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African Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* in the Karoo

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Abstract

The first record of an African Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* in the Karoo is reported. The bird was a juvenile, and the observation was made c. 330 km from the coast. The date of the observation, 7 July 2024, was during a period of severe storms in the breeding range of the species in the Western Cape, South Africa, and it is likely that the juvenile oystercatcher was driven inland during its migration northwards from its natal territory. .

Observation

On 7 July 2024, a juvenile African Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* was observed near the farm Vissershok at 30.7158°S, 21.4501°E. Northern Cape, South Africa (Figure 1). This locality is in the Karoo, c. 70 km from Carnarvon. It is c. 330 km from the nearest point on the coastline. There are no wetlands in the vicinity, and the bird moved on rapidly. Its ultimate fate is unknown .

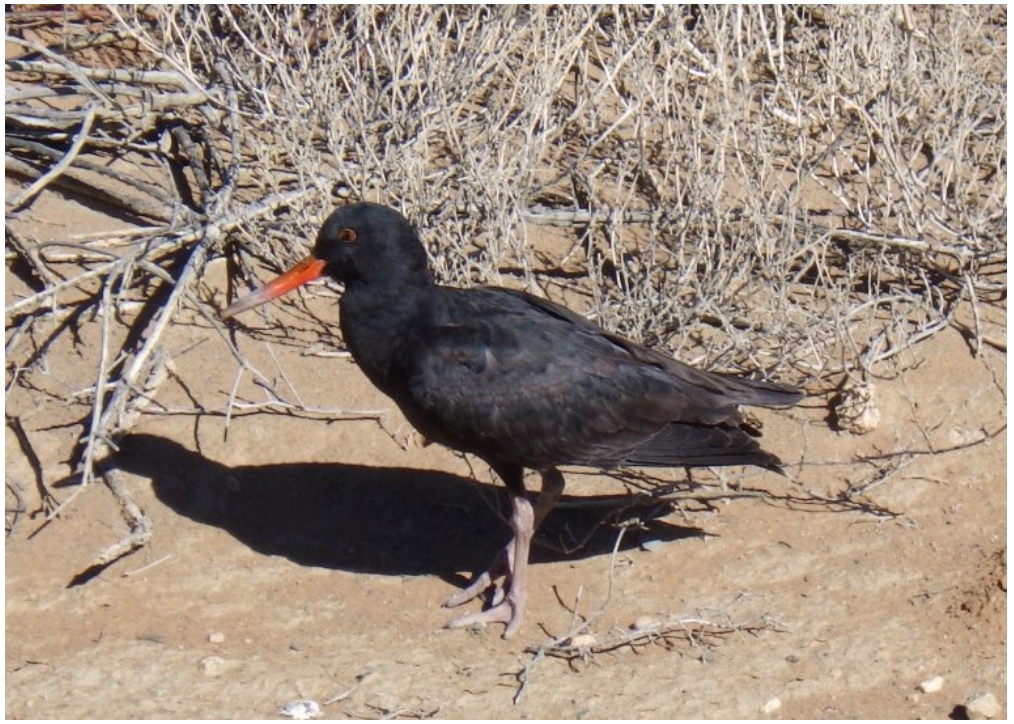

Figure 1: African Oystercatcher recorded in the Karoo on 7 July 2024. It is a juvenile from the 2023/24 breeding season, and therefore with a maximum age of about six months. The juvenile features are the lack of a red eye-ring, the brownish end to the bill, the dull pinkish-grey legs, and the off-black plumage. Photograph: Jannie du Toit. BirdPix record 289148.

Discussion

Prior to this observation, there have been no records of African Oystercatcher away from the coastline (Underhill1997, Hockey et al. 2005, SABAP2 unpubl. data). This species is associated exclusively with the narrow interface between ocean and land (Underhill 2014).

The African Oystercatcher is a well-studied species, and the information presented here is summarized by Hockey et al. (2003), Rao (2005), Ens & Underhill (2014), Underhill (2014), Kemper (2015) and Quintana et al. (2021). Oystercatchers breed along the coastline during the summer, with most chicks fledging from about January to April. Even though they can fly, the bills of fledglings are not strong enough to open mussels and limpets from the intertidal zone. Therefore, they spend about three months with their parents on their territories, acquiring the strength and also, probably, the skills to feed themselves. During this time, they are, at least in part, parent-fed. The parents ultimately evict the fledgling from its natal territory. The juveniles from the Western Cape mostly move northward to “nursery areas” in the Northern Cape, Namibia and as far north as Baia dos Tigres in southern Angola. Many individual juvenile oystercatchers do one northward migration in their life, often with a distance in excess of 1000 km, with the largest distance between the natal and nursery area being c. 2000 km. Oystercatchers have a strong flight; the Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* is a long distance migrant. It is likely that juvenile African Oystercatchers fly to the nursery areas in long hops.

There are few adult oystercatchers on the coastline of Namibia, where breeding is unsuccessful except on the offshore islands. Much of the coastline of Namibia, and the coastline of the Northern Cape north of the Olifants River is patrolled by Black-backed Jackals *Lupulella mesomelas*; they scavenge for washed-up seals and seabirds, and would find the eggs of any oystercatchers that attempt to breed. Adults incubating eggs on their nests just above the spring high tide level would also be vulnerable to predation by jackals. These nursery areas are thus attractive to young oystercatchers because they have no competition for food from adults.

It is possible that the juvenile African Oystercatcher observed in the Karoo on 8 July 2024 was on a northward migration flight from the Western Cape towards Namibia. This date was during a period of severe storms in the Western Cape and adjacent parts of the Northern Cape (pers. obs). It is thus possible that this bird got caught up in the winds and was driven hundreds of kilometres inland.

Although this appears to be the first incident of this nature in the winter rainfall region of South Africa, there are parallels in the summer rainfall region, where birds get caught up in tropical cyclones and get driven large distances inland. For example, Tarboton et al. (1987) summarized four occasions on which the Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatusis*, a tropical oceanic seabird, had been recorded in the former Transvaal, a landlocked area with no coastline. Each of these occasions followed the occurrence of a tropical cyclone in the Mozambique Channel.

A preliminary investigation suggested that the winter storms of the Western Cape do not make an impact on adult African Oystercatchers, even though the storms make the intertidal feeding areas inaccessible for several successive days (Underhill 2024). The paper also contained a comprehensive list of threats that have, through the decades, been suggested for this species. Here, we add a new potential threat, the impact of winter storms on juvenile oystercatchers.

Tippett & Underhill (2023) reported on an event in which hundreds of birds were killed during an extreme wind event in the Karoo. They listed a small selection of weather-related impacts on birds in southern Africa. They recommend that, in the light of predicted global climate change, observations on weather-related events which impact birds should be reported. This would facilitate a review of their frequency of occurrence. This journal, Biodiversity Observations (Underhill & Navarro 2023), provides a platform for such observations.

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