

Conservation Corner: April 2024

By Abigail Campbell

Globally, plastic production continues to increase, and with roughly half of all plastic going into single-use products, we might expect to see increasing amounts of plastic accumulating in the environment.



A large amount of plastic enters the ocean through heavily polluted rivers.

Photo: Abigail Campbell, at the Zandvlei Estuary

However, scientists measuring the amount of plastic floating at sea struggle to detect long-term changes due to the challenges of sampling sufficient area of ocean, given the high variation in plastic density linked to wind and wave action. Seabirds, which often mistake floating plastic for food, can be used to monitor changes in the amount of floating plastic.



Seabirds often follow long-line fishing boats, where they are susceptible to being caught as bycatch. White-chinned Petrels are the most frequently by-caught seabird in the Southern Ocean, giving access to many carcasses to examine for plastic.

Photo: Peter Ryan

A long-term dataset collected by Peter Ryan from the FitzPatrick Institute, containing the number and types of plastic ingested by White-chinned Petrels caught off the coast of South Africa gave us some insight in a study I completed in February.

Alarmingly, we found that over half of the 2,477 birds sampled contained plastic. Two birds analysed in the study had over 100 pieces of plastic in their gizzards (see below), and both of these occurrences happened for the first time in the last two years. An increasing trend in the amount of plastic being ingested was found, from an average of two pieces per bird in the 1980s to seven pieces on average today. This study is one of the few recent reports of increasing plastic loads in seabirds off the coast of South Africa.



White-chinned Petrel found with 122 pieces of plastic in its gizzard.

Photo: Abigail Campbell



Plastics found in the stomachs of White-chinned Petrels are counted and sorted into types (i.e. hard fragments, industrial pellets, bag fragments, and fibres.

Photo: Abigail Campbell

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<https://www.capebirdclub.org.za/conservation-corner/>