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OYSTERCATCHER (*HAEMATOPUS MOQUINI*) CHICK FATALITY DUE TO DOGS

Dane M. Paijmans

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PREDATION

OYSTERCATCHER (*HAEMATOPUS MOQUINI*) CHICK FATALITY DUE TO DOGS

*Dane M. Paijmans**

DST/NRF Centre of Excellence, Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa

* Corresponding author: d.paijmans@gmail.com

African Black Oystercatcher (*Haematopus moquini*) chick fatalities occur due to a number of different factors. These include wave action, wind-driven sand storms, and predation by birds and wild mammals (Loewenthal 2007). The anthropogenic causes are related to excessive site disturbance which reduces parental foraging ability (Leseberg et al. 2000) and more direct fatalities as a result of unrestrained dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*) (Loewenthal 2007).

To reduce these anthropogenic effects resulting in chick deaths on Noordhoek Beach (34°07' S, 18°20' E), SANParks proclaimed the site between Klein Slangkopunt and the Kakapo shipwreck a restricted area (Fig. 1). As Noordhoek beach falls within the Table Mountain National Park, noncompliance may be enforced with a fine. This restriction is active over the African Black Oystercatchers breeding season (November-March) and, as it is not fenced off, it allows for visitors to walk within the high tide water mark as this has minimal effect on the breeding pairs (SANParks 2015). As of 2008 an additional permit is also required if you would like to take a restrained dog to this beach (SANParks 2015).

These restrictions have had little effect and until 2013 no record of them being enforced is noted (Mposo 2013). This was seen all too clearly over the 2012/13 breeding season as I monitored the breeding pairs at this site for the Oystercatcher Conservation Program (OCP). Within a few days of 10 February 2013, one of the pairs I was monitoring re-laid a clutch of two eggs after losing their one-egg clutch earlier that season. As the pairs on this breeding site rarely hatch any chicks (Paijmans 2014) this clutch failure was not a surprise. This is usually a result of regular flooding at spring tide and heavy predation (pers. obs.). Over the next few weeks I returned to the site as part of the study and on 7 March 2013 the two eggs were found to be freshly hatched, the chicks' bills still having 'egg tooths' (Fig. 2).

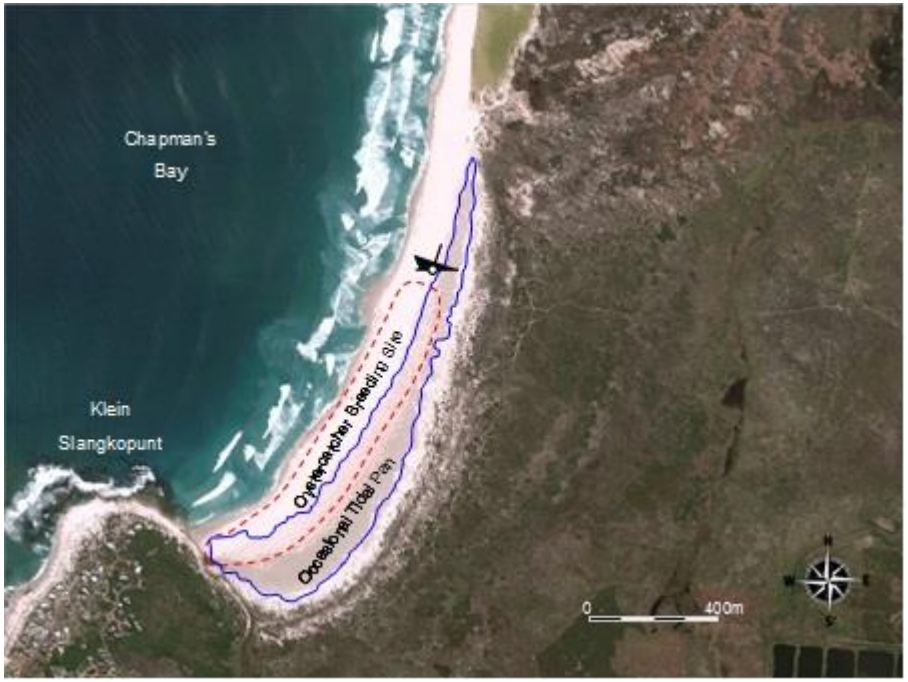

Fig 1. African Black Oystercatcher breeding site at Noordhoek beach. The area outlined in red (up to the shipwreck) is restricted.

Over the following two weeks the site was visited and the chicks were growing and healthy. As they had survived the initial week their

Fig 2. a) A clutch of African Black Oystercatcher eggs and, b) the pair of chicks shortly after hatching.

probability of success increased dramatically as they had made it through the most dangerous stage (Loewenthal 2007).

Sadly, however, on returning to the site on the 22 March 2013 I found one of the chicks freshly killed within the parents' territory. The chick was circled by dog tracks and had tears to its abdomen (Fig. 3). Shortly before arriving at the site I had seen two unrestrained dogs chasing various birds at the site. I did not attempt to find the other chick as both parents were very distressed. Once I had visited the rest of the breeding site I returned to attempt to find the remaining chick. There was no sign of the sibling and the deceased chick had been fed on by gulls. Further visits to the site resulted in the same outcome and the sibling was never seen again.

Although this site does not produce a large number of fledglings, it is necessary to enforce these seasonal restrictions to ensure the few breeding pairs present are offered the best chances of success and that avoidable deaths are prevented where possible.

Acknowledgements

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Fig 3. A freshly killed African Black Oystercatcher chick showing wounds on its abdomen.