

**FIRST BREEDING RECORDS OF KELP GULLS *LARUS DOMINICANUS VETULA*
AT ROB BEN ISLAND, WESTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA**

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The first recorded breeding of kelp gulls *Larus dominicanus vetula* on Robben Island, Western Cape, South Africa, took place in 2000, when five nests were recorded. In 2001, there were 15 nests and 29 fledglings. The initiation of breeding by kelp gulls on Robben Island is likely a response to the reduction of disturbance since the Robben Island Museum took control of the island.

Key words: First breeding, *Larus dominicanus*, Robben Island, South Africa

Kriel *et al.* (1980), in their review of breeding seabirds on Robben Island, Western Cape, South Africa, between 1949 and 1980, specifically noted that kelp gulls *Larus dominicanus vetula* had not been recorded breeding on the island over this period. Brooke (1983) deduced from early records that, although kelp gulls were present on the island in the 17th century, there was no proof that they bred there. Crawford and Dyer (2000) described the status of the species on Robben Island as a “common nonbreeding resident”. Kelp gulls are invariably present at Robben Island; during seven surveys of the birds along the shoreline of the island, made between 1977 and 2001, the median count was 120 birds (range 39–336; Underhill *et al.* 2001). Kelp gulls have bred at virtually all the other offshore islands of South Africa and Namibia, and at many sites along the coastline; by 1997, a total of 79 breeding localities had been recorded (Crawford *et al.* 1982, Crawford 1997d).

The first nests of the kelp gull on Robben Island were found by JC on 30 November 2000. Four nests were recorded in the quarry near the north-eastern corner of the island; three were empty and one contained three newly hatched young. One nest was found with three eggs on the western shoreline. No further monitoring of these nests was undertaken.

In 2001, the first kelp gull nest was found by KMC on 26 October, on a shell beach 100 m from the north-eastern quarry. It contained three eggs. By 15 November there were an additional 14 nests, all inside the quarry (three with three eggs, 10 with two and one with one). Two chicks from the first nest had fledged by 2 January 2002. The last chick had fledged by 15 February. The 15 nests containing 33 eggs produced 29 fledglings.

Kelp gulls scavenge at rubbish tips and take offal

discarded by fishing trawlers (Crawford 1997d). Both sources of food are available to kelp gulls breeding on Robben Island. The rubbish tips in the Greater Cape Town area are already exploited by the smaller Hartlaub’s gull *L. hartlaubii* when it breeds on the island (LGU pers. obs.), and many fishing trawlers pass within a few kilometres of the island. Food shortages are therefore an unlikely explanation of the lack of breeding by kelp gulls on Robben Island until 2000.

Crawford *et al.* (1982) noted that, at 33 of the 53 kelp gull colonies known at the time, the gulls were in association with colonies of African penguins *Spheniscus demersus*, cormorants or Cape gannets *Morus capensis*. Although there were large colonies of Cape cormorants *Phalacrocorax capensis* on Robben Island in the 17th century (Brooke 1983), there have been relatively small colonies of them on Robben Island since 1949, the start of the period reviewed by Kriel *et al.* (1980). African penguins bred in large numbers on Robben Island in the 17th century, but ceased to breed before 1800 (Brooke 1983). African penguins re-commenced breeding in 1984, and by 2000 the colony had grown to be the third largest of the species (Crawford *et al.* 2000). Kelp gulls take penguin eggs on Robben Island (pers. obs.). However, the peak of the penguin breeding season falls in midwinter, whereas kelp gulls breed in early to mid summer. It therefore seems unlikely that the penguin colony could have played a major role in the initiation of kelp gull breeding.

Crawford *et al.* (1982) suggested that the reason why kelp gulls had not bred on Robben Island was that “considerable human activity renders it unsuitable for breeding.” Disturbance levels have decreased since the island was taken over by the Robben Island

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Museum in 1996. Fewer people are now resident on the island than throughout the 19th and 20th centuries; in the prison era (1958–1996), a large staff and their families lived on the island, and in 1920, while it was a leper hospital, there were 2 000 people living on the island (Fish 1924, de Villiers 1971, Smith 1997). For many of the prison staff, angling and the associated collection of bait formed a major recreational activity (LGU pers. obs.). The operation of running a prison of necessity involved having staff continuously on duty; a by-product of this was that some staff were always off-duty. As a result, there were often people present on the coastline throughout the day, weekdays included. The reduction in disturbance is likely to be the key factor that has resulted in the initiation of breeding by kelp gulls on Robben Island.

It seems likely that numbers of breeding kelp gulls on Robben Island will increase rapidly. Trends in gull numbers, as well as the impact of their predation on other seabird species, should be carefully monitored, using current levels as a baseline. Kelp gulls are known predators of the eggs and small young of five Red Data Book species which breed on Robben Island: African penguin, bank cormorant *Phalacrocorax neglectus*, Cape cormorant, crowned cormorant *P. coronatus* and African black oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* (Crawford 1997a, b, c, Crawford and Whittington 1997, Martin 1997, Barnes 2000, BirdLife International 2000, Calf and Underhill 2002). It was on account of the presence of precisely these five species that Robben Island was designated an Important Bird Area (Barnes 1998). In addition, in some years the island supports the largest breeding colonies of two taxa endemic to southern Africa: Hartlaub's gull and swift tern *Sterna bergii bergii*. Although there is currently no need to implement control measures for kelp gulls on Robben Island, this is an option that might soon need to be considered, noting the problems associated with increases in numbers of the same species off New Zealand and Australia (Fordham 1967, Coulson and Coulson 1998).

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