



Species Information

African Penguins

Spheniscus demersus

(Spheniscus is a diminutive of the Greek word “sphen,” meaning a wedge, which refers to their streamlined swimming shape, while demersus is Latin for plunging.)

Breeding Range: Namibia and South Africa

First Discovered: 1497 (first penguin species to be discovered by Europeans)

Height: 25-27 inches

Weight: 6-8 pounds

Lifespan: 11-15 years, up to 20 in captivity

World Population: 70,000 breeding pairs

How do I look?

We all know that penguins are black and white, but each species has their own look. African Penguins are noted for their black chin and face patch separated from the crown by a broad white band. They have a narrow black band across the chest and down the flank towards its legs. Males tend to be larger with heavier bills, but these differences can only be seen when a pair is together. Juveniles differ from adults by being entirely blue-grey above, and lacking the white face markings and black breast band of adults.

I'm hungry.

African Penguins feed primarily on shoaling pelagic fish such as anchovies, mackerel, and herring, occasionally supplemented by squid and crustaceans. There are regional differences in diet, and in some regions major changes in diet are due to human exploitation of their food source. When on the hunt for food, African Penguins can reach a top speed of up to 15 mph.

Are African Penguins in danger of becoming extinct?

The African Penguin population has declined dramatically over the past century, from 1.5 million penguins in the early 1900s, to just slightly over 179,000 penguins today.

The reasons for the significant decline in the African Penguin populations are well-known and natural predators such as the South African Fur Seal, Kelp Gull, or Sacred Ibises are not to blame. Humans have introduced feral cats to African Penguin territories, collected their eggs by the hundreds of thousands, destroyed their nesting habitats by collecting guano, or excrement, for fertilizer, and have introduced a devastating pollution beyond compare - oil.



Species Information (*continued*)

Wondering where all the ice is?

Not all penguins live in cold environments. In fact, African Penguins are very comfortable living in temperate, or mild, regions of the world. While most African Penguins live on offshore islands, some colonize public beaches enjoyed by tourists. And if you think that's hot, Galapagos Penguins live out their lives on the Equator.

Can you imagine losing half of your body weight in about 20 days?

Penguins do this every year when they molt, or shed their old feathers for new ones. To prepare themselves for this uncomfortable process, penguins first spend about five weeks overeating, to "bulk up," or sustain themselves during the 20-day molt. While penguins do not eat or swim during molting, they make up for it when they spend six weeks at sea afterwards eating and rebuilding their strength.

Sing me a song.

Close your eyes and listen to the call of the African Penguin. You just might confuse it with that of a donkey - which is why they've earned themselves the nickname: "Jackass" Penguin. African, or Jackass, Penguins not only use their call as a warning, but also to attract a mate. Once they find a mate, it's for life.

A bird? That cannot fly?

Due to a dense bone structure and an inability to fold their wings, penguins may not be able to fly in the air, but have no difficulties in the water. Propelling themselves with their paddle-like wings at speeds of up to 15 mph, penguins have mastered the art of diving, swimming, and hunting underwater.

How does the African Penguin keep cool in the hot African, or Long Island, sun?

By spending most of their lives swimming in cool, offshore waters, or resting in sun-protected areas of underground burrows and rocks. African Penguins will also orient themselves with their backs to the sun so that their feet, flippers, and faces are shaded. And should they get too hot? You just may find them cooling down by panting, extending their flippers away from their body, or fluffing their feathers.