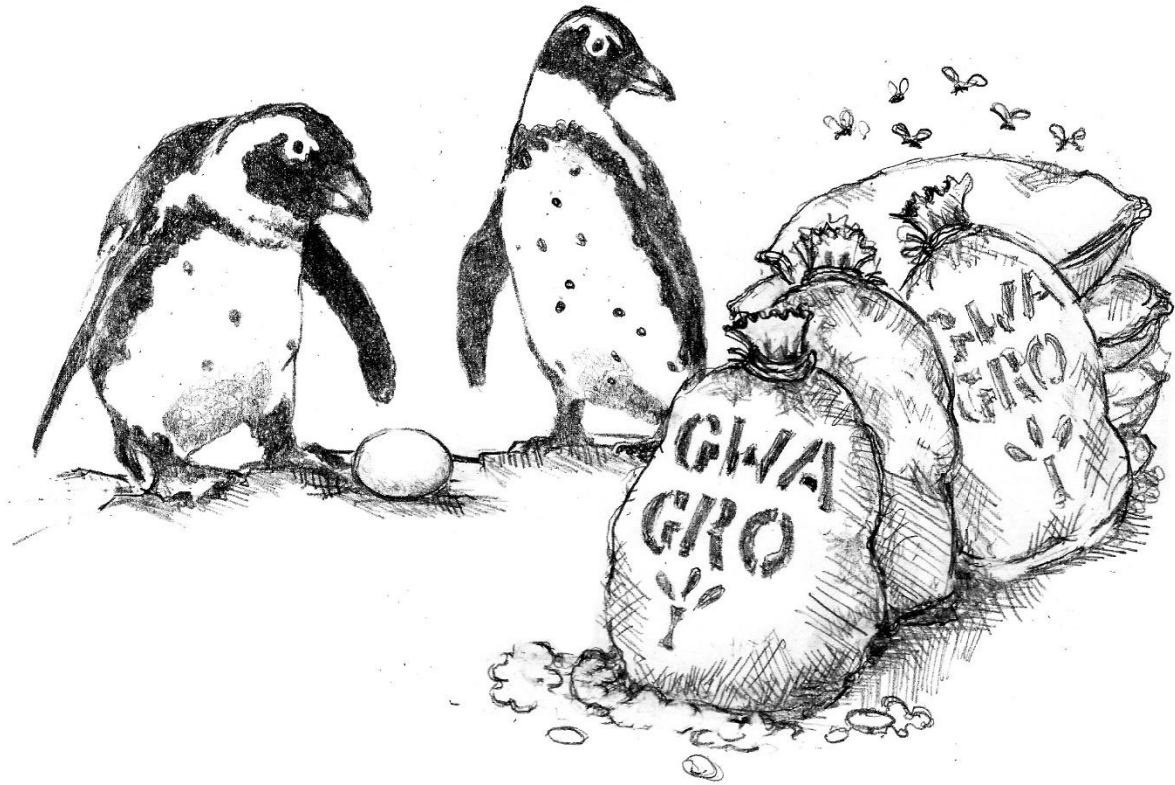


## EXTRACT

*Cat Among the Pigeons* by David Muirhead

# African penguin



'Penguin' was originally a colloquial name for the great auk, a northern hemisphere look-alike that was barely related. Once numbering in the millions, the flightless auks were relentlessly slaughtered over the centuries for their meat and fat. The last pair was killed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1844 by two Icelandic fishermen, commissioned to commit the dastardly deed by a museum. Knowing that the species was in peril, the museum curators had decided – in the interests of science, *nogal* – to get hold of a couple of stuffed ones for their dusty shelves before it was too late.

If the penguins of the southern hemisphere had any inkling of this crass calamity, they would surely have wished that their discoverers had chosen a less ominous name. The African penguin was the first of its kind to be encountered and named by European mariners as they fiddled about in the fickle winds at the Cape of Good Hope in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Fast-forward to the mid-1800s and there was already little doubt that the arrival of men in boats had set the scene for the birds to suffer the same sad fate as the auk.

African penguins chose to live along the temperate shores of southern Africa, understandably leaving their close cousins to enjoy the icy and inhospitable wastes of Antarctica, and other grim southerly addresses. They made a home for themselves on the numerous offshore islands dotting the South African and Namibian coasts. The islands offered safety from most predators and they were all within relatively easy reach of rich fishing grounds.

Even at these relatively benign latitudes it's important to get out of the African sun, particularly when raising a family. A bonus of the islands was that many had accumulated a thick coating of guano, soft enough to excavate a burrow, and absorbent enough to deal with the rain when it fell. If you keep your mind firmly distracted from the origin of this unique encrustation, guano makes a very cosy home.

It also makes a fantastic fertiliser. At almost the same moment as the last pair of great auks were being scientifically despatched in the northern hemisphere, entrepreneurs discovered the vast deposits of guano in southern Africa – over 20 metres deep on some islands – and set about removing them. When the frenzy was finally over, some 40 years on, the penguins that remained found themselves left with bare rock, their eggs exposed to the gulls and the sun.

Unfortunately the gulls weren't the only egg collectors. In one of those inexplicable waves that trigger fads and fashions in human populations, penguin eggs became a highly popular item in South African kitchens at the start

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lawrence Green, the peripatetic author, had many fine egg recipes, and was happy to share them with his readers. To be fair, like one of the tearful characters in Lewis Carroll's poem *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, in later life he lamented the seemingly inevitable demise of the parent birds.

About 2 million African penguins are estimated to have existed at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; today there are fewer than two hundred thousand, and the numbers are still dropping. Their chronically reduced ranks make them ever more vulnerable as a species to both natural and man-made threats – and the latter keep remorselessly piling up. Aging and rusty ships rounding the Cape routinely leak oil from their bunkers, and occasionally come apart altogether, dumping their entire noxious cargo into the sea; overfishing has led to a drastic reduction in fish stocks; and plastic and other pollutants in the sea set all kinds of lethal traps.

African penguins were once in a prime position to send gloating postcards back to their relatives in the snowy wastes of Antarctica, bragging about the sunshine and the good life, but they must surely now be consumed by doubts. If so, they show no sign of it. Smartly attired and as determined as ever, it's business as usual for the plucky survivors.

Penguins hunt by sight and each busy day begins bright and early, especially if there are chicks to be fed. Comically clumsy on land, in the sea penguins are more aqua dynamic than the most bragged-about submarine, and infinitely more manoeuvrable. They travel to fishing grounds in hunting parties of up to 60 birds, swimming 3 metres below the surface, on average, and popping up every 20 seconds or so to take a breath. A daily round trip can involve distances of 30 to 40 kilometres, and much longer than that if fish are hard to find.

It's an arduous commute by any standards, not made any easier by the thugs lining the route. The deadbeats who threaten late-night travellers in the dark recesses of the London or New York underground are purring pussy cats compared with the seals, sharks and orcas that make it their sharp-toothed business to waylay commuting penguins.

Given this history and their apparent stoicism in the face of epic human greed, it is not surprising that the inoffensive little birds have become totems for the conservation movement. Wobbling about on land, dressed in their coat and tails and bustling about with domestic chores, they are reminiscent of miniature butlers; and like any good butler, they are much more respectable than us.