



CLEAR AND PRESENT dangers

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Like many seabirds, Cape Gannets breed only on offshore islands, where they are safe from terrestrial predators. Historically, their colonies were an important source of guano, the rich natural fertiliser formed from seabird excrement in arid areas. Throughout most of the 20th century, people were stationed on the gannets' breeding islands to protect the birds and

their precious guano, which was scraped up after each breeding season. As a result, we have a good record of how gannet numbers have changed since the first census was conducted in the mid-1950s.

Over this period, Cape Gannets have bred at only six islands: Mercury, Ichaboe and Possession off southern Namibia, and Lambert's Bay, Malgas and Algoa Bay's Bird Island off South Africa. In the 1950s, there were some 260 000 pairs of Cape Gannets, 80 per cent of which bred in Namibia. Today there are barely 130 000 pairs, 95 per cent of which breed in South Africa. As a result, the species is listed as globally Endangered and as Critically Endangered in Namibia.

The dramatic decline of the Namibian colonies resulted from the collapse of that country's sardine population due to overfishing in the 1960s and 1970s. Dwindling fish stocks off the South African west coast over the past

two decades have seen gannet numbers decreasing at both Lambert's Bay and Malgas Island, and the colony on Bird Island in Algoa Bay now supports almost three-quarters of all Cape Gannets in the world. This is the only stable population – all five colonies off the west coast continue to decrease.

It is worrying to have so many Cape Gannet eggs in one proverbial basket. During the 'guano rush' in the 1840s, gannets were displaced entirely from Ichaboe Island when hundreds of people mined the island's guano. It took more than a decade without any disturbance for the birds to return. Fortunately, all six gannet colonies are now in protected areas.

However, this doesn't necessarily shield gannets from natural predators. When a few Cape fur seals started raiding the colony at Lambert's Bay in 2004, the number of pairs decreased from



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11 000 to 5000. And when attacks continued in 2005, the entire colony was abandoned. The gannets only returned in 2006 after decisive action by Cape-Nature to keep seals out of the colony.

Fur seals also target naive fledgling gannets at sea when they first leave their nests. Newi Makhado's patient observations in the early 2000s showed that 30 to 80 per cent of gannet fledglings produced on Malgas Island were eaten by seals. Only a small number of male seals were responsible for this carnage and removing these individuals has slowed the decline of the Malgas colony. Seal attacks on seabirds off the west coast have escalated dramatically since the mid-1980s as seal numbers have increased and fish populations have shifted to the south coast.

Fur seals are not the only threat to young gannets. Great White Pelicans have developed a taste for seabird chicks. Attacks by pelicans on Cape Cormorant chicks have been reported in central Namibia, but it is the pelicans that breed on Dassen Island in the Western Cape that have grabbed most of the headlines. Gangs of pelicans work together to round up gull chicks and can also wreak havoc in cormorant colonies. At Malgas Island, the Crowned Cormorants now only breed inside abandoned guano sheds, where they are safe from pelicans.

The pelicans even manage to eat gannet chicks, so for the past decade or so West Coast National Park honorary rangers have mounted a pelican watch to keep pelicans out of the gannet colony on Malgas Island while the chicks are at risk. Gannets also lose their eggs and small chicks to Kelp Gulls. Such losses are largely confined to the colony edge and are not too serious in large, healthy gannet colonies. However, as the colonies shrink, the proportion of nests accessible to gulls increases, exacerbating the impact.

Besides food scarcity, the greatest threat to Cape Gannet colonies remains direct predation on adults by Cape fur seals. At Lambert's Bay it only took the killing of some 200 adult gannets for the colony to be abandoned. Small numbers of adult gannets have been killed by fur seals on Malgas Island over the past few years, but we were shocked by evidence of widespread predation on 12 October 2021. There were almost 100 dead adult gannets bearing signs of seal bites and we observed a seal attacking a gannet. The adult gannets were understandably jumpy; many had lost their eggs or chicks, and large swathes of the colony that were occupied in September had been abandoned.

This incident highlights the fragile status of this Endangered species. West

A male Cape fur seal killing a Cape Gannet at Malgas Island (above left). Seals are serious predators of fledgling gannets when they first leave their colonies, but the impact is much worse when the seals come ashore and attack the adult birds. Not only is the demographic impact of losing adults greater, but there is massive disruption of breeding birds, causing large gaps to form in the colony where birds desert their nests (above right). If attacks persist, the entire colony may be abandoned, as happened at Lambert's Bay in 2005.

Coast National Park rangers were sent to Malgas Island to prevent further attacks and there are plans to have a presence on the island from the beginning of the gannet breeding season this year, ideally by stationing a seabird ranger there (see <https://sanccob.co.za/projects/penguin-seabird-rangers/>). Such action is crucial, given that Malgas Island is home to 17 per cent of the world population. But the colony on Bird Island is home to more than 70 per cent of all Cape Gannets. Should fur seals attack that colony or if there is a disease outbreak or a major oil spill in Algoa Bay, the species would be in grave danger. PETER RYAN AND BRUCE DYER

