

# Ornithological Observations



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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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## KELP GULLS BREEDING IN MOUNTAIN FYNBOS

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The Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* is a versatile seabird that has benefited from human changes to coastal ecosystems, including agriculture, creation of wetlands and dumpsites (Crawford 2005). Crawford *et al.* (1982) provided a comprehensive survey of Kelp Gull breeding distribution in southern Africa during 1976-1981 when there were some 11,200 pairs. The population increased to at least 18,000 pairs by 2000 (Crawford 2005). Since then, the numbers breeding at offshore islands in the Western Cape have halved (Makhado *et al.* 2013), in part due to predation by Great White Pelicans *Pelecanus onocrotalus* (Mwema *et al.* 2010). However, this decrease has been offset by the formation of mainland colonies, often close to urban centres (e.g. a large colony of 1 250 pairs at Strandfontein, Ryan *et al.* 2013, and smaller colonies at Yzerfontein and Dwarskersbos). Once largely confined to the coast, they also have extended their range inland (Crawford 2005).

One inland site that Kelp Gulls have occupied is Steenbras Dam in the Hottentots Holland Mountains south of Gordon's Bay, which is unusual in being 350 m above sea level. Gulls have roosted on a 10 ha island (S34°11.0', E18°52.1') in the lower Steenbras Dam for several decades (Martin 2003). The island is densely covered in pine trees *Pinus radiata* (Ryan 2014), and when the dam level is high the

gulls roost in the trees (Martin 2003), appearing like egrets from a distance (Rob Martin pers. comm.). BMD suspected that they might breed on the island, but Rob Martin has not seen any chicks or other evidence of breeding. PGR visited the island on 14 December 2013 and found that it offers little open ground suitable for gull breeding, although depending on the dam level, the island's "beaches" could support some nests. There was one active gull nest (1 egg) and four empty nests on a small, rocky islet 450 m SE of the main island, and only 50 m offshore, but large numbers of gulls were breeding on low, rocky ridges and adjacent flat ground in open mountain fynbos approximately 150-200 m south of the dam at S 34°11.4', E 18°56.5'. There were at least 18 nests with eggs (11 one-egg clutches and seven two-egg clutches), two nests with eggs and newly hatched chicks (one two-egg and one three-egg clutch), and five nests with small, downy chicks. However, most chicks had already left their nests, with some almost ready to fly. Such chicks were hard to locate in the dense vegetation; at least 28 broods were found, but more almost certainly were overlooked. A count of nest sites suggested there were at least 120 nests, and perhaps 150-200 pairs in the colony. The preponderance of 1-egg clutches in the nests with eggs suggests that these might have been repeat breeding attempts and/or attempts by young, inexperienced birds.

Gulls were roosting on a nearby shoreline, but there was no evidence of foraging in the dam area; an observation supported by the prey remains scattered around the colony. The most abundant remains were cuttlefish (*Sepia*) "bones", with smaller numbers of crayfish *Jasus lalandii* exoskeletons, fish bones, chicken and large mammal bones (most clearly butchered). Scarce prey items included one marine crab leg and one keyhole limpet shell. There were also numerous plastic bags, and smaller numbers of pieces of paper, cardboard, foil, cloth and other plastic items. The dam area forms



part of a nature reserve that currently is closed to the public (Wittridge 2011) and offers few opportunities for scavenging; the birds presumably feed at sea and in adjacent coastal communities.

The closest distance to the sea from the colony is 3 km (NNW to Gordon's Bay), but on 14 December the birds were commuting west along the Steenbras River to the sea, a distance of roughly 6 km. This is not the farthest inland Kelp Gulls breed in southern Africa; they have been recorded up to 10 km inland in the Skeleton Coast (Crawford 2005), but it is farthest inland breeding site in South Africa, and certainly the highest elevation site (although other subspecies of Kelp Gulls in New Zealand and South America routinely breed at high elevations around inland lakes, e.g. Higgins and Davies 1996). What is perhaps most surprising about this colony is that the gulls appear to be able to rear chicks in an area easily accessed by several potentially serious terrestrial predators: Chacma Baboons *Papio ursinus*, Caracals *Felis caracal*, Honey Badgers *Mellivora capensis* and Leopards *Panthera pardus* (Wittridge 2011). The colony borders a remote part of the dam, far from any potential predator shielding resulting from human activities. It will be interesting to see if the colony can persist in the area. The limited extent of trampling and guano-induced die back of the vegetation within parts of the colony (Fig. 1) suggest that the birds have bred here for at most 1-2 seasons, and that for much of the colony this is the first year the area has been occupied.

### Acknowledgements

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**Fig 1** - Part of the Kelp Gull colony in mountain fynbos adjacent to Steenbras Dam. Note the guano staining and trampling in the left foreground resulting in local die back of fynbos vegetation. The pine-covered island in the background was the gulls' traditional roost site in Steenbras Dam.