursuit of schools of pelagic fish. However, when foraging close to shore, they often roost on land, provided they are not disturbed too frequently.

Within False Bay, Cape Cormorants often roost on offshore rocks (for example, Ark Rock near Simon's Town) and large numbers frequently use the rocky shore at Boulders Beach where people are excluded from the penguin sanctuary area. However, towards the head of the bay, they routinely rest together at sea when conditions are not too rough. From a distance, their large flocks resemble black slicks on the water. Historically they have roosted on islands and causeways in Strandfontein Sewage Works, but in the 25 years I have lived overlooking Muizenberg beach, I have never seen them rest on the beach that runs east from Muizenberg to Strandfontein (although this behaviour is often observed at west coast beaches that are frequented less often by people).

No beach roosts were observed during the initial Covid-19 beach closures in April-May 2020, perhaps because there was limited feeding activity by large flocks of Cape Cormorants in the head of the bay at this time (despite large numbers of common dolphins feeding in the bay throughout most of this period). However, when beaches were again closed from late December to January 2021, I observed diurnal roosts along the beach on several occasions. The first, on 19 January 2021, occurred after large numbers of cormorants were foraging close inshore shortly after 09h00. Thousands of birds had moved onto the beach between Sunrise Beach and Strandfontein outfall by 09h30. Most birds departed to join a foraging aggregation off Strandfontein Point at about 10h15, but small numbers remained ashore until at least 10h30.

A roost was observed in the same area shortly after 14h00 on 31 January 2021. On this occasion, an additional roost formed east of Strandfontein outfall around 14h20, but by 14h30 both roosts started to lose birds to another foraging assemblage close offshore. Interestingly, all three roosts were attended by large numbers of Kelp Gulls, which mainly occupied the wave-washed beach between the cormorants and the sea.

Cape Cormorants are unusual in roosting at sea between foraging bouts, but Covid-19 beach closures suggest that they might do this more often than they'd like when close to land due to human disturbance on beaches.

On both these occasions, there was a light offshore breeze and the sea was fairly calm, characteristic of the conditions when Cape Cormorants typically roost on the water off Muizenberg. However, on the afternoon of 1 February 2021, a large roost again formed in the usual spot during strong southeasterly winds, when in the past the cormorants would have been obliged to fly south to find a secure coastal roost site. This roost remained on the beach for more than an hour, but dispersed before dusk to spend the night elsewhere. Beaches were opened again from 2 February and that afternoon the cormorants went back to roosting on the water.

The presence of diurnal cormorant roosts on Muizenberg-Strandfontein beach when people were largely excluded (although bait collecting and fishing continued) suggests that human disturbance causes the cormorants to roost at sea in False Bay more often than would otherwise be the case.

PETER RYAN