

THE SUIDERSTRANDER

My African Black Oystercatcher Family

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Right: African Black Oystercatcher Eggs, vulnerable as the eggs are laid in a depression at the high water mark.

Left: Sketch of the African Black Oystercatcher or "Swarttobie" from: *Sommige Beskernde Voëls van Kaapland-1967 (KPA)*



Being no expert on birds or the Black Oystercatcher I base my findings on my observations during the past five seasons. I started studying the breeding behaviour of the Black Oystercatcher (Swarttobie, *Haematopus moquini*) quite by chance when, in December 2019, I found four breeding pairs on the coastline near the Agulhas National Park Rest Camp. All four nests had eggs, but because of the holiday season none of the eggs survived. To my big surprise in mid-January there were again eggs in all four nests. On February 3, I actually watched the first chick pecking its way out of its shell. Soon after five other chicks arrived, three single chicks and one twin pair. Because of the vulnerability of the small chicks I asked SANParks to make people aware of the existence of the chicks and asked them to put up signboards to inform the public to keep their dogs on leashes. I have put the signs up every year during breeding season since then.

The chicks are *precocial*, which means they can move from birth and hide when the parents warn of approaching danger. They are very well camouflaged when hiding amongst rocks and kelp. When I find chicks I never stay too long near them so as not to upset them or the parent too much. During the first week of season one the twin chicks disappeared so in the first season there were three chicks that survived to adulthood. I kept checking on the other chicks on a daily basis. After about three weeks their bills started turning red and after a month-and-a-half they started losing their grey feathers and turned black. At this stage the only way to distinguish between the chicks and the parents are their legs that in the young chicks are a grey colour. The chicks start flying short distances at about two months of age.

The Black Oystercatcher is very territorial and the breeding pair remains in the same area where they raised their chicks all year long until the next breeding season. In December 2020 there were again eggs in all nests. They lay the eggs just above the high-water mark and always close to the area where the nest was the previous year. This season there were two pairs of twins by the middle of December. The two other breeding pairs had no chicks. The parents are very active when they have two chicks because they have two mouths to feed. The two other breeding pairs again laid eggs mid-January, but again no chicks hatched. Again, to my surprise and quite by chance I found another two small chicks in the first week of May, belonging to the breeding pair that already raised two chicks earlier in the season. Six chicks survived this season. A contributing factor might have been the COVID lockdown meaning there were fewer people to disturb the eggs on the nests.

In the 2021 season I counted two surviving chicks. The 2022 season was disastrous. All the eggs on the nests in December disappeared. Then in January 2023 there was a very high spring tide and all the eggs that were on the nest then got carried away by the waves. So that season there were zero chicks. This past season again a lot of eggs disappeared from the nests or were washed away by high springtides. I had only one chick that survived to adulthood. I hope the trend of fewer chick each season does not prevail. It does not bode well for my breeding pairs and I have already observed that one breeding pair has moved away. If you see the eggs on the beach in December and January please do not touch or disturb them in any way. And please keep your dog on a leash when there are chicks.

Editors Note: Please be aware that breeding season is November to April each year. We need to be vigilant as we walk with our dogs and our feet, the eggs are well camouflaged just above the high water mark and are vulnerable. The African Black Oyster Catcher became critically endangered a few years ago. They have enjoyed a recovery as people are more aware but for now but for how long? The breeding pairs tell us when we come too near, they make a significant fuss, we need to listen to that.



Right: A little African Black Oyster Catcher Chick well disguised lying between the rocks. LEFT: Open nest of eggs just above the high water mark, eggs are about half the size of a chicken egg and mottled.

