

HISTORICAL RECORDS OF BIRDS ALONG THE NAMIB COAST

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Entscheidungen über den Naturschutz sollten aufgrund möglichst vieler Unterlagen getroffen werden. Zählungen der Vogelbevölkerung entlang der Namib Küste begannen erst in den 50er Jahren (Rand 1963), aber glücklicherweise gibt es ältere Aufzeichnungen, die Informationen über die Veränderung der Vogelbevölkerung geben können. Dieser Bericht bringt Zusammenhänge der Information über die Küstenvögel, enthalten in zwei historischen Aufzeichnungen - von Edens (1845) Besuch einiger Guano Inseln (Eden 1846) und Elers (1906) Besuch in dem heutigen Skelettküstenpark (Elers 1907).

Conservation decisions should be based on as broad a database as possible. Counts of bird populations along the Namib coast only began in the 1950s (Rand 1963) but fortunately there are some old records which provide information which can be used to gain some impression of the degree of change in bird populations. This note presents syntheses of the information on coastal birds contained in two historical records - Eden's 1845 visit to some of the guano islands (Eden 1846) and Elers 1906 visit to what is now the Skeleton Coast Park (Elers 1907).

COASTAL BIRDS OF THE SOUTHERN NAMIB COAST, 1846

Mr T.E. Eden, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, visited the southern Namib Coast in 1845 to explore for nitrate, valuable minerals or, in the final resort, guano. Eden was acting as a scientist trying to make an accurate report on what he found. Birds were of only passing interest for him and he writes at greater length on the minerals he found and on the composition of guano. Nevertheless, the information he presents on birds is important because, as a scientist, he took care not to mislead. He emphasises that the numbers of sea-birds on the guano islands are in thousand but not in millions. This cautious approach to overall numbers is impressive for a period when many travellers liked to exaggerate the numbers of animals seen to impress their readers.

Sailing from Liverpool in the 573 ton barque Jessie he reached Possession Island, 27°1'S 15°12'E, on May 8 1845. There he found

13 vessels, most of which were loading guano. He reports that Jackass Penguins Spheniscus demersus were numerous on the western coast of the island. Serious exploitation of the penguins were evidently underway as he remarks that the men on the island liked penguin eggs but penguin liver was preferred to penguin flesh! Possession Island is currently one of the few breeding localities of the Cape Gannet Morus capensis. Eden does not mention this species at Possession Island. This may be because his visit was after the breeding season when gannets seldom visit their breeding colonies. Alternatively the large scale guano scraping needed to supply the thirteen ships and the associated disturbance caused by large numbers of men on the island could have led the gannets to temporarily desert the island.

At the Long Islands he saw a boat loading guano in May. These islands are unsuitable for large colonies of seabirds but are now, and probably were then, the resort of Cape Fur Seals Arctocephalus pusillus (Rand 1963, pers. obs.) presumably the guano collected was largely seal and not seabird guano.

At Ichaboe Island, which he visited on June the first, Eden found Jackass Penguins "more numerous ... than at any other locality on this part of the coast" and estimated their number at 100,000 birds. Since 1956 the penguin population of this island has not exceeded 8,000 birds and was even smaller earlier in this century (Rand 1963, Shelton et al. 1984). Since Eden was not given to gross exaggeration this implies that there was a major decrease in the penguin population at Ichaboe Island at some time between 1845 and the latter part of the nineteenth century. Most probably this would result from the removal of the thick, up to twelve metres in parts, layer of guano from the island, into which the penguins formerly burrowed as well as the temporary presence at the island of up to 4,000 men to excavate it (Williams 1987a). Eden also remarks on the great numbers of "shags" at Ichaboe Island. This could refer to either or both the Cape Cormorant Phalacrocorax and the Bank Cormorant P. neglectus, the latter not formally identified as a distinct species at that time, and both of which still occur commonly at Ichaboe.

Eden's vessel did not stop at Mercury Island but he notes that there were two ships there and that in July a boat put into Walvis Bay with a large cargo of fresh penguin eggs which had been taken from this island.

Much of Eden's time was spent on or by Hollamsbird Island, 24°38'S 14°31'E, where the Jessie stayed for some months and loaded 200 tons of guano. While at Hollamsbird Eden saw Pintado Petrels Daption capense, Whitechinned Petrels Procellaria aequinoctialis and unspecified albatrosses. He observed that the Kelp Gulls Larus dominicanus used to fly up with "muscles" (sic) and then drop them onto rocks to crack them open, presumably the first description of this fascinating behaviour in the Kelp Gull. Most interesting is his report of the mass return of Cape Gannets from the north in September and how between

40,000 and 50,000 settled on the island although he was not sure whether they bred there. No gannets now breed at Hollamsbird Island but breeding did occur there until the late 1930s when it appears that increasing numbers of fur seals finally made the island uninhabitable for the gannets (Crawford et al. 1982).

In Lüderitzbucht he found flamingoes (species not differentiated) numerous and saw a few pelicans. Flamingoes still occur there but at least in the last eight years there have been no observations near Lüderitz of pelicans (SWA/Namibia Directorate of Nature Conservation unpublished records). The species concerned would have been the Great White Pelican Pelecanus onocrotalus which regularly occurs on parts of the Namib coast. The only alternative species, the Pinkbacked Pelican P. rufescens, is a freshwater species only very rarely found at the Namib coast and then only singly.

At Walvis Bay Eden recorded flamingoes in "multitudes" and estimated the overall population as between 30,000 and 40,000 birds of which there were many more Greater Flamingos Phoenicopterus ruber than Lesser Flamingos Phoenicopterus minor. This estimate indicates a total flamingo population remarkably like, though a little smaller than, the population which currently uses Walvis Bay (Williams 1987b). In addition he reports the presence of a few pelicans, numerous waders, some Common Waxbills Estrilda astrild, Pied Corws Corvus alba and some doves. The plant "Salt Samphire" (probably Salsola) was abundant implying there must at that time have been extensive saltmarsh in the area where none is now found.

On the return voyage to England the Jessie transported a number of Jackass Penguins, presumably with the intention of selling them to zoos or for taxidermic preparation for museums. Most of these unfortunate birds escaped at St Helena Island and the remainder off Ascension Island. This example serves to remind ornithologists of the need to exercise caution in considering records of this species far from the established range.

WHITEBREASTED CORMORANTS ON THE SKELETON COAST

In July 1906 George Elers set out from the settlement at Uis with a waggon and a cart to try to locate guano deposits near the coast which had been indicated in an earlier report by Lt. G. Hartmann, and to see if they were commercially exploitable. The following seabird observations were made by Elers and reported in a letter to his sponsors in December 1906. This letter is now held at the State Archive in Windhoek (Elers 1907).

A thin layer of guano was found on riverine deposits in the Hoanib Valley on the seaward side of the dune belt which crosses the water-course near its mouth. Though Elers saw no birds there he met an old bushman who admitted killing adult cormorants at or near this locality and taking their eggs. From the description given these were clearly

Whitebreasted Cormorants Phalacrocorax carbo. The Hoanib River, which is ephemeral, only infrequently breaks through the coastal dune belt to reach the sea and the break-through area may vary, so Eler's locality cannot be firmly pinpointed. Whitebreasted Cormorants currently breed at a reedfringed pool a little south of the present exit of the river from the dune-belt (pers. obs.).

At Rocky Point, then called Guano Point, Elers found about 200 tons of guano and some roosting Whitebreasted Cormorants. Since Blackbacked Jackal Canis mesomelas had access to the roost area, Eler's presumed that this prevented the cormorants from breeding there.

An hour's walk along the coast north of the Uniab River he found a colony of Whitebreasted Cormorants on the cliffs. There are no recent records of any cormorants breeding on these cliffs (R. Loutit pers. comm.). Possibly at the time of Eler's visit there were suitable ledges for cormorants to breed on but these have subsequently been eroded away.

In summing up his findings, Eler's states that although, because of the difficult conditions and the prolonged drought, he could not explore the whole coast he considered that no commercial guano deposits would be found north of Cape Cross. His basis for this statement was that he had seen few seabirds along the coast and particularly no flocks of the major guano producing species the Cape Cormorant. It is also evident from his remarks that in 1906 there were very few seabirds in the vicinity of Cape Cross - though it is not clear from his letter whether this observation is based on personal experience or was hearsay. Elers suggests that the birds which formerly occurred there had either moved south to Walvis Bay or to St Helena (presumably he meant the island and not the bay near Velddrift, South Africa).

COMMENTARY

Eden's account is of particular interest because, although unfortunately it does not ante-date the start of the guano industry, it gives an indication of the distribution and population of Jackass penguins when their populations probably remained near the pre-guano exploitation levels. The 100,000 penguins seen by Eden at Ichaboe Island even if not wholly accurate indicates a far larger population than the fewer than 8,000 penguins found there in the first proper census of November 1956 (Rand 1963). Eden's comment that Ichaboe Island supported by far the largest population of penguins must be compared with the 1956 situation when Rand (1963) found more than 33,000 pairs at Possession Island which was then the most important breeding locality along the Namib coast.

Eden's estimate of the number of flamingoes at Walvis Bay is of the same order of magnitude as current populations. This suggests

that conditions for flamingoes remain relatively unchanged by human development at Walvis Bay and at the hinterland breeding localities.

Eler's most significant observation is the lack of Cape Cormorants north of Cape Cross. This same situation has prevailed through most of the past twenty years and at least suggests that ecological conditions affecting these cormorants have remained similar.

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