



FOCUS ON THE

# AVIAN DEMOGRAPHY UNIT

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

## Robben Island

### *A superb bird research platform*

**R**obben Island is the platform for a lot of ADU research. Our projects on the island cover seabirds and shorebirds, and even the Cape Weaver. Six post-graduate students do part or all of their research field work there. Robben Island was designated an Important Bird Area in 1998 and our research on the island highlights and enhances this status. In this article we look at just one facet of our work there.

Since November 2000 we have been doing counts of the shorebirds of Robben Island. Prior to these surveys, only three complete counts of the shorebirds around the island had ever been made, and they were done two decades ago. Two striking patterns have emerged: migrant numbers are down, oystercatchers are up.

The number of migrant waders appears to have decreased sharply. The problems for these birds lie not on the island, but at the birds' tundra breeding grounds and along their migration routes. Long-distance migrants are predicted to be negatively impacted by global climate change. Because the coastline of Robben Island is unlikely to be altered by developments, it could form part of a network

of sites used for long-term monitoring of these species at risk.

There are now more than four times as many African Black Oystercatchers than there were 20 years ago; the count has increased from 40 to 180 birds. When the island was a prison, the number of people living on the island was far larger than it is at present. Many of the inhabitants were recreational fishermen and there must have been more disturbance along the shoreline than occurs now, which would have made Robben Island a poor breeding area. On account of its oystercatchers alone, Robben Island now qualifies as a Ramsar site, a 'Wetland of International Importance'.

It is a real privilege to do research on Robben Island, where two of southern Africa's most desirable 'ticks', the Chukar Partridge and the Peafowl, are part of our daily experience.

We deeply appreciate the logistical support we receive from the Robben Island Museum, and from Marine and Coastal Management, who share with us their research house on the island.

*For more information about our projects on Robben Island, visit the ADU website: [www.aviandemographyunit.org](http://www.aviandemographyunit.org)*



*This mixed colony of Swift Terns and Hartlaub's Gulls bred on Robben Island in autumn 2002. MSc student Janine le Roux colour-ringed the tern chicks: look out for them along the southern African coastline as they have spread out between about Swakopmund and Maputo.*

## Partner of the Year

At a breakfast held in the new offices of the ADU, we presented our 'Partner of the Year 2001' award to Marine and Coastal Management (MCM), Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism. The ADU collaborates with many organisations, but the partnership with MCM is the broadest and strongest of them all, and covers a wide range of activities.

The citation read: 'Marine and Coastal Management, especially through the "seabird team" led by Dr Robert Crawford, provide enormous support to the Avian Demography Unit. They partner us in a range of projects, assist staff and students with transport and access to islands, provide co-supervision for postgraduate students, and invited us to participate in the Prince Edward Islands Millennium Expedition in December 2001.'



*Dr Robert Crawford (left), Marine and Coastal Management, receives the 'Partner of the Year 2001' award from Professor Les Underhill, Director of the ADU.*

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