

# Ornithological Observations



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



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.

**Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen**

---

## **FIRST AND FIRST: AFRICAN SPOONBILL *PLATALEA ALBA* OBSERVED BREEDING ON ROBBEN ISLAND**

**Arnold C vd Westhuizen, T Mario Leshoro, Eukene Rueda, Les G Underhill, Danél vd Westhuizen**

Recommended citation format:

**Van der Westhuizen AC, Leshoro TM, Rueda E, Underhill LG, Van der Westhuizen D 2014.** First and first: African Spoonbill *Platalea alba* observed breeding on Robben Island. *Ornithological Observations* Vol 5: 252-257.

URL: <http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=132>

Published online: 16 June 2014

**- ISSN 2219-0341 -**



## FIRST AND FIRST: AFRICAN SPOONBILL *PLATALEA ALBA* OBSERVED BREEDING ON ROB BEN ISLAND

Arnold C vd Westhuizen<sup>\*1</sup>, T Mario Leshoro<sup>2</sup>, Eukene Rueda<sup>1</sup>,  
Les G Underhill<sup>1</sup>, Danél vd Westhuizen<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Animal Demography Unit, Department of Biological Sciences,  
University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7700

<sup>2</sup> Robben Island Museum

<sup>3</sup> PO Box 400, Moorreesburg, 7310

\* Corresponding author: [acvdw@lantic.net](mailto:acvdw@lantic.net)

Robben Island (S33°48' E18°22'), the largest of the islands along the South African coast, is located in Table Bay. It is approximately 11 km north of Cape Town and 7 km from Bloubergstrand, the nearest mainland (De Villiers, 1971). The island is a World Heritage Site (RIM, 2006), and Important Bird Area (Barnes, 1998) and probably best known as the place where Nelson Mandela (past president of South Africa) was incarcerated as a political prisoner. However, the island is not just a cultural heritage site – it is habitat to a wealth of bird species, mammals and even reptiles (Brooke and Prins, 1986) – introduced alien species as well. Today these aliens are strictly managed in terms of the Robben Island Museum Environmental Management Program (RIEMP 2002).

The highest point on the island is Minto Hill (30.2 m a.s.l.) where the lighthouse is situated. The rest of the island is relatively flat and the perimeter of the island comprises rocky shores (boulders and sharp jagged slate bedrock) with a small sandy beach on the sheltered east coast just south of Murray's Bay Harbour. Robben Island is 507 ha in extent (Crawford and Dyer, 2000). The coastline is approximately 12 km long. The island is situated in the Fynbos Biome and vegetation types are classified as **FS 6** (Cape Flats Dune Strandveld)



**Fig 1** – Adult African Spoonbills at the nesting site in the heronry on the southern side of Robben Island – note the other species sharing the site: Crowned Cormorant, Sacred Ibis, Western Cattle Egret. © ACvdW

and **Azd 3** (Cape Seashore Vegetation) (Mucina and Rutherford, 2006). Due to centuries of human habitation and even exploitation the island and its vegetation have been altered, modified and transformed by introduction of exotic species – *Acacia cyclops*, *A. saligna*, *Myoporum serratum* and plantations of *Pinus pinaster* and *Eucalyptus* spp. These larger trees form the ideal habitat for colonial breeding bird species and heronries are formed in different parts of the island. Heronries shift to new sites every few seasons and different species share the site to breed and raise chicks. Crawford and Dyer (2000) state that "with the expansion of the urban environment around Cape Town, and the resultant loss of habitat for colonially breeding species, Robben Island has provided a sanctuary at which they breed." Robben Island thus became a safe refuge for colonial breeders which experienced too much disturbance on the mainland.



**Fig 2** – An adult African Spoonbill just above the nest site with some of the other species sharing the heronry in picture – Sacred Ibis, Western Cattle Egret and Little Egret. © ACvdW

Robben Island not only is a safe haven for colonial breeders, but provides breeding habitat for several threatened marine and coastal species. In 2010, Robben Island was host to a globally important (fourth largest) breeding colony of the African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus*, as well as significant numbers of Swift (Greater-crested) Tern *Sterna bergii*, Hartlaub's Gull *Larus hartlaubii*, African Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini*, Cape Cormorant *Phalacrocorax capensis* and the Bank Cormorant *P. neglectus* (Crawford *et al.* 1994; Crawford and Dyer, 2000; Sherley 2011).



**Fig 3** – One of the adult Spoonbills incubating. © ACvdW

In their booklet *Wildlife of Robben Island* Crawford and Dyer (2000) have compiled a list of 143 bird species that were observed or that bred on the island historically and up to the year 2000. This was the first formal list of bird species which occurred on the island in the past as well as of current species inhabiting Robben Island. Some of the species on this list became extinct on the island due to various reasons.

In 2011 Sherley *et al.* updated the Crawford-Dyer list of birds observed or breeding on Robben Island and 21 additional species were added to the list for a total of 164 species. Since 2011 another 2 species were added to the list. In 2012 a Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* was reported by Sherley and Robinson (Sherley and Robinson, 2012). The next new record for the island – a Black-



**Fig 4** – An adult African Spoonbill just after it has alighted from the mainland. It then proceeded to the nest where it fed chicks – 12.01.2013.  
© LG Underhill

winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* – was reported as wading in the Blue Stone Quarry on the north western shore of the island (Rueda and Sherley, 2013). These two new additions bring the "official" list of species observed on Robben Island to 166 species in total of which 55 species were recorded as breeding on the island at some time or another.

On 4 December 2012 around 11:30 TML alerted the team of the possible presence of a Spoonbill *Platalea alba* being present in the heronry on the southern side of the island - S33°49.145' E18°22.295' – 8 m a.s.l. On closer inspection 4 adult birds were observed (Fig 1 and 2) and it was established that at least one more bird was

incubating on a nest (Fig 3). This breeding attempt corresponded with recorded breeding elsewhere in the Western Cape (Aug to Dec) (Tarboton 2001; Tarboton 2011). The bird was sitting tight on the nest made of twigs, reeds and other material and lined with dry grass (Tarboton 2001; Barnes 2005; Tarboton 2011). The nest was in the branches of *Acacia cyclops* about 1.5 m above ground. To limit disturbance at the heronry, no closer inspection of the nest was made as the bird was sitting tight. Therefore no count or measurements of eggs were made at the time.

Only one nest could be accounted for with certainty. Several other species were breeding or rearing chicks at the site – Crowned Cormorant *Phalacrocorax coronatus*, Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*. The majority of birds in the heronry were African Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus* and these birds were continually leaving for the mainland to forage and coming in to feed their chicks. These observations correspond with other data on interspecific relationships (Anderson, 1997; Barnes 2005).

Breeding Spoonbills were monitored by regular counts at Rietvlei Wetland Reserve in Milnerton on the mainland, 12.5 km away from Robben Island (Harebottle, pers. comm.) In the 2013 breeding season the birds were not observed as breeding at their regular site at Rietvlei and observers were puzzled to where they would have gone to breed (Harebottle, pers. comm.). When breeding, spoonbills are more susceptible to disturbance by humans than most of the other species with which they share breeding sites (Hockey *et al.* 1989). At least one pair found a safe refuge to breed and rear chicks in the heronry on Robben Island.

This record represents two firsts – it was the first time that African



**Fig 5** – Three juvenile African Spoonbills photographed in the tree around the nest on 12.01.2013 – note the relatively short, dark bills. © E Rueda

Spoonbills were observed on Robben Island and it was the first observation of a breeding attempt of this species on the island as well. The official list of birds observed on the island now stands on 167.

The first confirmation of a successful breeding attempt was possible on 12 January 2013 when LGU observed an adult bird flying in from the mainland. It alighted in the branches a small distance from the nest and then proceeded towards the nest and started feeding chicks which could not be seen at the time. Later that same morning ER observed 3 chicks in the branches around the nest. Viewed for the



**Fig 6** – One of the fledgling African Spoonbill chicks – on 20.01.2013. Note the duller colour of the legs, lores and bill. Note the Crowned Cormorant and Sacred Ibis in the background. © E Rueda

first time, these chicks evidently were already quite large.

On 15 January 2013 ER observed the chicks outside the nest for the first time, walking about on the ground below the nest sites in the trees. The chicks fledged on 20 January 2013 when they were observed the last time by ER close to the nest site.

This successful breeding record brings the list of confirmed breeding species on Robben Island to 56.

African Spoonbills arrived and settled relatively late in the Western



Cape. At the beginning of the previous century it was "hardly known in the Cape Colony" (Stark and Slater, 1906). It was first recorded as breeding on the Berg River as late as 1957 (Wilson 1957; Blaker 1967; Siegfried 1968). It was established as a regular breeding species in the Western Cape by 1958-59 (Barnes 2005). Numbers increased during the 1900s due to the creation of artificial wetlands (Anderson, 1997; Barnes 2005).

Since the first record on Robben Island in the SABAP2 database, records have increased to 10 datasheets reporting the species. The current reporting rate for the species in the atlas pentad is 5.8 (n=171) (SABAP 2014). It would be interesting to monitor future breeding of the species on Robben Island.

- oo0oo -

## References

- Anderson MD 1997.** African Spoonbill *Platalea alba*. In Harrison JA, Allan DG, Underhill LG, Herremans M, Tree AJ, Parker V, Brown CJ. (eds) 1997. The atlas of Southern African Birds. Vol 1 – Non-passerines. Birdlife South Africa: Johannesburg.
- Barnes KN (ed.) 1998.** The Important Bird Areas of southern Africa. BirdLife South Africa: Johannesburg.
- Barnes KN 2005.** African Spoonbill *Platalea alba*. In Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan P (eds) 2005. Robert's birds of southern Africa – VIIth Edition. The John Voelcker Bird Book Fund: Cape Town.
- Blaker D 1967.** Spoonbills in the Western Cape. Ostrich 38:157-158
- Brooke RK, Prins AJ 1986.** Review of alien species on South African offshore islands. South African Journal of Antarctic Research 16: 102–109.
- Crawford RJM, Dyer BM 2000.** Wildlife of Robben Island, Bright Continent Guide 1. Avian Demography Unit: Cape Town.
- Crawford RJM, Dyer BM, Brooke RK 1994.** Breeding nomadism in southern African seabirds – constraints, causes and conservation. Ostrich 65: 231–246.
- De Villiers SA 1971.** Robben Island: Out of Reach, Out of Mind. A History of Robben Island. Struik: Cape Town.
- Hockey PAR, Underhill LG, Neatherway M, Ryan PG. 1989.** Atlas of the Birds of the Southwestern Cape. Cape Bird Club: Cape Town.
- Mucina L, Rutherford MC (eds). 2006.** The vegetation of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. South African National Biodiversity Institute, Pretoria.
- RIEMP 2002.** Robben Island Environmental Management Plan (RIEMP). CSIR Report No. ENV-S-C 2002-074.
- RIM 2006.** Integrated Conservation Management Plan (ICMP) for the Robben Island World Heritage Site. Robben Island Museum: Cape Town.
- Rueda E, Sherley RB 2013.** First observations of Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* on Robben Island. Ornithological Observations Vol 4: 24-26. <http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=79>
- SABAP2 2014.** The Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2. Animal Demography Unit, University of Cape Town. [www.sabap2.adu.org.za](http://www.sabap2.adu.org.za) (Accessed on 16 June 2014)
- Sherley RB, Dyer BM, Underhill LG, Leshoro TM 2011.** Birds occurring or breeding at Robben Island, South Africa, since 2000. Ornithological Observations Vol 2: 69-100. <http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=31>



---

**Sherley RB, Robinson KJ 2012.** First observation: Pied Avocet at Robben Island. Ornithological Observations Vol 3:100-101.  
<http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=48>

**Siegfried WR 1968** Spoonbills breeding at Stellenbosch. Ostrich 39:199

**Stark AC, Sclater WL 1906.** The fauna of South Africa: the birds of South Africa. Vol 4. Porter: London.

**Tarboton W 2001.** A guide to nests and eggs of Southern African Birds. Struik Publishers: Cape Town

**Tarboton W 2011.** Roberts Nests and Eggs of southern African Birds. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund: Cape Town.

**Wilson PJ 1957** Breeding of African Spoonbill *Platalea alba* (Scop.) in the South Western Cape. Ostrich 28:236