

BETTY'S BAY'S NESTING SHOREBIRDS

African Oystercatchers and White-fronted Plovers nest and breed on the coastline. Kelp harvesting, people and dogs are some of the factors that influence the success of their breeding and negatively impact their populations for future generations to enjoy.

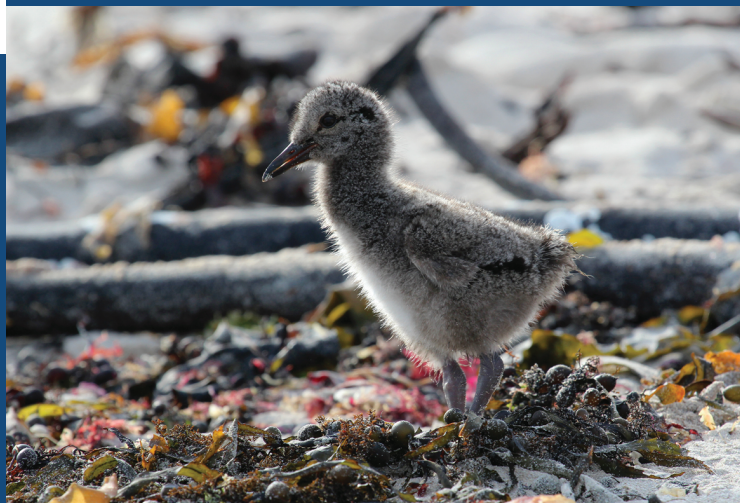


AFRICAN OYSTERCATCHERS

African Oystercatchers (*Haematopus moquini*) are black, about 45 cm tall with pink legs and feet, a long orange-red bill and red eyes with an orange eye ring. The chicks have a greyish plumage which ensures good camouflage in the kelp or next to rocks. They live on rocky and sandy shores along the Southern African coastline and use their bills to pry open mussels and limpets on the rocks and to probe in the sand for worms.



Breeding takes place between October and April, peaking in December and January. Their nests are simple shallow scrapes in the sand near the high-water mark. The females lay one to two eggs (sometimes three) and the eggs are incubated for about 28 to 32 days. The chicks fledge after about 35 days.



WHITE-FRONTED PLOVERS



White-fronted Plovers (*Charadrius marginatus*) are small birds that are sandy coloured on the back and white below. Their populations are decreasing. They live in groups or in solitary pairs along sandy coastlines. They eat small insects and crustaceans, and forage by running, stopping suddenly and then running again.



Breeding takes place throughout the year, peaking between September and November. The nests are simple scrapes in the sand above the high-water mark and the eggs are often covered with sand when the parent leaves the nest. There are usually one to two eggs which are incubated for about 27 to 30 days. The chicks fledge after about 35 days. Parents distract threats away from the eggs or chicks by acting as if they have a broken wing.



KITTLITZ'S PLOVERS

The Kittlitz's Plover (*Charadrius pecuarius*) is the same size as the White-fronted Plover, but it has darker markings and a more buff colour. It is less common along Betty's Bay beaches as they prefer estuaries such as the Rooisand Nature Reserve where they can be found in abundance. Nonetheless, every year there will be a few breeding pairs found along the beaches and rocky areas. As they prefer to nest in gravel and kelp patches just above the high tide mark, this unfortunately means that our foot paths are the perfect spot for them. Similar to the White-fronted Plover, the adults have egg burying habits and can put on a "broken wing" act when danger approaches.



THREATS TO THESE NESTING BIRDS

- **Natural predators in Betty's Bay**

These include ravens, crows, jackal buzzards, kelp gulls, mongooses, caracals and snakes.

- **Humans and dogs**

As these birds breed in the hot summer months, the parents incubate their eggs to keep them cool. When parent birds are scared off their nests by dogs or people (children or adults), the eggs are exposed to high temperatures which can be fatal within five minutes. The more times this happens, the less chance the eggs have of hatching.

Disturbing the nest can also make eggs and chicks more vulnerable to trampling and predators.

- **Kelp harvesting**

Harvesting of kelp undoubtedly negatively impacts on the birds' breeding success. Both the process of harvesting, when the birds are likely to be disturbed and their scrapes and eggs destroyed, and the aftermath of beaches denuded of kelp, are likely to be contributory. Removing kelp from the beaches disturbs the delicate ecological balance on the beaches. Our shore birds are just some of the casualties of that harvesting. The kelp that is washed up on our beaches provides important protection for the young vulnerable chicks, who are adept at hunkering down in the kelp when their parents give the signal.

Limiting the kelp harvesting permits to the months when the oystercatchers are not breeding, will not protect the breeding plovers during those periods. In addition, the kelp provides an important year round food source for birds with an abundance of sand hopper and kelp flies.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP PROTECT OUR SHOREBIRDS?

- **Be aware of the signs and stick markers indicating nesting areas.**



- **In the case of the oystercatcher, listen for their "alarm call" indicating the proximity of chicks.**
- **Give nests plenty of space in order not to scare parent birds off their eggs.**
- **Watch where you step to avoid standing on eggs or chicks. Ideally, walk along the wet sand close to the water's edge.**
- **Keep dogs leashed when walking on the beach as per the Bylaw.**

By following these simple guidelines, we can all help our nesting shorebirds to breed successfully.

Sections 6(2) and (3) of the Overstrand Municipality's bylaw on dogs and cats is clear both in context and literal interpretation: "No person may allow or cause to allow any dog to be in a public place unless it is kept on a leash." Note that public places include any beach, road, path, bridge, footpath or garden, and any other place under the control of the municipality.

Photos: Keith Hamilton

