

Ornithological Observations



An electronic journal published by BirdLife South Africa and the Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town



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Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen

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Recommended citation format:

Waller LJ, Boersma PD, Leiden T, Underhill LG 2012. Close escape: Cape Cormorant entangled by sack. *Ornithological Observations*, Vol 3: 195-200

URL: <http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=58>

Published online: 28 September 2012

- ISSN 2219-0341 -



CLOSE ESCAPE: CAPE CORMORANT ENTANGLED BY SACK

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This short note continues a theme initiated by Oschadleus (2012), who reviewed the deaths of weavers entangled with the threads of discarded fabric woven into nests, and continued by Robinson *et al.* (2012) who reported on the death of a Bank Cormorant *Phalacrocorax neglectus* chick entangled by nylon fishing line which its parents had incorporated into its nest on Robben Island. The incident reported here took place on Dyer Island, Western Cape, South Africa – this island is one of South Africa's breeding platforms for seabirds. It is a CapeNature reserve and was selected as an Important Bird Area (Barnes 1999).

At 11:57 on 8 September 2012, while undertaking an inspection of part of the coastline of Dyer Island we encountered a Cape Cormorant *Phalacrocorax capensis* dragging a large brown object (Fig. 1). The bird dragged the object a distance of c. 15 m before was run after and caught. It was unable to fly.

Closer inspection revealed a sack made of closely woven plastic, with frayed edges (Fig. 2). The dry mass of sack was 80 g. When the material was wet, and the sack was not holding any water, its mass was 210 g. Its dimensions were 37 cm × 80 cm (Fig. 2). The average mass of a Cape Cormorant is about 1.2 kg (Berry 1976).

The sack was attached to the bird's right wing (Fig. 1). The sack must have been lost at sea, and the bird had become entangled with a loose thread which had pulled tight over the wrist of the wing. The attachment was clearly accidental, not deliberate. Fortunately, the wing was attached at the closed end of the sack (right hand end of sack in Fig. 2, see also Fig. 1), otherwise the drag caused by a full sack of water would have exhausted the bird rapidly.

We removed the sack by cutting through the thread that had encircled the wing (Fig. 3). There were no external injuries; the sack had not been attached to the bird for long enough to chafe through the skin and cause a wound. But there was extensive bruising on the leading edge of the wing along a 5 cm section of the wing where the bag was attached (Fig. 4). Although the feathers of the wing had been displaced, there was no obvious damage to them. The bird was thin; the keel was prominent. We took the decision to release the bird immediately, rather than put it through rehabilitation. It swam away strongly, but did not fly. We do not know the subsequent fate of the bird.

The sack is of a design widely used by poachers of abalone *Haliotis midae* along the coastline of the Western Cape, including around Dyer Island and the adjacent mainland. The illegal harvesting of abalone in South African coastal waters has been rife since the early 1990s (Hauck & Sweid 1999). There is of course no proof that this particular bag was discarded by abalone poachers.

This incident highlights once again the hazards that discarded objects cause in the marine environment.

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Acknowledgements

Dee Boersma's visit to South Africa was sponsored by a grant from the Visiting Scholars' Fund of the University of Cape Town to Les Underhill. The study visit to Dyer Island was undertaken as part of routine delivery of stores to the CapeNature wardens on the island. We are grateful to Deon Geldenhuys, CapeNature, for facilitating this visit.

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Fig 1 - Cape Cormorant on Dyer Island, with wing entangled in sack typical of those used by abalone poachers.

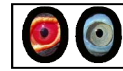


Fig 2 - The sack which had been attached to the Cape Cormorant. The rule is 50 cm in length.



Fig 3 - Detail of entanglement of Cape Cormorant on Dyer Island. A pair of scissors were used to cut the loop of plastic thread.



Fig 4 - After removal of the plastic thread from the cormorant, there was no open wound, but bruising and displacement of feathers.