BIRDS ON THE BRINK

Will this be the first penguin we will lose?

African penguins are facing an unprecedented decline; their numbers have dropped by 97 per cent in the last century. Francesca Page follows their plight and finds a population struggling to compete for food, space and attention in a society ignorant of how close these beloved birds are to extinction.

Words and photographs by Francesca Page





ABOVE: Thousands of sardines lie dead along Cape Town's beaches, highlighting the fragility of the marine ecosystem these penguins depend on.
LEFT: An African Penguin stands proudly after returning to shore from a day at sea in search of food.
PREVIOUS PAGE: An African Penguin navigates urban streets, adapting to a world of unfamiliar obstacles, including traffic and passing cars.

It's late August in Simon's Town, and spring is in the air. Pink flowers spill over garden walls and a warm evening breeze drifts through the streets. Underfoot, the pavement looks like a Jackson Pollock painting, splattered white with guano. It reads like a trail of signposts, and I followed it, camera in hand, towards a creature I had dreamed of meeting for years.

Locals call them nature's tuxedoed comedians, and a symbol of the Cape. Like an investigator, I pieced together the clues and found a pair beneath a parked car, pressed side by side next to the wheel. One nibbled gently at the other's neck, grooming its partner with the patience of a long-married couple. They often mate for life, and this pair, it felt, were expressing a long-held kinship.

We picture penguins on remote islands and sea ice, not on a street lined with palm trees. They seemed at ease, a few metres from my lens. But this was no postcard. Behind the charm, alarm bells were ringing. Something had gone wrong for them to be here. The penguins on that street were not there for the view. They were, in a sense, refugees.

My first ocean assignment as Storyteller in Residence for Oceanographic begins somewhere unexpected: not beneath the waves, but in the middle of an urban environment. Along South Africa's Cape Peninsula, where mountains and sprawling cities seem to melt into towering kelp forests. Here lives the critically endangered African penguin, a species whose future is far from certain, but hangs precariously now in the balance.

A century ago, the waters stretching from Namibia to South Africa were home to more than a million breeding pairs. Today, according to the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB), 8,000 remain, that's a decline of around 97 per cent. In October 2024, the IUCN made history in the worst possible way, listing the African penguin as Critically Endangered, the first penguin species on Earth to reach that status. As I set out to uncover what had gone wrong, I would learn something even more sobering: if the decline continues, the African penguin will be functionally extinct in the wild by 2035. So how did we let this happen to one of the most charismatic and utterly adorable sea birds on earth?

Over a warm drink, I put that question to Swati Thiyagarajan, environmental journalist and associate producer behind My Octopus Teacher, who has lived beside these penguins for nearly 15 years. The story starts, unexpectedly, with penguin poo. For thousands of years, seabirds layered southern Africa's rocky islands in guano, and penguins burrowed into it to lay their eggs, a warm, insulating blanket that kept every egg at the right temperature, hidden from predators overhead. Then, in the mid-1800s, its use as fertiliser was discovered. It became "white gold," Swati says, scraped off and shipped overseas until around 1990. Without it, birds were forced onto bare rock, where SANParks says they faced flooding, predators and heat stress.

Eggs were taken too, up to 48 per cent of those produced between the 1920s and mid-1950s, according to SANParks, with legal collection ending only in 1967. Swati calls it a "double whammy," eggs taken, the ground scraped away, leaving penguins homeless. The population fell from roughly a million breeding pairs in the 1920s to about 147,000 by 1956.

An island bird had lost its home. Then, after the Second World War, unregulated purse-seine fishing stripped



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African Penguins often mate for life. Beneath a parked car, a pair gently preened each other, revealing a quiet moment of lifelong partnership.

the sardines from southern Africa's waters, and hungry penguins went searching for food. False Bay, closed to purse-seine fishing, still had plenty. They settled at either end of it, in Simon's Town and at Stony Point, and the colonies grew from there.

This was an unexpected choice of home. African penguins traditionally nest on islands, close to food and away from predators. Adults raising chicks rarely travel more than 25-30 kilometres from the nest, making a reliable food supply nearby essential, one reason False Bay suited them. But the mainland brought new dangers: caracals, mongooses, dogs and cats, as well as roads, cars and, of course, people.

At Boulders Beach, these obstacles have also brought an unusual form of protection. SANParks has built walkways to manage tourists, deployed rangers to monitor, collect data and educate the public. Fences have been added to keep penguins off the roads, help that seems to be paying off: the June 2026 census recorded 790 breeding pairs, up 92 on the previous year, a result SANParks calls "a welcome sign of stability". One good year doesn't mean recovery though, and against the wider population decline, Boulders remains the exception.

What kept running through my mind was this: if nothing changes, I am witnessing extinction in real time. It isn't dramatic. It's silent and largely unseen, and here it was right in front of me.

Then, while I was in the field, I received a text from a local contact: "Get to Cape Town. There's a mass sardine die-off happening right now!" He sent me a photograph of thousands of sardines washing ashore. I jumped in the car and headed to what felt like a crime scene.

The beach glittered with silver, thousands of sardines lying still on the sand, and the smell of decay hung thick in the air. What washed up may be only a fraction. Die-offs were reported along both the South African and Namibian coasts, with no reliable way to know how many dead fish represent the wider population. Scientists believe pilchard herpesvirus, which attacks the gills and starves the fish of oxygen, is the most likely cause. SANCCOB has seen no rise in admissions linked to the die-off yet. Jacqueline du Plessis, resource developer at SANCCOB, admits it's too early to know. "We remain concerned that effects could become more apparent, particularly as penguins approach their annual moult," she tells me.

But the sardines were already slipping away. Climate change alters ocean temperatures and currents, Jacqueline explains, pushing prey further from shore. As the Benguela Current warms, sardines, which struggle above about 22°C, retreat to cooler water, beyond the reach of penguins built to hunt them, and specialised to eat almost

"WE PICTURE PENGUINS ON REMOTE ISLANDS AND SEA ICE. NOT ON A STREET LINED WITH PALM TREES"

MAIN IMAGE: A huddle of African Penguins waits beside a stop sign, illustrating how these resilient birds have adapted to sharing roads with people.
FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: Evening sunlight falls on two African Penguins as they preen each other after a long day at sea. | As darkness falls, African Penguins begin their nightly commute home, navigating pavements built by humans rather than natural paths. | Three African Penguins prepare to make their way home, passing a sewage pipe that highlights the human pressures surrounding their habitat. | A group of African Penguins waddles along urban streets on their daily journey home to their nests.











"EVERY EVENING, AS THE LIGHT DROPPED, PENGUINS GATHERED ON THE ROCKY SHORE AND SET OUT ON A SHARED PILGRIMAGE HOME."

As night falls and tourists retreat indoors, African Penguins emerge onto the streets, navigating traffic as they travel kilometres back to their burrows.







TOP: Jade from SANCCOB begins a health assessment of an African Penguin, examining its eyes and beak.
MIDDLE: A SANCCOB volunteer and Jade work together to assess an African Penguin's health before its release back into the wild.
BOTTOM: Juvenile African Penguins are released back into the wild, taking their first steps towards life in the ocean.

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nothing else. Over 80 per cent of the catch becomes fishmeal for farmed cattle and fish. Squeezed by warming seas, disease and our appetite, the penguins are fast running out of options.

These penguins are more than a story about one species. This coastline is an engine millions of years in the making, a web of life that perfected itself until it sat in balance. In the last hundred years, we have knocked it out of kilter. The African penguin is the canary in the coal mine: an indicator species, warning us that something is very wrong in our oceans, and that we are simply not paying attention.

Yet there is a glimpse of hope. A small group of people are paying such close attention that their work has become one of the last lines of defence for this species. This is the remarkable work of SANCCOB.

I spent a morning in SANCCOB's chick-rearing unit, where trained staff and volunteers provide round-the-clock care. Hatchlings are fed every three hours, and their health is checked constantly. I watched Mel lift a week-old chick from its towel-lined crate with the tenderness of a mother, then prepare its morning feed, a thick, fishy smoothie. The chick gulped it down.

"SANCCOB has admitted close to 800 African penguins since 1 January 2026," Jade Sookhoo, seabird rehabilitation manager, told me. "That's much higher than last year, when we admitted around 600." She explained that much of the rise came from abandoned eggs: 594 had been brought in for incubation, and 382 had hatched, compared with just 139 the previous year. To date, SANCCOB has released nearly 8,000 chicks and rescued over 1,000 eggs. SANCCOB confirms that threats include lack of food, maritime disturbances, pollution, predation, and climate change, though it's starvation that remains the biggest.

Before release, every penguin must pass Jade's health check. She examines their coat for waterproofing, checks their eyes, feet, beak and mouth. She listens to their heart, and if they clear this stage, they move on to a swimming test to confirm they're strong enough to survive at sea. Each penguin is fitted with a Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tag, a small transponder that lets SANCCOB track them after release. "It's critically important," Jade explains, "that the tags provide proof rehabilitated penguins go on to survive and breed just as well as those raised in the wild." Around 80 per cent of admitted penguins make it back to the ocean.

While performing a health check on a penguin, Jade looked at me and smiled as she listened to its heart. "Do you want to listen?" I took the stethoscope, half in disbelief, and pressed it to my ears. A heartbeat, fast, strong, unmistakably alive, filled my head, and I cried. It was the same heartbeat every person in that building was fighting to protect, and one I now felt a sense of responsibility for.

Back on the streets of Simon's Town that evening, I found myself listening differently. I closed my eyes and listened past the hum of traffic, people and construction work. Slowly, another sound rose through the noise: a comical chorus of brays, bouncing off the garden walls and rolling out across the bay. Strange and unforgettable, it's part donkey, part trumpet. The noises of the African penguin will live rent-free in my mind.

Night after night, for weeks, I returned to the same streets, and slowly a pattern emerged. Every evening, as the light dropped, penguins gathered on the rocky shore and set out on a shared pilgrimage home, some to nests just metres away, others to burrows a few kilometres up the streets. I had stumbled onto a penguin highway, and watching it night after night was remarkable: dozens of small, waddling commuters, moving through a town that was never built for them.

Not everyone, though, was watching the way I was. The longer I spent on these streets, the more a disconnect became apparent, a gap between the public and what was actually unfolding in front of them. At the tourist spots, I saw people observe nature through their phone screens, more concerned with a selfie beside a penguin than the animal itself. Around Boulders Beach, where a few stretches sit free of fences and raised walkways, I watched people reach out to touch the penguins, unaware of the panic and harassment they were causing. I recognised something in it: a need to be seen, a need to feel and a thousand small moments of ego playing out in front of a species running out of time. Some stood in the middle of the very highway I had been tracking, blocking a bird's path back to its burrow, and perhaps back to a hungry chick. It rarely came from cruelty. It all just came from not knowing.

That, more than anything, is what I took from Simon's Town. I met tourists who adored the penguins but had little to no idea how close they are to extinction. Awareness matters. Informed people become passionate people, and passionate people act. That is why I wanted to tell this story.

So I ask you: have my words and photographs moved you? The African penguin could become the first penguin species we lose, and it won't happen with a bang. It will happen silently, along coastlines like this one, while we look the other way.

This story needs shouting from the rooftops: at dinner tables, in classrooms, in group chats. If you're a storyteller reading this, they need you.

Somewhere in Simon's Town, a pair of penguins begins its daily journey up the streets to its urban home, unaware of how much rests on them. They can't tell their own story, but we can.

At one of Cape Town's busiest tourist spots, visitors experience African Penguins on their screens, often unaware of the species' precarious future.

This feature was written by Francesca Page - our current **Storyteller in Residence**

Meet Francesca