



FOCUS ON THE

AVIAN DEMOGRAPHY UNIT

The Avian Demography Unit undertakes bird research in partnership with BirdLife South Africa

The ADU at 10 years

1 December 2001 marks the official 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Avian Demography Unit (ADU) as a formally recognised research unit of the University of Cape Town. In 1991, the embryo ADU already had responsibility for the Southern African Bird Atlas Project and the South African Bird Ringing Unit, so the informal history is several years longer.

In fact, the concept on which the ADU is based can be traced to 1983, to a workshop on the establishment of a Bird Populations Data Bank for South Africa, held as part of a symposium run by the Southern African Ornithological Society (now BirdLife South Africa).

Highlights of activities at the ADU over the past 10 years have included:

- 1992 – Coordinated Waterbird Counts (CWAC) started in January, and midsummer and midwinter counts of waterbirds at wetlands have continued ever since. CWAC completed its first 10 years of counts in June 2001.
- 1993 – the ADU's graph and feather logo was designed, and it seems to have been effective in communicating the concept that the unit's prime focus is about quantitative studies of birds. The first edition of the ADU's newsletter, *Bird Numbers*, was produced. BirdLife

International approached the ADU to select and describe the Important Bird Areas (IBAs) for southern Africa.

- 1994 – the *Apollo Sea* oil spill occurred in June. The ADU has been involved ever since in monitoring cleaned penguins. We did not know the influence this would have six years later, when the *Treasure* sank in June 2000.

- 1997 – *The Atlas of Southern African Birds* was published, the culmination of 'the largest biodiversity project ever conducted in Africa'.

- 1998 – the directory of Important Bird Areas was published, setting the scene for the BirdLife IBA Programme to undertake conservation of these key sites for birds.

- 2000 – when the *Treasure* oil spill hit both Robben and Dassen islands in June, the unambiguous message that 'cleaning penguins is worthwhile' – the outcome of ADU monitoring of the *Apollo Sea* birds – resulted in unqualified support for the penguin rescue initiative. The three satellite-tagged penguins, whose positions were updated daily on the ADU website as they swam home from Port Elizabeth, focused a huge amount of international attention on the overall rescue effort.

- 2001 has seen exceptional growth and development. All the main monitoring projects, such as SAFRING, CWAC, Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcounts (CAR), Birds In Reserves Project (BIRP), have continued and expanded. The Southern African Frog Atlas Project is nearing completion. The

ADU website has maintained a high profile. The main new thrust has been southern African seabirds, with the primary focus on 15 breeding species. Of these, nine are endemic to southern Africa and nine are listed in the latest Red Data Book.

These seabirds, with the African Penguin as the flagship species, are a top South African conservation priority, from both bird and marine perspectives. We have worked with the Earthwatch Institute, Marine and Coastal Management, Bristol University and the Robben Island Museum on a new design of penguin flipper band, and we have received support from WWF South Africa and the Darwin Initiative which will

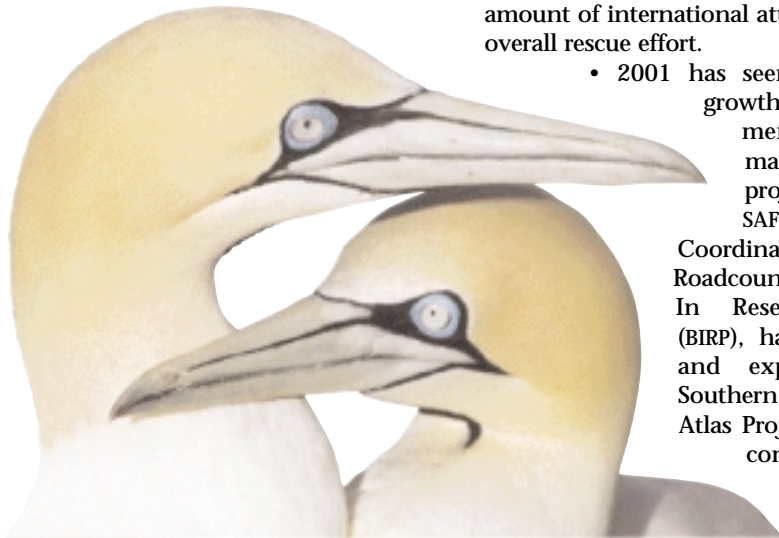
enable us to intensify our efforts to undertake diagnostic research in support of seabird conservation.

- 2001 also saw the number of postgraduate students registered within the ADU grow to 16. The unit is making a major contribution to teaching and research within the University of Cape Town's Faculty of Science.

These 10 productive years would have been impossible without the support of a multitude of sponsors. It is not feasible to list them all here, but the ADU would like to place on record the long-term support it has received from BirdLife South Africa (and the SAOS before it) throughout its existence. This has been not only financial, to maintain the infrastructure that enables the bird monitoring projects to be co-ordinated, but also the contributions of several thousand members of BirdLife South Africa who make huge inputs of time and travel to participate in the projects. The ADU is deeply grateful. □



LES UNDERHILL (2)



At the start of year 11, seabirds and shorebirds form an important focus for the ADU. Engraved colour rings, like the one on this Kelp Gull (above right), enable us to follow individual birds. At many colonies, seals have an impact on Cape Gannets (above).

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