



Cape Gannet

Witmalgas

Morus capensis

The Cape Gannet is endemic to southern Africa, breeding only at six coastal islands off Namibia and South Africa: Mercury (2514DB), Ichaboe (2614BD), Possession (2715AA), Bird (Lambert's Bay 3218AB), Malgas (3317BB), and Bird (Algoa Bay 3326CD) islands. There are between 80 000 and 100 000 breeding pairs (Crawford *et al.* 1983b; N.W.T. Klages *in litt.*). It ranges north to former Spanish Sahara on the West African coast and to Mozambique in the east (Crawford *et al.* 1983b). It occurs around southern Africa, mostly over the continental shelf within 100 km of land (Crawford *et al.* 1983b). The lack of atlas records immediately north and south of the Orange River is probably due to the few observations made in this diamond-mining security area.

Habitat: It breeds on flat ground, except at Mercury Island where some nests are on slopes. Nests are made almost entirely from guano (Berruti 1987). It feeds at sea, plunging onto prey from the air, and seldom flies over land.

Movements: It moves considerable distances, adults generally within 540 km of their breeding locality but up to 3300 km. Immatures move up to 6800 km, mostly in a northerly direction in winter (Broekhuysen *et al.* 1961; Crawford *et al.* 1983b). The few birds reaching Australia have journeyed even farther (Ross 1988). Most young of the year leave the vicinity of their natal islands by May (Rand 1959). In winter, during the nonbreeding season, many move to tropical waters off West Africa south of 4°N and east of 6°E, and to KwaZulu-Natal and Delagoa Bay (26°S) on the east coast (Broekhuysen *et al.* 1961; Crawford *et al.* 1983b).

It follows shoals of Sardine *Sardinops ocellatus* migrating to KwaZulu-Natal in winter (Rand 1959; Cyrus & Robson 1980); the models indicate higher reporting rates off KwaZulu-Natal in winter. It congregates at islands when about to nest in late August (Rand 1959).

A gannet ringed on Bird Island (Algoa Bay) was recovered off Madagascar (SAFRING). Another was captured in Western Australia (Ross 1988), and one was seen regularly in a colony of Australian Gannets *M. serrator* in Victoria, Australia (Menkhorst 1992). Several have been seen at Amsterdam Island in the southern Indian Ocean (Berteaux 1991).

Breeding: Breeding takes place in spring and summer. Onset of breeding can be delayed by insufficient nesting material (Crawford & Cochrane 1990). Birds nest colonially and show fidelity to breeding sites and localities (Crawford *et al.* 1994; Klages 1994).

Interspecific relationships: Large numbers of fledglings are sometimes eaten by Cape Fur Seals *Arctocephalus pusillus* on entering the sea (Crawford & Robinson 1990). Seals have displaced Cape Gannets from some breeding sites (Shaughnessy 1984; Crawford *et al.* 1989).

Historical distribution and conservation: It formerly bred at Hollam's Bird (2414CB), Halifax (2615CA), Seal (False Bay 3418BA) and, possibly, Dyer (3419CB) islands (Crawford *et al.* 1983b; Berruti 1985). Conversely, Bird Island (Lambert's Bay) was colonized sometime between 1907 and 1912. Cessation of breeding at Hollam's Bird Island resulted from displacement

by seals (Shaughnessy 1984). In the 1950s, most bred west of Cape Agulhas (3420CC), whereas in the 1980s the majority were at Bird Island (Algoa Bay) (N.W.T. Klages *in litt.*). Recoveries of ringed birds from Angola and farther north along the west coast of Africa were reported regularly in the 1950s and 1960s, but only sporadically since then, possibly indicating reduced northward movement (Oatley 1988; Klages 1994).

Gannets at Mercury Island were recently threatened with displacement by Cape Fur Seals (Crawford *et al.* 1989), but a disturbance programme during 1986–93 cleared most seals from the island. Growth of the seal colony at Lambert's Bay could affect the gannets there. Breeding success is influenced by availability of sufficient nesting material (Jarvis 1971), so that removal of too much guano can have a detrimental effect (Randall & Ross 1979). Cape Gannets mainly eat commercially exploited pelagic shoaling fish (Rand 1959; Crawford & Shelton 1978; Klages *et al.* 1992; Berruti *et al.* 1994b) and are likely to be affected if overfishing takes place. Extreme scarcity of food may lead to fewer birds attempting to breed (Crawford & Dyer 1995) or to high mortality of chicks from starvation (Crawford *et al.* 1983a). The colony at Possession Island has been decreasing rapidly, numbering only 1000 pairs in 1993, compared with an estimated 13 000 in 1956 and 5000 in 1978 (Crawford *et al.* 1983b; pers obs). That at Ichaboe Island has also decreased (Crawford *et al.* 1983b). However, colonies off South Africa have been increasing (Randall & Ross 1979; Klages *et al.* 1992; Crawford & Dyer 1995).

R.J.M. Crawford

Recorded in 155 grid cells, 3.4%
Total number of records: 4471
Mean reporting rate for range: 17.5%

