



MEDIA RELEASE

Embargo: Immediate

African Penguin Satellite Tracking Project launched

Cape Town, 8 September 2013. BirdLife South Africa, the only national, dedicated bird conservation non-governmental organisation and member of BirdLife International, initiated the second phase of its African Penguin Satellite Tracking Project (APST Project), at Dassen Island, just off the west coast of Cape Town over the weekend. The project team was joined by media representatives and partner GreenMatter, championing biodiversity skills development.

Globally there are fewer than 30,000 breeding pairs. One hundred years ago, Dassen Island was the largest African Penguin colony in the world, with an estimated one million breeding pairs. There are currently fewer than 4000 breeding pairs at Dassen Island. This represents a loss of almost 200 pairs a week, over a period of 100 years! With that trend continuing, some colonies are shrinking by 20% each year.

"The APST Project responds firstly to the plight of the African Penguin as an endangered species that has exhibited a recent population collapse. Secondly, the African Penguin is an indicator to marine ecosystem health and their decrease is a warning signal for the economy, quality of life, jobs and other social impacts" says Dr Ross Wanless, Seabird Division Manager, BirdLife South Africa, and the African Coordinator for the Global Seabird Programme.

For this round of research, the project team will look at where adult penguins go after breeding; later they will follow birds once they've completed their annual moult. By knowing where they go, the project team can determine if they are likely to come into competition for food with the sardine and anchovy fishery and if implementing special management areas around islands, or elsewhere, will aid in supporting marine ecosystem health.

"Our marine environment is under enormous pressure and the African Penguin's collapse is largely the result of human activities. In response to these issues, BirdLife South Africa has

prioritised the APST research. The research involves using small Geographical Positioning System (GPS) devices attached to breeding penguins to investigate foraging ranges (where they look for food) and constraints faced by penguins during breeding. They are similar to a car's GPS navigation system, but transmit positions to a network of satellites, which then transmit the positional information back to earth. These data are accessed daily, allowing the project team to track the birds' movements in real time.

Each small device costs R30,000. The Birdlife International African Penguin Species Champion, the Charl van der Merwe Trust, provided funds for 20 devices and covered the costs for satellite uplinks.

"In preparation for the upcoming Save our Seabirds (SOS) Festival that takes place every year during National Marine Week, BirdLife South Africa has developed a website to provide access to the real-time movements of the penguins for youth and those interested in learning more about this amazing seabird. BirdLife South Africa and GreenMatter will be developing a game, linked to the APST Project for high school and university students that will be launched at the upcoming SOS Festival. The game will provide experiential learning about a serious issue in a fun and interactive format, instilling environmental values in the next generation of leaders," states Wanless.

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For further information, please contact: Dr Ross Wanless, Seabird Division Manager, BirdLife South Africa; Telephone: 021 419 7347, Mobile: 084 622 2424, E-mail: ross.wanless@birdlife.org.za. Royalty-free images are available on request.

Notes for the editor:

1. The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.
2. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Lewis House, 239 Barkston Drive, Blairgowrie, P.O. Box 515, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: info@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za
3. This project is a collaboration between BirdLife South Africa and the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology and is funded by the Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, the Charl van der Merwe Trust and the Percy FitzPatrick Institute for African Ornithology.
4. The penguin tracks can be viewed online at the BirdLife South Africa at SOS Festival website: www.sosfestival.co.za/penguin-tracking/
5. In 2010, the African Penguin was uplisted from Vulnerable to Endangered on the BirdLife International Red List of Threatened Birds, because of the rapid decrease in population numbers. The population in South Africa has decreased from about 141 000 pairs in the 1950s to around 20 000 pairs in 2012.

6. It is vital these declines are halted as the African Penguin is the only penguin species found in Africa and lives nowhere else but along the coast of South Africa and Namibia. The African Penguin breeds at 27 sites on the coast of South Africa and Namibia. The largest colonies are at Dassen and Robben Islands on the west coast and St Croix Island on the south coast. Several colonies have shrunk to almost nothing, and one colony, at Lambert's Bay, went extinct when no pairs returned to breed in 2010.
7. The major threats to penguins include a lack of food, potential oiling from large-scale oil spills, predation by seals and egg and chick predation by gulls. In the past, they were affected by guano scraping on their breeding islands as well as egg collection.