



ENDANGERED. Weighing Penelope the penguin before attaching the tracking device is Dr Ross Wanless, head of BirdLife South Africa's seabird division, and Jenny Roberts, a masters student involved in the fieldwork and data for satellite tracking. Picture: Peter Chadwick.

Race to save the African penguins

DYING: 99% OF POPULATION LOST IN LAST 100 YEARS

» **Species is an early warning system for environmental threats.**

JeVanne Gibbs

With the African penguin population dropping at a rapid rate, environmentalists are racing against time to save the indigenous southern African seabird.

BirdLife SA's seabird division manager, Dr Ross Wanless, says the country's marine ecosystems are under threat and that they are the most poorly protected of all our ecosystems.

"Species such as the African penguin that play the role of an early warning system for environmental threats, are quickly declining in number," says Wanless.

"In order to effectively respond to this and other environmental issues, we need a pool of cross-disciplinary experts to keep our

ecosystems intact."

Wanless says this particular penguin is a custodian of the marine environment as it relies on very few species of fish which are the base of the food chain.

"Everything else in the ecosystem depends on those fish as well. So if the penguin is in trouble, it means the marine ecosystem is in trouble," he says.

Pollution, particularly oil spills, loss of habitat and lack of control of fisheries pose a major threat to these seabirds.

Wanless says about 99% of the African penguin population has been lost in the last 100 years.

BirdLife SA, the national partner organisation of BirdLife International, has embarked on several projects to increase awareness about the plight of the threatened seabirds. One of these projects involves placing small Geographical Positioning System (GPS) devices on new penguin parents on Dassen Island, north of Cape Town.

"It's the coolest tracking system, a tiny device weighing a couple of grams," says Wanless.

"At night when the bird is resting in the water, the device switches itself on, transmits sig-

nal to satellites, and we get the position of the bird.

"By understanding where they go and protecting those sites, we will hopefully restore balance to the ecosystem as a whole."

The research involves investigating the penguins' food foraging ranges and the constraints that they face during the breeding season.

These tracking devices are similar to a car's GPS navigation system, where they transmit positions to a network of satellites. This positional information is sent back to earth.

The data is accessed daily, which allows the project team to track the movements of the seabirds.

Wanless says that each device costs R30 000 and has a lifespan of about 100 days.

The Charl van der Merwe Trust provided the funds for 20 devices and covered the costs for satellite up-links.

The tracking project is an initiative from the Save our Seabirds Festival, which is one of Bird Life's major annual events that aims to raise public awareness of issues related to marine conservation.

Plight of the penguin

Penguin population

In the early 1900s there were several million pairs of penguins, by the 1950s this had decreased to 140 000. **Last year there were only 19 000 pairs.**

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We have lost two thirds of the African penguin population in the last 30 years.

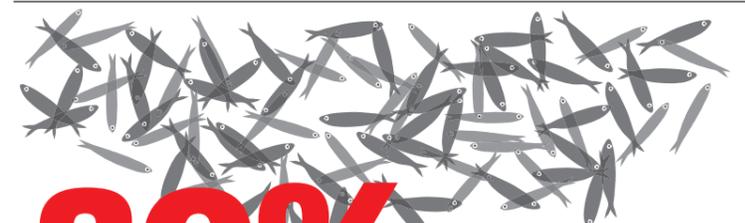


500km

Penguins can travel more than 500km to find enough food to bulk up before the moulting season. But it's getting harder to find food close to home.

The impact of commercial fishing

Penguins on the West Coast have to travel further than penguins on the East Coast.

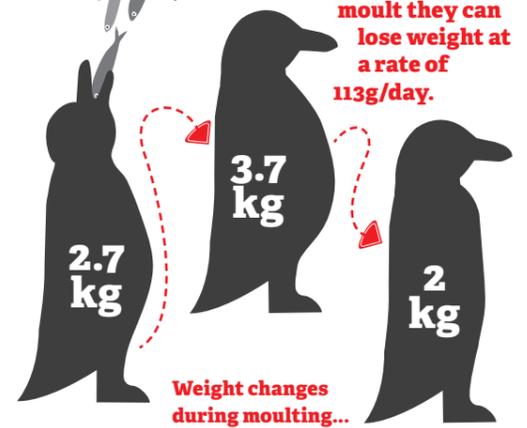


30%

Penguins have to increase their weight by 30% to cope with moulting. During the moulting they can lose weight at a rate of 113g/day.

Eat as much as you can

When they moult, penguins can lose up to 50% of their body weight. Sardines and anchovies are their favourite but they'll also eat mackerel, mullet and squid.



The Penguin Run

BirdLife South Africa has fitted five penguins with tracking devices to see how far they have to go to get their dinner.

They are currently running a race between the penguins ahead of moulting season which is due to start today.

Track and back your favourite on thepenguinrun.com

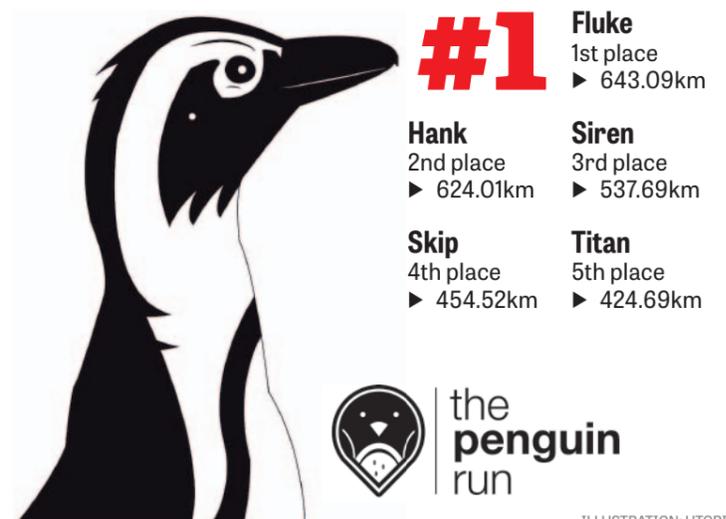


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SOURCE: BIRDLIFE.ORG.ZA