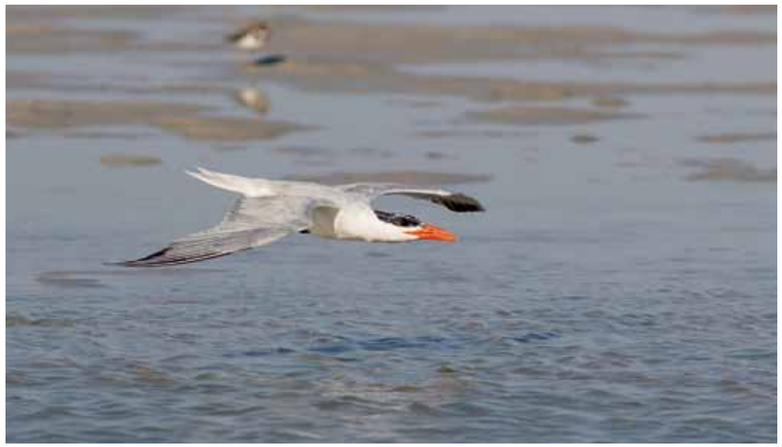
wide, open DE MOND

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **ANDREW JENKINS**

A fraction of the huge Cape Cormorant roost present daily at the mouth of the Heuningnes River in the winter of 2017.



above *A Caspian Tern about to grab a mullet from the surface of the estuary.*

top *Cape Cormorants leaving their roost site on the beach at De Mond and heading out to sea.*

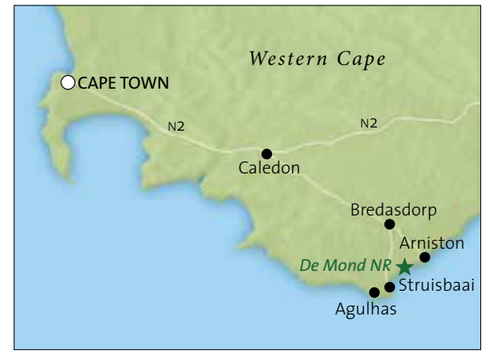
Gusts of the wildest wind scorch across acres of exposed sand, whipping it up into tiny, stinging tornadoes, garnished by the skimming salt of the sea. Offshore, a slate-grey curtain of rain merges with the squalling ocean, surging right to left before veering shoreward. Out there near the blurred horizon, a distant ant-line of tiny flickering shapes appears and disappears over the spray-strewn rollers. A wavy formation of oncoming birds gradually resolves from the storm.

Flying perilously low over the water, they are obscured by a violently crashing breaker before miraculously cresting the next towering swell. There is something profoundly heroic about this dark squadron of cormorants, stoically returning to land after a day of foraging, a day spent exposed to the warring sea. Just before they make landfall, a searchlight of sun probes through the scudding clouds and smudges a watery rainbow across the sky, a fitting tribute to their safe return. Close now, their wings pumping powerfully in rhythmical symmetry, they pull in behind their leader, finally bringing them home. The formation endures an awkward transition as it flutters to the ground, each bird stumbling and pitching on arrival.

Almost before they are still, another skein of heroes hammers home over the coast, followed by more, each settling behind the other in an ongoing sequence of clumsy landings. Night is approaching and the cormorants form a spreading fluid swarm of straining bodies; a bulging black stain, big enough to blot out most of the sandspit at the river's mouth.

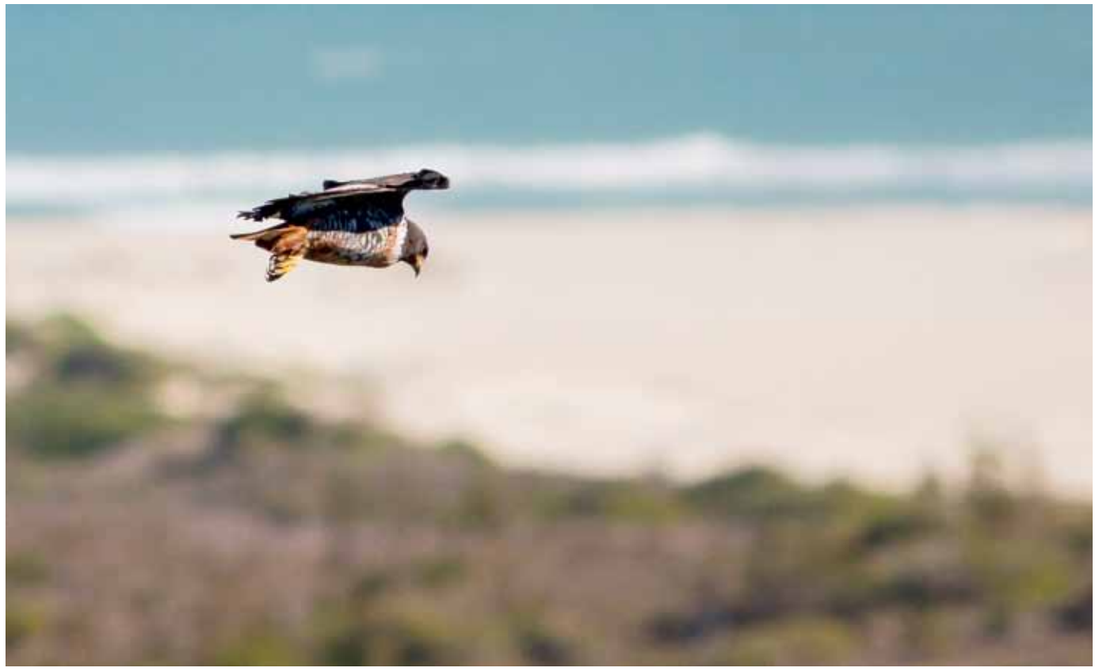
Ultimately, this spectacular Cape Cormorant roost swelled to a size that I found difficult to comprehend. It was located right at the mouth of the Heuningnes Estuary and was a striking daily feature of my first visit to De Mond Nature Reserve in May 2017. De Mond is a tiny reserve – less than 1000 hectares in extent – managed by CapeNature and nestled inconspicuously between the much larger and better known De Hoop Nature Reserve in the east and the Agulhas Plain National Park to the west. What it lacks in size, De Mond makes up for in the quiet, pristine quality of its natural environment and in the sheer quantity of life it supports.

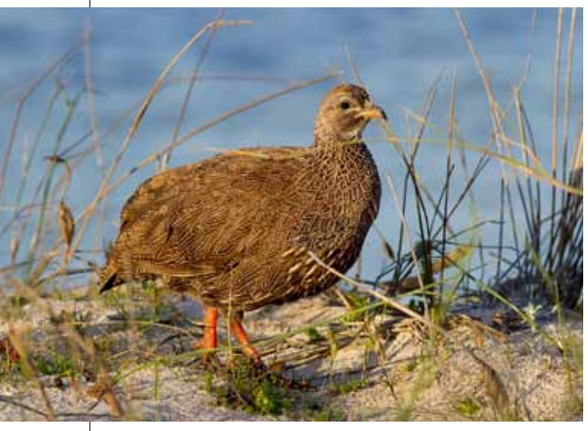
Given its location in the fynbos biome of the Western Cape, the reserve doesn't boast a very high diversity of birds, but there are some cracking species here and a wider range of avian habitats than one might expect. Private farmland – mostly covered by wheat and other forms of cereal agriculture – extends right up to the reserve boundary, only a couple of kilometres from the sea. While this extreme modification of the natural habitat is regrettable, the wheatfields and adjacent fallow pastures are great places to see flocks or pairs of Blue Cranes, loose gatherings of Denham's Bustards, a wide variety of open-country raptors (including Lanner Falcon, Jackal Buzzard, African Marsh Harrier and possibly even Cape Vulture from the nearby colony at Potberg) and the locally endemic Agulhas Long-billed Lark. The landward side of the reserve features a band of vegetated dunes running parallel to the coastline and covered by a mixture of dune and limestone fynbos, grading into milkwood forest along the river. This area of largely intact indigenous vegetation sustains a good complement of regionally endemic passerines, including Southern Tchagra. The fynbos strip is also home to nesting Black Harriers and this sensational, globally threatened, near-endemic raptor is easy to see at De Mond, especially during spring when pairs display in preparation for the breeding season.



top *Greater Flamingos are regular visitors to De Mond.*

But the river, its estuary and the adjacent coastline are probably the biggest birding drawcards. The estuary is the central feature of the reserve, winding its way around a huge, flat expanse of sand, mud and salt marsh as it approaches the coast. While the course of the river and its openness to the sea may have been manipulated in >





above *Cape Francolin is common in the reserve.*

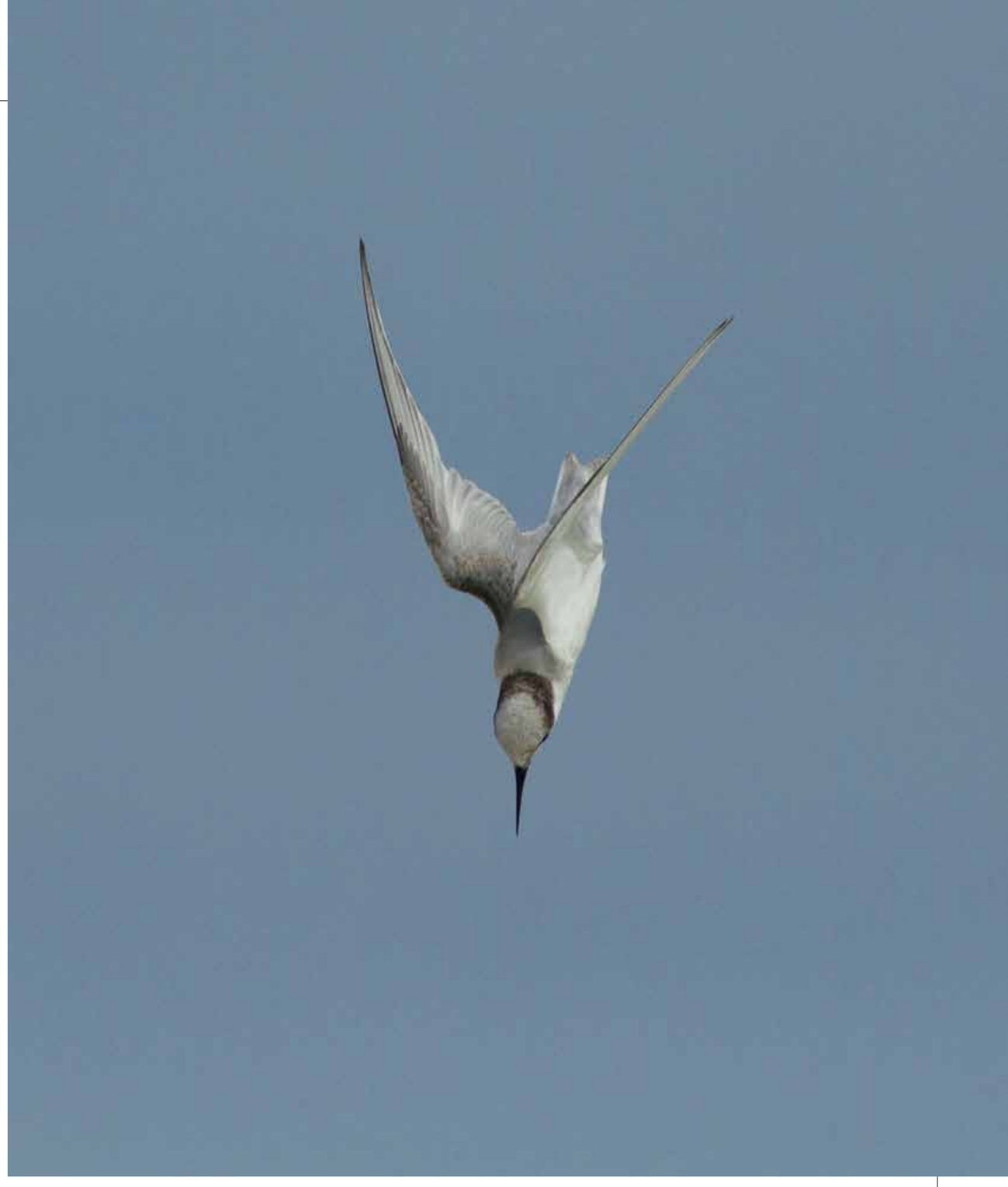
top *Jackal Buzzard, a regional endemic, hovering over the dunes.*

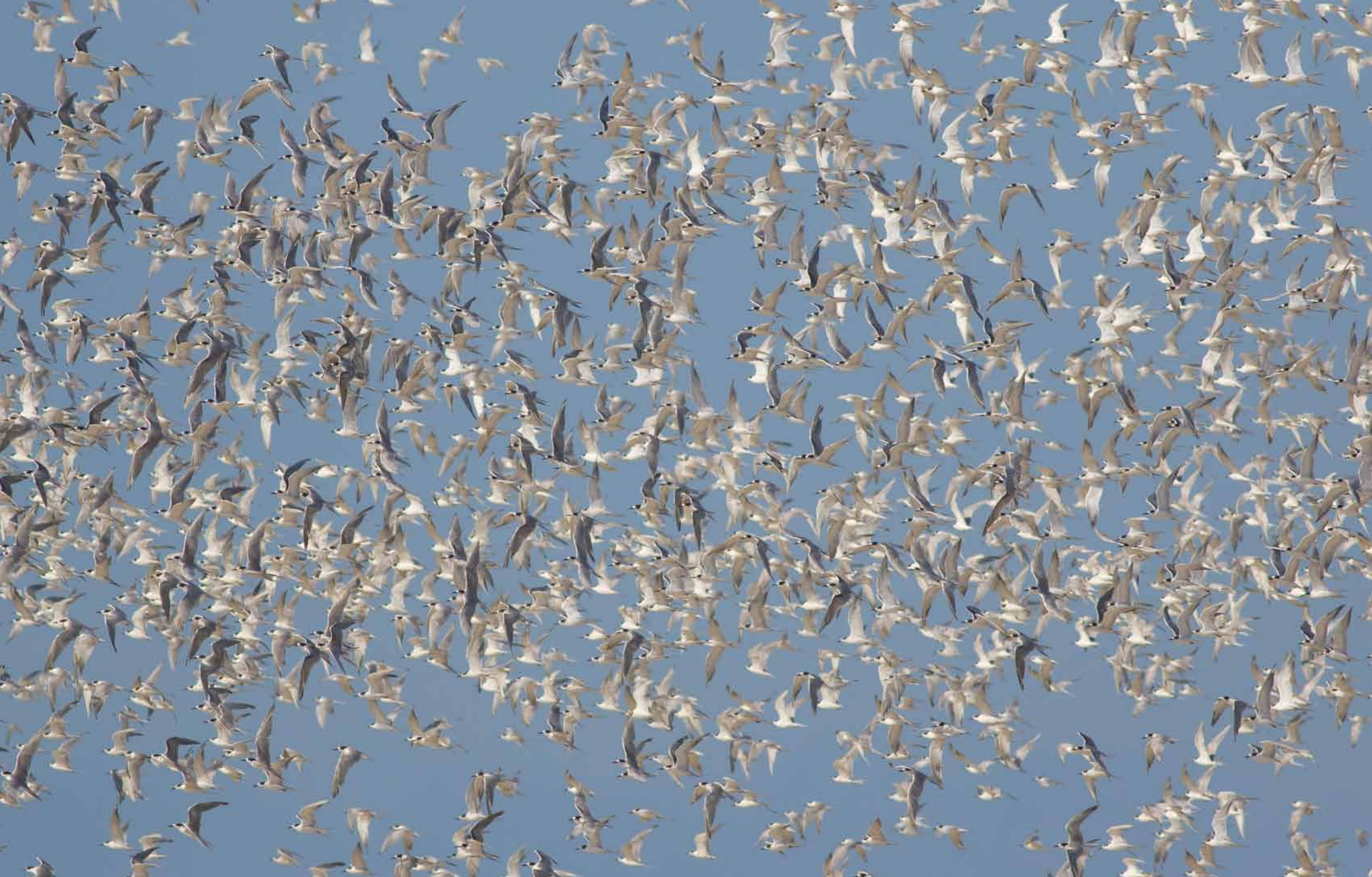
opposite *A young Damara Tern.*

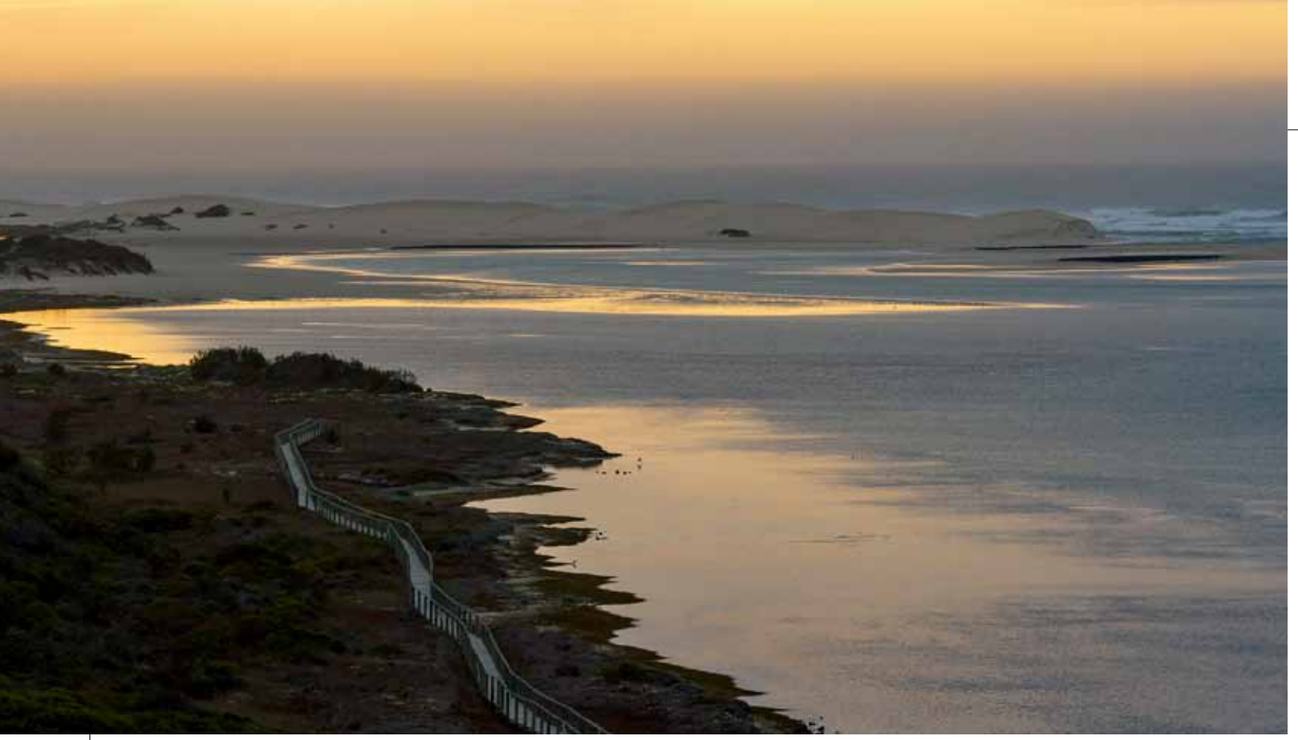
the past, the water here is crystal clear and obviously packed with biodiversity; meadows of seagrass, razor shells, octopuses and cuttlefish, sea hares, crabs and fish are abundant. The place oozes ecological health and productivity and this condition is strongly reflected in its birdlife. Shoals of mullet and the fry of larger fish species are visible everywhere in the shallower water and these stocks sustain a wide variety of piscivorous birds, including cormorants and darters, terns and gulls, herons and egrets, African Fish Eagle and the occasional Western Osprey. The tidal flats present another lucrative environment for birds, with good numbers of resident and migratory waders regularly or seasonally in attendance. These include Eurasian Curlew, Common Whimbrel, Grey Plover and Terek Sandpiper, with quite frequent records of rare vagrants such as Broad-billed Sandpiper and American and Pacific golden plovers.

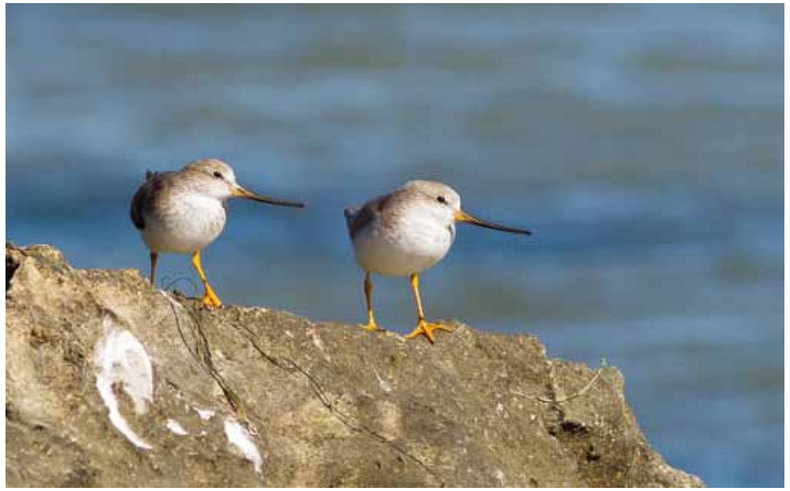
The river mouth and the broad span of sand that extends from the first big bend in the river to the sea serve as a remote safe haven for roosting and even breeding seabirds. Both Caspian Terns and Kelp Gulls were actively nesting in this area when I visited the reserve in January 2018 and provisioning Caspians were a constant presence on the estuary, patrolling the river and occasionally splashing heavily into the fringe-water after mullet.

The cormorant roost, which consisted almost entirely of Cape Cormorants in the winter of 2017, was whittled down to just 40 to 50 White-breasted Cormorants by the following January. I'm guessing that most of the thousands of threatened and near-endemic Cape Cormorants that roost at De Mond in the off-season disperse to breeding colonies during spring and summer. Remarkably though, the birdlife seems hardly to be diminished. On my January visit, the cormorant spectacle of winter, with its diurnal schedule of a massed departure mid-morning and a constant stream of arrivals from mid- to late afternoon, was simply replaced by a different but equally phenomenal gathering of roosting terns (mostly Common, I think, but including sizeable contingents of >









above *Terek Sandpipers striking a pose.*

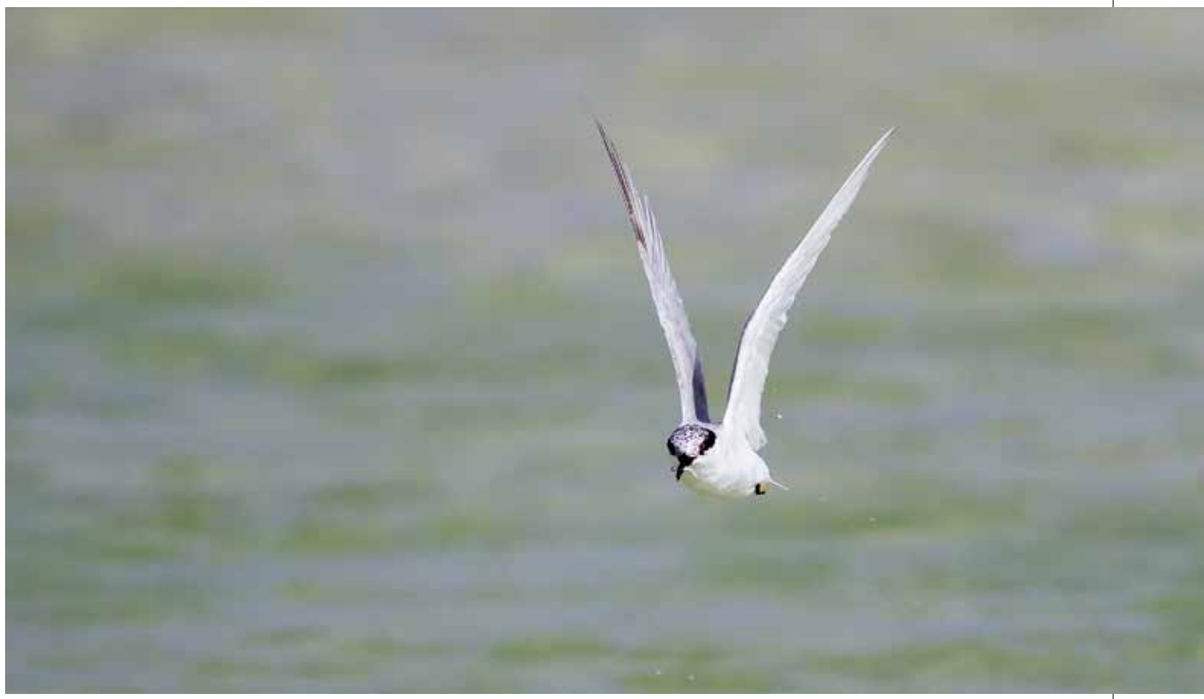
top *Dune-top view of the estuary at dawn.*

previous spread *Common Terns milling excitedly before departing for the day.*

Swift and Sandwich too). Again, I couldn't even begin to estimate the number of birds involved, but each morning the sandbank was covered by an expansive drift of white, periodically erupting into a confetti shower of pale wings and shrill, scolding cries, a murmurating mass of sea-angels, forming swirling patterns over the beach as the roost grew restive before dispersing out to sea.

The truth is – and this is some confession for a die-hard raptor biologist – I fell in love with terns at De Mond. I marvelled at the red-billed, bulky brashness of the Caspians, was captivated by the balletic coursing and screeching of the Swifts and was completely gobsmacked by the milling multitudes of 'comic' terns.

And then there was the diminutive jewel in the crown. The sawn-off, scaled-down, tubby little gem of a tern that I constantly sought throughout my time there – the Critically Endangered Damara Tern. There's something about these tiny birds that enthrals me. I guess it's partly to do with rarity – the species has a world population of fewer than 5000 adult birds and there are not more than 40 breeding pairs in South Africa at just two isolated sites – but there are other factors too. Their shape, for starters – an impossibly short tail, dumpy body and narrow, swept-back wings combine to deliver an intriguing aerodynamic profile. They also have a likeably forthright way about them that somehow pairs well with their jet-black bandit's head-cap. This chirpy attitude stands them in good stead as they take on the elements, hunting miniature fish along the turbulent, windswept shoreline.



Three flickering white shapes are just discernible through the cool, opaque vapour that clings low to the high-water mark. They shuffle out along the tide-line, one loosely following the other – Damara Terns, working their way towards me into the breeze. Progress is slow as each bird regularly darts down into the surf, quickly rising again to beat the incoming waves. At a distance, they create a pulsing, pendulum effect that is almost hypnotic and I risk losing sight of them as the moisture in the air distorts my view. After a time, they are close enough to see without binoculars, the first bird right in front me, about three metres above the water and almost close enough to touch. It is still industriously pushing into the wind, wings flapping hard, body jinking subtly from side to side. Despite this slight instability, caused mainly by the buffeting effect of the strengthening wind, its head is held dead still, turned sharply down and scanning the white water below and behind it. In an instant it drops, corkscrewing into the boiling edge of the sea. For a moment the little bird seems dangerously exposed to the rushing foam, then it rises forcefully, its small but muscular body driving it forward and up, back to foraging height, and away. The second bird passes in exactly the same way, while the third slaps down twice into the ocean, finally emerging with a silver fingerling that is quickly consumed. Soon all three are lost again, constantly in motion and swallowed by the mist shrouding the shore.

Having lived in the Cape for more than 30 years, I've been remarkably slow on the uptake, only discovering De Mond quite recently. However, my family and I have been back there no fewer than three times since our first visit less than a year ago, drawn by the milling birds, the wild majestic skyscapes over a deserted beach and the crystal streaming estuary turned luminous aquamarine by the warm summer sun.

If you've ever found a venue that's almost too good to be true, a glowingly satisfying sanctum that somehow hasn't been found by the crowds, you'll know why part of me was reluctant to write this article. Why write about De Mond and contribute to popularising this magical, deserted destination? Well, I guess one very important reason is to help to attract more paying visitors and improve the financial security of the reserve. Then there's the unwritten imperative to share with a wider audience a great birding location and a simply beautiful place to holiday. This said, the select few who are already in the know surely won't thank me for spilling the beans. ◆

A non-breeding Damara Tern heads off with its tasty catch.