

## SANCCOB's AMAZING RESCUE MISSION.

by **Lindsey Macdonald.**



*Photo: Lindsey Macdonald.*

“Thanks, guys, you’re amazing.”

At 8am every day for the past six weeks over 40 people - staff, interns and volunteers – have gathered for a morning briefing at SANCCOB’s Table View seabird rescue centre. After reminders on COVID security the daily tasks are distributed. We are warned again and again that if these birds become tame, the rescue operation will have failed.

On Monday 11th January, ranger Andile Mdluli was conducting a regular patrol on Robben Island when he noticed that almost all the island's thousands of adult Cape Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax capensis*) had flown. Unprotected, their chicks in their nests were being picked off by predators.

The next day the largest seabird rescue in 20 years brought together teams from SANCCOB, Robben Island Museum, Two Oceans Aquarium and the National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI) to transport hundreds of chicks. They arrived at SANCCOB emaciated and dehydrated. “Those first days we were here from dawn until 11pm,” said one long-term volunteer.

Around 170 more chicks arrived 10 days later from Jutten Island. And there were still chicks from the earlier illegal dumping in Simon’s Town, the subject of legal action.

Sadly, some of the chicks were too ill to survive. But around 1200 continue to grow strong.

Researchers are still to conclude why these chicks were abandoned, but lack of fish because of years of over-fishing and climate change is the most plausible explanation.

“Cape Cormorants feed mainly on anchovy (and to a smaller extent on sardines) and these small pelagic fish species are at very low levels at the moment. We are seeing dramatic population declines in all seabird species that rely on these fish species; the African Penguin, the Cape Gannet and Cape Cormorant are all listed as Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and lack of sufficient food is the primary factor for the most recent declines observed,” explained Dr Katta Ludynia, SANCCOB’s Research Manager. The latest IUCN estimate of 2010-2014 puts the RSA population of Cape Cormorants at 57,000 breeding pairs, of a world population of around 234,000 individual birds.

The chicks are weighed and monitored by vets regularly. Their pens and pools are scrubbed daily. At first the chicks were fed fish ‘gloop’ (simulating parents’ food) and hydrating fluid via syringes. Within days they were all ringed with help from DEFF and the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, so the birds can be tracked after release.

Now, in mid-February, virtually all the rescued chicks are free feeding, swimming three times a day and flexing their developing wings. To avoid imprinting and taming, the birds are now fed by people wearing amorphous black masks, dresses and gumboots.



*Photo: Lindsey Mcdonald*

The numbers have strained the holding capacity at SANCCOB with every space fully used for the cormorants as well as the centre’s other patients, rescued seabirds including Cape Gannets, Kelp Gulls, African Penguins and a Southern Giant Petrel. Of course, the vitally important ‘routine’ summer work of raising African Penguin chicks also continues.

The amount of work has strained staff capacity but regular appeals for volunteers have proved fruitful. The majority are young people local to Table View, matric students, undergraduate and graduate students, all with an interest in conservation. Others include a retired virologist, also a few CBC members, people who’ve lost their jobs due to COVID, and several of SANCCOB’s first responders from around the coast.

It is hard physical labour: scrubbing the pen walls and floors, hosing down the mats, cleaning the dividers (toothbrushes are useful for this!), washing the fish plates and other equipment, defrosting

and cutting up fish, preparing the syringes, while at all times keeping everything disinfected. Of great importance is the team of local residents who are daily taking away dirty towels and return them clean and dry, relieving the strain on the laundry.

Welcome donations have included a purpose-built aviary behind the centre, provided by Ultra Pro Roofing & Waterproofing, and the black outfits provided by the Fabric Centre in Newlands and Flamingo Tailors, plus individuals and companies who have responded to public appeals for items to be donated. But donations of spotting scopes, binoculars and other household items to assist with cleaning, such as hard and soft bristle brooms, floor scrubbing brushes and other items mentioned on [SANCCOB wish list online](#) are still welcome. Everyone can sponsor a chick for R250.

The fact that the team has saved so many of these young Cormorants is a tribute to the skill, care, hard work of staff and volunteers and to their passion for their mission to save our endangered seabird species one bird at a time.