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VAGRANT NORTHERN ROCKHOPPER PENGUIN AT SOETWATER BEACH, WESTERN CAPE

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An unusual penguin was discovered on a kelp lined beach at Soetwater Reserve (S34°09' E18°19'E) on 30 January 2013. The bird was soon identified as a Northern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes moseleyi* by the extent of black on the underside of its flippers and as an immature bird by the lack of long yellow head plumes. The penguin was showing obvious signs of active moult and had come ashore as it was therefore no longer waterproof. Vagrant penguins infrequently turn up on the South African coastline to moult (Cooper 1992), a process which normally takes around two weeks to finish. During this time they are vulnerable to terrestrial predators and are often in an already weakened state. Many of these vagrant penguins are found by beach-goers and taken to seabird rehabilitation centres such as SANCCOB where the chances of the birds returning to their respective breeding colonies are slim. Fortunately, SANCCOB was alerted by birdwatchers and the bird was not removed from the beach, instead an area was cordoned off to the public to limit stress to the bird. A readily "twitchable" individual, the penguin drew in birding enthusiasts from all over South Africa for several days. The penguin remained on Soetwater beach from 30 January until 03 February, during which time it moulted out most of its feathers, before thought to have returned to the sea.

Fig 1 - Northern Rockhopper Penguin at Soetwater. © Mike Buckham.

A further report of a Northern Rockhopper Penguin came from a beach in Onrus, Western Cape on the 19 February 2013, approximately 100 km east of Soetwater. This individual is thought to be the same as the Soetwater bird, as it was freshly moulted and photograph comparisons matched. The bird was seen for just one day before it was again thought to have headed out to sea.

Northern Rockhopper Penguins are considered rare vagrants to the southern African subregion (Ryan 2005), with this individual representing only the fourth record in a decade in southern Africa.

Fig 2 - Northern Rockhopper Penguin showing diagnostic bold black leading edge and extensive black tip on under-flipper. © Mike Buckham.

Previous records in recent years have been from Struisbaai (August 2009), Noordhoek (July 2008) and Bakoven, all in the Western Cape (February 2008) (Hardaker, 2013). Over almost a century there have only been approximately 50 records of both Northern and Southern Rockhopper Penguins[1] *E chrysocome* from almost the entire South African coastline. Most records constitute young Northern Rockhopper Penguins coming ashore mid-summer to moult (Cooper 1992).

[1] The Rockhopper Penguin complex was recently revised by Jouventin et al., (2006) and recognised as two full species *E chrysocome* and *E moseleyi*, previously thought to be subspecies. Banks et al. (2006) suggest *E c filholi* be further recognised as a full species.

Northern Rockhopper Penguins are listed by the IUCN as *Endangered* and are restricted to breeding on the islands of Tristan da Cunha, Gough, Amsterdam and St Paul. There is believed to be c. 230 000 pairs on Tristan da Cunha and Gough, and 24 000 and 9 000 on Amsterdam and St Paul (Birdlife International, 2012). Breeding takes place early September to October, with moult then occurring late January to mid-March. Failed breeders and juveniles will depart colonies earlier with moult occurring in December and January (Williams and Stone 1981). The Soetwater bird was most likely a young bird from an island in the Tristan da Cunha group which had gotten lost at sea and was forced to come ashore to moult, presumably after leaving the colony in December-January.

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