

## Island Oddballs: penguins of dubious parentage

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The African Penguin *Spheniscus demersus* is endemic to southern Africa and its offshore islands, their geographic range extending from the offshore islands of Namibia in the west to Algoa Bay in the east, with non-breeding vagrants occasionally wandering north to Angola and Mozambique.

Although unique in its markings, it does closely resemble the Humboldt Penguin *Spheniscus humboldti* and the Magellanic Penguin *Spheniscus magellanicus*, both endemics of South America. While there are reportedly no sub-species of any of these three penguins, anomalous individuals resembling hybrids of these species do appear on our coastline. On visits to both Robben and Dassen island penguin colonies, I usually spot 4 or 5 of these "oddballs" amongst normal birds on the shoreline; they have a double breast band, a characteristic of the Magellanic Penguin. There also appear to be a large number of birds with just a faint trace of a second band, or with only a partial second band.

While all three species exhibit the characteristic black and white markings, with an inverted black horseshoe running across the breast and extending down the flank to the thigh, there are some subtle differences. The adult African Penguin has a single black band across its breast, and a fairly wide white band extending from the neck, over the head above each eye to the culmen. The Humboldt penguin differs in that it has a broader black band across its breast, and a much thinner white band extending over the head above the eyes. The Magellanic Penguin, on the other hand, sports a double-breasted suit. It has two black bands running across the breast, a thick one continuing the black markings of the

back, from shoulder to shoulder under the neck, and a thinner band running around the breast below it, similar to that of the African and Humboldt penguins. It has a wide white band extending from the neck over the head above each eye, similar to that in the African Penguin.

Both the Magellanic and Humboldt penguins are restricted to the South American coast and its offshore islands, but while the Humboldt Penguin is found only in the Humboldt current region off the western coast of South America, the Magellanic is found on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of southern South America, including the Falkland Islands, with vagrants wandering as far as New Zealand to the west. Could a foot-loose and fancy-free vagrant or two have strayed a similar distance to the east to intermingle with African Penguins? Could this explain the presence of double-banded birds in South African penguin colonies? Are they hybrids arising from two genetically distinct species, or are they mutants resulting from a genetic mutation of a single species, or simply a phenotype displaying a trait inherited from common ancestors in the evolution of the two species?

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Double-banded bird with single-banded bird on shore at Robben Island.



Double-banded bird and partially banded birds on shore at Dassen Island.