

# African Penguin

*Spheniscus demersus*



**Lifespan:** 15 years (34 in captivity)

**Habitat:** coastal waters with temperatures between 5-20 degrees C (41-68 degrees F)

**Range:** south western coast of Africa within 40 km of the shore

**Preferred food:** sardines and anchovies

**Conservation status:** Critically endangered

## About

The African penguin is the only penguin on the African continent! It is also known as the black-footed or Jackass penguin due to its distinctive braying call and thrives in the nutrient-rich waters of the Benguela Current. The species breeds on 25 rocky islands and a few mainland sites along the southern African coast. African penguins are monogamous and typically reach breeding maturity between 3 and 6 years of age.

## Fun facts

- Spots on the chest and belly are individual to each bird.
- They can swim up to 100 km a day.
- They sleep in the water and only come ashore to breed and molt.
- African Penguins can shoot their poop up to 3 feet! Projectile defecation allows them to keep their nest clean while incubating eggs and raising chicks.

## Threats and conservation

Their population has **declined by 97%** within the last century and the species will be extinct in the wild by **2035** if we don't act now.

**Overfishing** has reduced fish stocks, leaving African Penguins hungry and more vulnerable to predation by seals. **Oil spills** damage their waterproof feathers, making it hard to swim, hunt, or stay warm—often leading to poisoning when they try to clean themselves.

**Disturbance** from people, boats, and drones can stress penguins, causing nest

abandonment or poor breeding success. **Climate change** worsens this by pushing fish farther from colonies, forcing penguins to travel longer distances to find food.

A recent outbreak of **avian influenza** has caused the death of many birds, adding to the pressures African penguins face. In the past, they were also **hunted for food** and their **eggs were collected**, further reducing their numbers. Another historic threat that continues to affect the species is **guano harvesting**. Once, penguins burrowed into thick guano to nest safely. After the guano was removed for fertilizer, they were left to nest in the open, exposing chicks to predators and harsh weather. This reduced breeding success and has contributed significantly to their population decline.

Conservation measures are implemented across South Africa and Namibia through **SANCCOB** (South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds), **NAMCOB** (Namibian Foundation for the Conservation of Seabirds) and **OCN** (Ocean Conservation Namibia).

## Vital role in ecosystems

**Penguins play a vital role in ocean ecosystems**—they keep fish populations balanced, support top predators, and help cycle nutrients between sea and land. Their decline signals broader ecosystem trouble. Beyond nature, their loss would also harm ecotourism in Namibia and South Africa, **threatening jobs and local economies** that depend on penguin-related tourism.

## How YOU can help

- **Choose sustainable seafood** – Apps like WWF-SASSI make it easy.
- **Ditch plastic** – Every bottle, bag or single use plastic swapped is one less threat.

- **Protect their homes** – Support MPAs & no-fishing zones.
- **Be a respectful tourist** – Keep your distance, skip the flash.
- **Report injured penguins** – Fast action saves lives.
- **Act on climate** – Small changes cause a big impact.
- **Spread the word** – Share their story, inspire change.



**GUIDELINES TO RESPONDING TO STRANDED SEABIRDS**

At NAMCOB, we are committed to protecting Namibia's marine and coastal biodiversity, with a special focus on seabird species. As first responders, we are prepared to address threats ranging from oil spills and habitat loss to harmful interactions with wildlife and human activity.

**DO'S ✓**

- Assess the Situation:** Determine if the bird is injured, exhausted, or simply disoriented.
- Seek Professional Help:** Contact NAMCOB First responders in respective areas. See contacts below.
- Document Encounters:** Record details such as date, location, species, and take footage which may assist with primary care.

**DON'TS ✗**

- Avoid Direct Contact:** Refrain from touching birds to prevent further harm, oil or bacteria transfer.
- Do Not Attempt to Feed:** Avoid feeding stranded seabirds, as improper nutrition can harm them.
- Don't Disturb Nesting Sites:** When observing seabirds, maintain a safe distance from nesting sites to avoid disturbing them.

**Did You Know?**

The Marine Resources Act 27 of 2000 provides for the conservation and management of marine and coastal resources, including seals and seabirds, with regard to their protection, rehabilitation and controlling seal harvesting.

Seabird rehabilitation involves long-term care in properly designed and permitted facilities by qualified staff; medical diagnosis and treatment; and the preparation and release of the birds back into the wild.

If you encounter a seabird in distress, please reach out to us immediately.

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