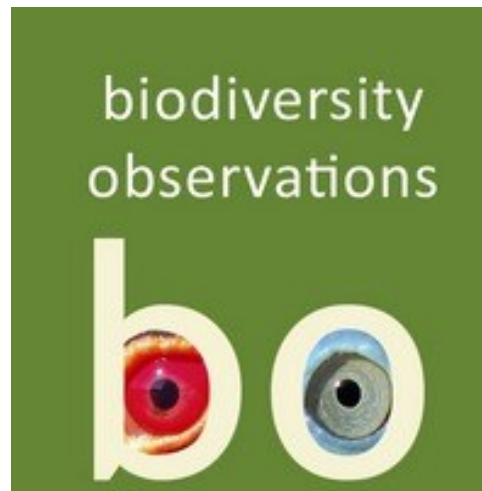


Impact of Pied Crows *Corvus albus* at Malgas, Jutten, Dassen and Robben Islands, Western Cape, South Africa

Bruce M Dyer



Dyer BM 2025. Impact of Pied Crows *Corvus albus* at Malgas, Jutten, Dassen and Robben Islands, Western Cape, South Africa. Biodiversity Observations 15: 129–132.

27 October 2025

DOI: 10.15641/bo.1959

ORNITHOLOGY

Impact of Pied Crows *Corvus albus* at Malgas, Jutten, Dassen and Robben Islands, Western Cape, South Africa

Bruce M Dyer

22 Zeeland Crescent, Table View, South Africa 7441

bruce.dyer8@gmail.com

Abstract

Pied Crows *Corvus albus* were first observed on Robben Island in 1987, on Dassen Island in 1997, on Malgas Island in October 2008, and on Jutten Island in 2011. On both Malgas and Jutten Islands, pairs of Pied Crows bred in disused guano sheds. Prey items were collected, identified and counted; they were mainly eggs of seabird species in threat categories. On both Jutten and Malgas Islands the recommended strategy is to eliminate nest sites for Pied Crows on the islands, and on the adjacent mainland. Dassen and Robben Islands are relatively far from the mainland, and a culling strategy is recommended, especially because these islands have important breeding colonies of the Critically Endangered African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus*.

Introduction

Numbers of Pied Crows *Corvus albus* in the Swartland and West Coast regions of the Western Cape, South Africa, have increased, with many areas showing a 50% increase in bird atlas reporting rates (Jenkins & van Zyl 2020). There is a growing concern over the impact of these crows on biodiversity, with a particular focus on the impact on tortoise populations (Fincham & Lambrechts 2014, Fincham et al. 2015, Durá i Franch 2017). This note provides observations of the impact of Pied Crows at four of the offshore islands of the Western Cape, Malgas, Jutten, Dassen and Robben Islands.

Observation

During a career spanning 43 years, from 1978 to 2021, I frequently visited all the offshore islands of the Western Cape undertaking seabird monitoring (e.g. Crawford et al. 2007a, b, Crawford et al. 2009). In addition to the seabird fieldwork, I recorded and published observations on many other components of biodiversity (e.g. Crawford & Dyer 2000, Venter et al. 2002, Underhill et al. 2009, Leshoro et al. 2010, Sherley et al. 2011).

During many days of fieldwork ringing the chicks of Hartlaub's Gulls *Chroicocephalus hartlaubii* on Robben Island between 1968 and 1981 (Underhill & Underhill 1986), Pied Crows were never observed (Les G Underhill pers. comm). I first observed them on the island in 1987. They were listed as "rare" in the first attempt at a comprehensive species list of the birds of the island (Petersen & Tripp 1995), but were considered a "common visitor" five years later (Crawford & Dyer 2020). This status was repeated a decade later, with the additional quantitative information that Pied Crows had been recorded on 87% of bird atlas checklists submitted between August 2007 and January 2011 (Sherley et al. 2011). Pied Crows have been recorded at Dassen Island since 1997 (Whittington & Wolfaardt 1999), and on Malgas Island from October 2008 and on Jutten Island from 2011 (pers. obs).

I first observed the breeding of Pied Crows on Malgas Island in 2012, and on Jutten Island in 2015. Both islands have multiple buildings,

dating back to the guano era, but have not had permanent human occupation for several decades. The buildings are not maintained, and many are in various stages of disrepair. On these two islands, the crows bred in disused guano sheds. The floors of the sheds were an accumulation of guano, planks and general rubble. The remains of the predated food items lay on the floor over much of the area.

I collected the items, identified them to species whenever possible, counted them and then disposed of them so that they would not be counted again on the next visit. I did 10 clearings of the shed on Malgas Island between October 2012 and October 2020, and five on Jutten Island between October 2015 and February 2022.

On Dassen Island, the Pied Crows had a nest on the lighthouse in October 1998 (Whittington & Wolfaardt 1999). Prey items were collected in the immediate vicinity of the lighthouse. Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus*, abundant on Dassen Island, were never observed to drop their prey items here, but used flat rocks for this purpose. On Robben Island, in November 2015, prey items were collected along a section of Cornelia Road, one of the roads through an interior section of the island, seldom used by Kelp Gulls.

On Malgas Island, the estimated total number of prey items was 510, and on Jutten Island, it was 379 (Table 1). The vast majority of prey items consisted of eggs, mainly cormorants, which breed in colonies on the island.

It is salutary that the impact of the Pied Crows on Malgas and Jutten Islands was mainly on seabird species in threat categories. It is therefore appropriate to consider measures to reduce the impact of this predation. Culling is an inappropriate solution because these two islands are less than 1 km from the coast, and are therefore likely to be recolonized from the mainland. The action that should be explored is the denial of nest sites. This would involve blocking the access to buildings through missing doors and broken windows. In addition, potential nest sites (such as disused telephone poles and broken windpumps) on the adjacent mainland should be removed (Underhill 2025); this ought to reduce the number of visiting Pied Crows.

Dassen Island and Robben Island are 9 km and 7 km from the nearest mainland respectively (Table 1); ongoing culling strategies for Pied Crows at these islands are likely to be successful, because colonization will probably be a rare event. Both islands have colonies of African Penguins, a species classified as Critically Endangered (Sherley et al. 2024). Pied Crows on the offshore islands seem to have become egg specialists in terms of diet (Table 1). There are two incidents of penguin egg predation (Table 1), and it seems reckless to risk more. In addition, there have been incidents of tortoise predation of both Robben and Dassen Islands, and it appears unwise to allow situations such as those described by Fincham & Lambrechts (2014) to develop on them.

In conclusion, the recommended strategy on Jutten and Malgas Island is to eliminate nest sites for Pied Crows on the islands, and on the adjacent mainland. On Dassen and Robben Islands, a culling strategy is recommended, especially in the light of important breeding colonies of species in threat categories, in particular the African Penguin.

Acknowledgements

These observations were made while I was employed by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries & the Environment of the South African Government, but were not part of my official monitoring responsibilities. I am grateful for all the opportunities to travel to these and other offshore islands.

References

- Crawford RJM, Dyer BM** 2000. Wildlife of Robben Island. Bright Continent Guide 1. Avian Demography Unit, Cape Town.
- Crawford RJM, Dyer BM, Kemper J, Simmons RE, Upfold L** 2007a. Trends in numbers of Cape Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax capensis*) over a 50-year period, 1956–57 to 2006–07. *Emu* 107: 253–261.

Table 1. Estimated numbers of prey items of each species collected by Pied Crows on four offshore islands of the Western Cape, South Africa. The prey items consisted of eggs unless otherwise specified.

	Status	Malgas	Jutten	Dassen	Robben
Coordinates		33.05°S, 17.93°E	33.08°S, 17.96°E	33.42°S, 18.09°E	33.81°S, 18.37°E
Distance from mainland (km)		0.8	0.8	9	7
Species					
Angulate Tortoise <i>Chersina angulata</i>				2	3 juv
Leopard Tortoise <i>Stigmochelys pardalis</i>					1 juv
African Penguin <i>Spheniscus demersus</i>	Critically Endangered		1		1
Common Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Alien	1			1 adult
Speckled Pigeon <i>Columba guinea</i>			5		
Speckled Pigeon/Rock Dove <i>Columba</i> sp		95			
Crowned Cormorant <i>Microcarbo coronatus</i>	Vulnerable	23	13		
Cape Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax capensis</i>	Endangered	176	353		
Cape/Crowned Cormorant	Vul./End.	193			
Greater Crested Tern <i>Thalasseus bergii</i>		2			
Cape Gannet <i>Morus capensis</i>	Vulnerable	3			
Kelp Gull <i>Larus dominicanus</i>		1	2		
Egyptian Goose <i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		1	2		
African Sacred Ibis <i>Threskornis aethiopicus</i>		10			
Hadada Ibis <i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>			3		
African Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus moquini</i>					2
Helmeted Guineafowl <i>Numida meleagris</i>		1			2
Cape Spurfowl <i>Pernistis capensis</i>		1			20
Tern spp. Sternidae		3 wings			
Total		510	379	2	30

Crawford RJM, Underhill LG, Upfold L, Dyer BM 2007b. An altered carrying capacity of the Benguela upwelling ecosystem for African Penguins (*Spheniscus demersus*). ICES Journal of Marine Science 64: 570–576.

Crawford RJM, Underhill LG, Altwegg R, Dyer BM, Upfold L 2009. Trends in numbers of Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus* off western South Africa, 1978–2007. Ostrich 80:139–143.

Durá i Franch C 2017. Quantifying the level of predation on tortoises by Pied Crows in south western South Africa. Unpubl. MSc dissertation. University of Cape Town, Cape Town.

Fincham JE, Lambrechts N 2014. How many tortoises do a pair of Pied Crows need to kill to feed their chicks? Ornithological Observations 5: 135–138. Available online at <https://journals.uct.ac.za/index.php/BO/article/view/230>

Fincham JE, Visagie R, Underhill LG, Brooks M, Markus MB 2015. The impacts of Pied Crow *Corvus albus* on other species need to be determined. Ornithological Observations 6: 232–239. Available online at <https://journals.uct.ac.za/index.php/BO/article/view/291>

Jenkins A, van Zyl A 2020. Successful citizen or voracious vermin? What we know, what we don't know, and what we need to know to address the Pied Crow conundrum in South Africa. Avisense Consulting, Cape Town. Available online at <https://www.birdlife.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Pied-Crows-Biodiversity.pdf>

Leshoro TM, Underhill LG, Dyer BM 2010. First breeding record of feral Common Peacock *Pavo cristatus* in Africa. Ornithological Observations 1: 1–2.

Petersen W, Tripp M (eds) Birds of the southwestern Cape and where to watch them. Southern Birds 20. Southern African Ornithological Society and Cape Bird Club, Cape Town

Sherley RB, Dyer BM, Underhill LG, Leshoro TM 2011. Birds occurring or breeding at Robben Island, South Africa, since 2000. Ornithological Observations 2: 69–100.

Sherley RB, Makhado AB, Crawford RJ, Hagen C, Kemper J, Ludynia K, Masotla MJ, McInnes A, Pichegru L, Tom D, Upfold L 2024. The African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus* should be considered Critically Endangered. Ostrich 95: 181–187.

Underhill LG 2025. [Impact of Pied Crows *Corvus albus* on biodiversity in southwestern Africa. Academia Biology.](#)

Underhill LG, Sherley RB, Dyer BM, Crawford RJM 2009. Interactions between snakes and seabirds on Robben, Schaapen and Meeuw Islands, Western Cape Province, South Africa. Ostrich 80: 115–118.

Underhill LG, Underhill GD 1986. An analysis of the mortality and survival of Hartlaub's Gull. Ostrich 57: 216–223.

Venter A, Underhill LG, Whittington PA, Dyer BM 2002. Waders (Charadrii) and other shorebirds of Dyer Island, Western Cape, South Africa. Wader Study Group Bulletin 98: 20–24.

Whittington PW, Wolfaardt AC 1999. The avifauna of Dassen Island. Bird Numbers 8(2): 8–11.

*Paper edited by Les Underhill
Biodiversity and Development Institute*