

# Namibia Coastal/Marine Bird News 10

Newsletter of the Namibia Coastal/Marine Bird Working Group

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*Ed: We would like to thank the GEF Small Grants Programme for funding newsletters 1 to 10.*

## ALBATROSS CHICKS KILLED BY PLASTIC POLLUTION

**Chris Jordan**, Seattle (October 2009)

[http://www.chrisjordan.com/current\\_set2.php?id=11](http://www.chrisjordan.com/current_set2.php?id=11)

*These photographs (right) of albatross chicks were made on Midway Atoll, a tiny stretch of sand and coral near the middle of the North Pacific. The nesting babies are fed bellies-full of plastic by their parents, who soar out over the vast polluted ocean collecting what looks to them like food to bring back to their young. On this diet of human trash, every year tens of thousands of albatross chicks die on Midway from starvation, toxicity, and choking.*

*To document this phenomenon as faithfully as possible, none of the plastic in any of these photographs was moved, placed, manipulated, arranged, or altered in any way. These images depict the untouched stomach contents of baby birds in one of the world's most remote marine sanctuaries, more than 2000 miles from the nearest continent.*

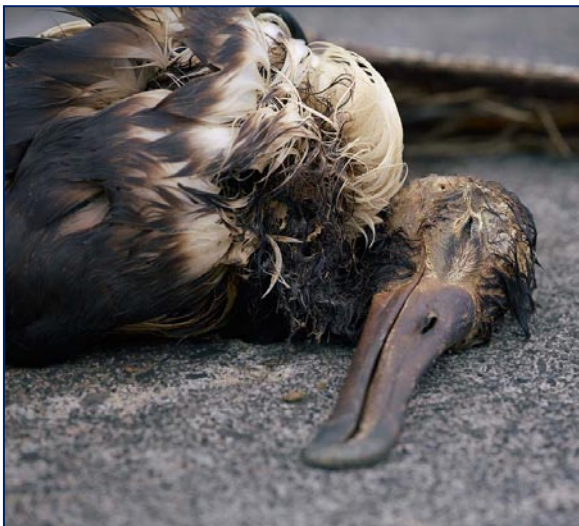
What makes albatross chicks so susceptible to this kind of mortality? *Roberts VII* provides some interesting insights into albatross ecology. These huge birds commonly scavenge on the open ocean, feeding by surface-seizing as well as diving. The diet of breeding birds includes squid, fish, crustaceans, jellyfish and carrion. Albatrosses regularly follow trawlers and scavenge from the nets; for example, 40% of the diet of the Shy Albatross is made up of trawler bycatch and offal. Foraging may also take place at night. Coupled with the increasing amounts of human trash (much of it plastic - and much of which floats), all of these factors add up to a recipe for disaster, as the floating plastic items could easily be mistaken for food. The Laysan Albatross is known to consume plastic litter regularly, stunting the growth of chicks fed large plastic loads. As can be seen in the photographs on pp1-2, this practice can also result in the death of albatross chicks.



On a diet of human trash, every year tens of thousands of albatross chicks die on Midway Atoll (near the middle of the Pacific Ocean) from starvation, toxicity, and choking (photos <http://www.chrisjordan.com>)

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For previous issues see [http://www.nacoma.org.na/Our\\_Coast/FaunaFlora.htm](http://www.nacoma.org.na/Our_Coast/FaunaFlora.htm) (bottom of page) and [www.nnf.org.na/coastalbirds.htm](http://www.nnf.org.na/coastalbirds.htm)





More albatross chick mortalities on Midway Atoll due to plastic pollution  
(photos <http://www.chrisjordan.com>)

## ***What can be done?***

Some of the plastic pollution that kills albatross chicks may originate from our own shores. More than ever, we need to reduce plastic pollution; promote awareness; recycle/reduce; promote the economic value of plastic for recycling; take a bag when visiting the coast and pick up plastic (and other) trash – every little bit helps.

Susann Kinghorn (email [susannkinghorn@gmail.com](mailto:susannkinghorn@gmail.com)) comments: *I always carry a bag with me during my morning walk along the Swakop River to collect some rubbish. Most rubbish - apart from plastic - are cigarettes and bottles containing some or other alcoholic beverage. I have made this collecting of garbage an interesting project and study in order to keep sane and away from becoming bitter as a result of human behaviour.*

Swakopmund Municipality is to be commended for embarking upon *Recycling Project: Lighthouse*, which has the following objectives:

- To produce a by-law that will guide the implementation of a levy per plastic shopping bag issued.
- To reduce the negative effects of plastic bags and other pollutants on the environment.
- To raise awareness amongst the public of Swakopmund.
- To encourage the public to recycle.
- To implement the necessary measures to promote recycling.
- To get the buy-in of all retail shops.
- To use 50% of the funds generated through the sales of plastic bags as a donation towards the Environmental Fund that will be managed by the Council.
- To design and manufacture recycling depots and to place them at suitable areas in Swakopmund.

(*Swakopmunder Lightbeams, Sept. 2009, p8*).

For more information on recycling in Namibia, do a Google search on "Recycling Namibia". Recycling agencies in Okahandja include Plastic Packaging and Namibia Polymer Recycling. On the coast, West Coast Recycling takes in plastic (including water bottles) for recycling and has depots in both Walvis Bay and Swakopmund (Tel. 064 200-900, email [jlemmer@mweb.com.na](mailto:jlemmer@mweb.com.na)).

## ***The Albatross Task Force***

[www.nnf.org.na/NNF\\_pages/albatross.htm](http://www.nnf.org.na/NNF_pages/albatross.htm);  
[www.savethealbatross.net](http://www.savethealbatross.net).

The Albatross Task Force is an international initiative working in the southern oceans from southern Africa, South America and Australia. It is the first global team of technicians placed in seabird bycatch hotspots to work at-sea and on-shore with the fishing industry and to demonstrate measures to reduce incidental mortality of seabirds in longline and trawl fisheries. In Namibia, BirdLife South Africa has been working in partnership with the Namibia Nature Foundation and the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources for the past two years, to monitor and mitigate the impacts of long-line and trawl fishing on albatrosses, petrels and other non-target species in Namibian waters.



Imagine trying to count this mass of birds, roosting and flying at the mouth of the Walvis Bay Lagoon – let alone 115 934 birds, the total number counted at the Walvis Bay wetlands on 16-17/1/2010. This is where planning, experience, dedication, enthusiasm – and possibly a certain amount of madness – come into play. **Linda Millington**, who comes all the way from Virginia, USA to participate in the counts each year, shares some of her photographs (see story on p4).

## WALVIS BAY LAGOON NEWS

### Summer bird count

**Peter Bridgeford**, for Coastal and Environmental Trust of Namibia, email [pmbridge@iway.na](mailto:pmbridge@iway.na)

Another successful bird count was completed on 16 & 17/1/2010. Many thanks to all who participated, especially the people who drove all the way from Windhoek. Thanks to those of you who used your vehicles, some drove through salt water a metre deep (not that I believe them), others through the slush in the salt works.

To our sponsors, many who have been supporting CETN with the count for many, many years, a special word of thanks. Also to Gail Wearne, who made all the lovely food. Our sponsors: Namib Marine Services supplied the boat to transport counters, Probst Bakery donated brötchens and a meeting place, Radio Electronics made sure we had good comms, Walvis bay Salt Refiners allowed us unhindered access to their property and donated funds for the food, Buccaneers Squash Club for allowing us to use their club and Namibia Breweries supplied the vital liquid refreshment and Wilderness Safaris helped with transport and sent their staff all the way from the capital.

So, until next time, many thanks to one and all for a very pleasant weekend and the positive and cheerful atmosphere.

The total count was **115,934 birds** (full list available on request). This includes 18 507 Greater Flamingo, 2 617 Lesser Flamingo, 360 Great White Pelican, 49 Damara Tern, 309 African Black Oystercatcher, 10 008 Black-necked Grebe, 4 731 Pied Avocet, 3034 Cape Teal and 26 441 Common/Arctic Tern.



Top: The counters come from all walks of life; Saturday's team gathers for lunch at the Lookout (photo Gail Wearne)

Bottom: Peter Bridgeford (front right), who has taken over the organization of the counts from the late Keith Wearne, and some of his counters (photo Linda Millington)



***The Walvis Bay bird counts – one of the best experiences an American birder can have in Namibia***

**Linda Millington**, email [millington.linda@gmail.com](mailto:millington.linda@gmail.com)

I knew that I had to get back to Namibia from a Christmas visit to the U.S. in time for the Walvis Bay mid-summer bird count – my 4<sup>th</sup> in the five years I have lived here. It was something I did not want to miss! It is a thrill to be amidst the thousands of birds that fill the lagoon, the vast tidal mudflats, and the beaches. The settings are spectacular. Elegant avocets, spinning phalaropes, swirling terns, flamingos that flash peachy-pink and black wings as they take to the sky, fur seals, and jackals are all part of the ever-changing canvas.

Birding skills are challenged. Finding that unusual bird or counting a sea of flamingos or a dark shadow that is thousands of tiny waders can be daunting tasks. We work hard trudging across the mudflats and traversing the salt pans in search of birds, but we enjoy ourselves too. The counts begin Saturday with a jovial reunion of birders at Probst Bakery. Many of us don't see each other except for the counts and we greet each other like long-lost friends and catch up over coffee and brötchens. There are the delicious and much appreciated lunches provided by the wonderful Gail Wearne – baskets brimming with homemade jam and bread, brötchens and all sorts of fillings, and beer at the hide on Saturday, and Sunday's delicious buffet at her home.

Most important, our surveys play a vital role in protecting and conserving this beautiful and critical habitat – the most important wetland for migratory birds in southern Africa. These biannual counts that we are part of have been conducted by the Coastal Environmental Trust of Namibia since 1994.

Each year I leave – sunburned, windblown, tired – but totally exhilarated and looking ahead to the next count. However, my next count might be a few years away as I am moving back to the U.S. in April. Still, I look forward to returning for what I consider to be one of the best experiences an American birder can have in Namibia.

← Photographs on left (top to bottom) by Linda Millington: 1 Long-standing counters John Paterson, Verna Hasse and Mabel Wilson; 2 Driving through the slush at the salt works; 3 Cheerful workers at the oyster farm; 4 & 5 Masses of terns, and flamingos (bottom), at the mouth of the lagoon; Top right: Linda in action at NamibRand Nature Reserve (*Ann Scott*)

## Comments on the Walvis Bay Harbour assessment

Dr Rob Simmons, FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, email Rob.Simmons@uct.ac.za

The EIA assessment for the Namport Container Terminal Extension is being conducted by Enviro Dynamics, contact person Carla Biewenga (email carla@envirod.com). The draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and the Specialist Reports are available at the following link:  
<http://www.namport.com.na/content/show.php?m=17>.

**22/1/2010** As the previous state ornithologist for Namibia I spent much time monitoring Walvis Bay with the help of Keith Wearne and other birders.

Walvis Bay faces many challenges, some man-made and some natural. It is the premier wetland in southern Africa for migrant and resident wetland birds, which frequently number well over 100 000 birds. The lagoon is the most sensitive of these areas and holds high densities of flamingos, waders and egrets (as well as dolphins). All of this has been well documented and led to the site being designated an internationally Important Bird Area (IBA), with details in Simmons *et al.* (2001). It is, as you probably know, still monitored and with Holger Kolberg and Rod Braby we are assessing the numbers and trends in numbers of wetland birds at Walvis Bay and Sandwich Harbour.

I understand that a large Harbour development with a very long wall is to be built close to the mouth of the lagoon. This is very worrying given that the tidal reach in the lagoon will surely be affected and potentially increase the sedimentation of the lagoon. This has the real potential of reducing the habitat available for birds in this IBA.

I therefore not only wish to register as a concerned IAP but also strongly recommend that: (i) all the mitigation measures for this development are taken on board and incorporated into the final design- should it go ahead; (ii) that the hydro-dynamic model that grounds this study be thoroughly reviewed by an independent expert.

The danger exists that if this model is wrong then a major proportion of the Walvis IBA will be reduced to a sand flat and be lost to the wetland birds that depend upon it.

## VISITING THE PERUVIAN TERN STERNA LORATA, THE DAMARA TERN'S CLOSEST RELATIVE, IN CHILE

Justine Braby email justine.braby@gmail.com

After a lengthy application process, the University of Cape Town Travel Grant awarded me the funding to visit the University of Antofagasta in Chile. The aim of this visit was to collaborate with the Gaviotin Chico Project (to us known as the Peruvian Tern Project) on the similarities and differences between the Peruvian Tern *Sterna lorata* and the Damara Tern *Sterna balaenarum*. I was given the opportunity to join the research team out in the Peruvian Tern breeding grounds where the Atacama Desert meets the Humboldt Current, a system very similar to ours in Namibia. Monitoring methods were similar to the methods used on the Damara Tern at the central breeding colonies of Namibia, however conservation measures were interestingly different. The biggest colony of breeding Peruvian Terns is found within an area marked for industrial development, known as the Pampa de Mejillones, some of which has already begun. To prevent some of this development within the densest areas of breeding, the University of Antofagasta, the municipality of Mejillones and various other conservation authorities have instituted a foundation dedicated holistically to the protection of the species within the Pampa de Mejillones. This foundation consists of rangers and fundraisers who network, create funding, and liaise with the scientists at the University of Antofagasta regarding monitoring progress reports of every season (so far there have been two seasons of formal monitoring for the foundation). I joined the monitoring team on their daily activities which included finding nests, finding chicks at nests and measuring them at each visit, and staying in a hide observing chick behaviour continuously. The similarities between the Peruvian Tern and the Damara Tern are uncanny, from the calls they make, the behaviour of chicks and adults, to the morphology of adults and especially chicks. Even their breeding ecology is almost the same, with the exception of the Damara Tern's unique one-egg clutch adaptation.

During my time in Chile I gave two presentations to various stakeholders in the protection of the Peruvian Tern and the Damara Tern. The trip was an overall success and both the Chileans and I took home valuable lessons, primarily in the conservation of our special little seabirds.



Working on the Peruvian Tern (photos: top Carlos Guerra, bottom (L to R) Justine Braby, Christian Guerra, Justine Braby)

## NEWSFLASHES AND PHOTO GALLERY

### Swakop River Mouth bird counts

Mark Boorman email felix@mweb.com.na

**17/11/09** Surprise of the count was a Glossy Ibis. The Harlaub's Gulls weren't too impressed and kept mobbing it. Last seen it had taken flight and was heading in the direction of Walvis Bay.

Count includes 180 birds of 21 species; 80 Hartlaub's Gull, 5 Greater Flamingo, 1 Glossy Ibis

**14/12/09** The mouth is drying up rapidly and would benefit greatly from preferably fresh, but also sea- water, replenishment.

Count includes 92 birds of 18 species; 20 Hartlaub's Gull, 7 Greater Flamingo

**19/1/2010** The mouth could really do with some water. Let's hope some of the inland rains manage to get carried through. The bushes on the bank look like a giant toilet with toilet paper strewn everywhere and more tracks than necessary.

Count includes 134 birds of 18 species; 7 Greater Flamingo, 43 Hartlaub's Gull

### Aerial survey of the Namib coast

Chris Nel, Living Desert Adventures

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Web: www.livingdesertnamibia.com

**22/12/09** Today Rod Braby and myself did an aerial survey of the Namib Coastline. The results of this survey were shocking. The coastline is so destroyed that it is beyond description ... at one stage Rod and myself started laughing as we both realized we were looking at things from the wrong point of view. Instead of looking for tracks on the gravel plains we were looking for gravel plains between the tracks ...

Look at the garbage piled up to half a metre against the toilet at Mile 8 and scattered all around (below). Bait boxes, beer bottles, heaps of discarded nylon and plastics all over the place. Nearly every bush along the coastline has a Totem pole built from a variety of alcohol bottles and garbage as a reminder of where Johnny caught the big one yesterday.

So in rounding off – will this letter make a difference?



### Trapping of Kelp Gull

Sandra Dantu email felix@mweb.com.na / namringers@yahoo.com

**13/1/2010** Attached is a picture of a Kelp Gull (above) we've just released at the sewage works. It was brought to us by MFMR employees who found it in Walvis Bay, with a fish hook in its mouth. The hook was attached to a stone by a length of nylon line. The obvious inference is that someone used a baited hook to trap it. Similar traps have been found near the Mile 4 salt works, with Cape Cormorants having been trapped. On closer inspection it could be seen that the hook had already penetrated the throat and was protruding through the skin beneath the chin. It was a simple matter of cutting off the barb with side-side-cutters and pulling the rest of the hook back out.

### African Black Oystercatchers breed close to railway line

Rob Simmons email Rob.Simmons@uct.ac.za

**5/1/2010** I've been photographing African Black Oystercatchers breeding on the railway line in Glencairn (Western Cape, SA) this morning (above) ... what with no trains till sea level returns to normal, we may see some success! The nest was about 3m off the railway line on the sea side but there was no space left - it was about 2ft from the sea-side embankment. They have successfully raised 2 young and now they've moved them down onto the rocks below - and out of my sight! The train to Simon's Town has mercifully been stopped, because the line is being undermined in two different areas.

