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DOUBLE BROODING ATTEMPT BY AFRICAN BLACK OYSTERCATCHERS ON CASTLE ROCK, KNYSNA

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The Lakes Bird Club, in the Knysna area, has been monitoring the breeding successes and failures of the African Black Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini* for a number of years. Their findings have been submitted to the Animal Demography Unit (ADU) annually for more than 16 years. I have been monitoring the four or five breeding pairs along the Brenton-on-Sea coastline for the last 5 years.

African Black Oystercatchers usually lay clutches of 2 eggs during the peak breeding season from November to March. Lost eggs or chicks that die very early on in the breeding season are replaced during the season. When a chick has been successfully raised it is very unusual for the breeding pair to lay another clutch of eggs (Hockey, 1995). However, reports have been received of double brooding (raising more than one clutch per season) during two consecutive years at Possession Island, off the Namibian coast (Leseberg, 2012). Nola Parsons has also observed this phenomenon at Koeberg in her research during the 2002/2003 season (Parsons 2006). Dane Pajmans reported double brooding at Soetwater during the 2012/2013 season. Another record comes from Betty's Bay during the 2012/2013 season, but this record is unconfirmed (Pajmans *in litt.*). The Castle Rock double brooding is therefore the 5th confirmed occurrence in Southern Africa.

Castle Rock, is a large rock jutting into the sea at the eastern end of



Fig 1 - Castle Rock showing A) position of African Black Oystercatcher nest site, B) Kelp Gull nest site and C) rock on beach to where the chick was moved.

the 5 km beach, stretching from Buffels Bay to Brenton-on-Sea, near Knysna, in the Western Cape. This site at S34° 04.496' E23° 01.193' is a known breeding site for a pair of African Black Oystercatchers (Fig 1).

Castle Rock is right next to the main swimming beach at Brenton-on-Sea and is a very popular fishing spot. It is visited by many fishermen and holiday makers during the holiday season. There is even a small ladder conveniently placed to enable people to gain access to the rock easily. It is therefore remarkable that this pair of African Black Oystercatchers have managed to raise a chick almost every year since I have been monitoring the birds. Their main enemies, apart



from the humans disturbing the breeding pair, are Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus*. The latter have a breeding site a mere few meters from the African Black Oystercatchers. Other birds in the vicinity are Cape Cormorants *Phalacrocorax capensis*, White-necked Ravens *Corvus albicollis* and Jackal Buzzards *Buteo rufofuscus*, but I have not observed them predated on the African Black Oystercatchers eggs or chicks. Dogs cannot get onto Castle Rock, unless they are carried, and other predators, such as mongooses will find it difficult to get to the nest site. Access, even to humans, to the rock is only possible during low tide.

Food is abundant, with the surrounding rocks covered in indigenous black mussels *Choromytilus meridionalis* and introduced Mediterranean mussels *Mytilus galloprovincialis*, as well as various limpets, oysters and other molluscs. White mussels *Donax serra* are found on the adjacent beach.

Table 1: Breeding statistics for the Castle Rock breeding pair during the past 4 seasons.

Season	Number of clutches laid	Number of chicks hatched	Number of chicks survived
2009/2010	4 (2 eggs each)	5	0
2010/2011	2 (2 eggs each) 2 (1 egg each)	1	1
2011/2012	3 (5 eggs in total)	1	1
2012/2013	1 (1 egg)	1	1



Fig 2 – Nest with three eggs on Castle Rock on 13 November 2013.

On 1 November 2013 I noticed that the birds were flying repeatedly up onto a pinnacle on the rock, giving the impression that they were establishing a nest. On 19 November I counted 3 eggs in the nest (Fig 2). On 13 December 2013 only one egg remained. The birds were not too upset by my presence close to the nest. The solitary egg stayed in the nest until 23 December. However, I heard the typical warning call that African Black Oystercatchers use to alert chicks of danger. This led me to believe that there was a chick somewhere on the rock. I did not want to search too hard for the chick as there were many people on the beach and I did not want to draw attention to the birds.



Fig 3 – Adult and chick feeding next to Castle Rock – 8 February 2014.

On 31 December 2013 I noticed the birds have moved off Castle Rock itself and were sitting against the cliff on a large rock next to the beach. On 15 January 2014 I observed an almost fully fledged chick emerging from a crevice in that rock. From the dates of my observations I assume that this chick hatched in early December 2013, but was so well hidden that no-one had noticed it. I also assume that the egg which remained in the nest was abandoned, but I do not know what happened to the other egg.

I continued to watch the chick learning how to feed on the rock shelf around Castle Rock, and then on 4 February 2014 saw that the breeding pair was flying repeatedly up onto Castle Rock itself again. The birds became highly upset when I approached Castle Rock. When I climbed up onto the rock I saw two more eggs in the same

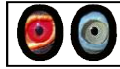
nest used previously. On the same day I also noticed the now almost fully grown chick emerging from a crevice in the rock on the beach. It moved onto the rock shelf and was clearly being taught how to feed by one of the adult birds. The other adult was back on the nest on Castle Rock and continued incubating the new clutch of eggs.

I returned on 8 February 2014 – by now the two eggs in the nest have disappeared. Both adults were feeding on the rocks with the now almost fully grown chick (Fig 3). I can only assume that the parent birds did not pay enough attention to the new eggs and that they got predated on by the Kelp Gulls.

It was considered whether the eggs could have belonged to one of the other African Black Oystercatcher pairs in the Brenton-on-Sea area. This is unlikely as pairs are very territorial and the closest pair to Castle Rock was seen feeding on the beach at the same time about 1 km to the west. The closest pair towards the east is both ringed and therefore easily recognisable.

Keeping the latest observations in mind (Koeberg, Soetwater and now Brenton-on-Sea), it may be possible that double brooding is more common than previously thought, as it can be easily overlooked on the higher density breeding sites. Future research may look at factors contributing to certain pairs double brooding within a single season, as well as the resultant effect on offspring numbers. Current oystercatcher monitors should therefore take extra care to record potential double broods and publish the results.

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