



Last Call - The African Penguin's Fight for Survival

**In partnership with Marine Dynamics
and the Dyer Island Conservation Trust**

Manar El Kebir

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Report 1

Episode 1: Past – A Legacy of Life by the Sea

The African penguin, *Spheniscus demersus*, is native only to the southern coast of South Africa and Namibia. They were formally described by scientists in the mid-18th century, cementing their identity as a species deeply rooted in the Cape’s maritime heritage. The African penguin is also known as the “jackass penguin” for its loud, braying call that resembles a donkey.

This investigation was carried out by Manar Elkebir, a Darwin Leader from Tunisia, as part of a broader effort to understand and communicate the African penguin’s decline. Field research was centered at the African Penguin & Seabird Sanctuary (APSS) in Gansbaai—a leading rehabilitation and conservation facility dedicated to seabirds—supported by on-site observations at Dyer Island and Betty’s Bay, two vital colonies along the Western Cape. These locations represent some of the last strongholds for the species, offering critical insight into the challenges African penguins face and the urgent need for conservation action.

Anna-Marie APSS-African Penguin & Seabird Sanctuary, Gansbaai veterinarian:

“We don’t have other penguins living in the area permanently. Occasionally, rockhoppers wash up in storms, but the African penguin is our main resident. They are local species with colonies only in South Africa and Namibia—nowhere else in the world.”



African penguin in Boulders Beach incubating its egg.

Facts about the iconic bird:

- African penguins lay two white eggs, incubated for 38–42 days.
- Both parents develop a bare patch of skin on their bellies to warm the eggs.
- After hatching, chicks go through three stages: P1 to P3, followed by blue, juvenile, and finally, adult (the iconic black and white “tuxedo”).

Xolani Lawo, senior bird rehabilitator at APSS:

“From hatchling to adult, it’s a tough journey. By 4 years, they reach sexual maturity and they choose a mate for life. But only after years of surviving at sea.”

African penguins hatch from eggs and are cared for by their parents until they fledge as chicks. They then spend up to two years at sea, returning as immatures to develop adult plumage.

Once a year, African penguins undergo a moulting process—a three-week period during which they shed and regrow their feathers. This transformation is vital, as their dense, waterproof feathers are essential for insulation and efficient swimming. However, moulting is a vulnerable time. Penguins cannot enter the ocean to feed during this phase, so they must fatten up beforehand to survive weeks without food. Often appearing scruffy and lethargic, moulting penguins stay on land, exposed to predators and the elements, making this natural cycle a critical and delicate stage in their lives.

African Penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*) at Betty’s Bay guarding its resting chick developing adult plumage.

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Photo taken by Manar Elkebir

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