



home on loan

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS PETER RYAN

Of the 20 species of terns that occur in southern Africa, only five breed in the region. Four breed singly or in small colonies, but the Swift Tern forms large, dense colonies, creating a birding spectacle as the birds display their catches to potential mates and later ferry a seemingly inexhaustible supply of fish to their rapidly growing chicks. These colonies usually occur on offshore islands, but in 2018 one of the largest colonies was in the heart of Cape Town's V&A Waterfront, where the terns' presence caused quite a stir.

The Swift Tern *Thalasseus bergii* is the nominate race of the Greater Crested Tern, which occurs throughout coastal waters of the Indian and south-western Pacific oceans. Most Swift Terns breed in the Western Cape, with smaller numbers at islands off Namibia and in Algoa Bay. The South African population remained more or less steady at about 4000 pairs from the 1970s to the late 1990s, then grew to roughly 15 000 pairs by 2010, at a rate of more than 11 per cent per year – an impressive

achievement for a species that typically lays only one egg each season. The Swift Tern's increase came at a time when the numbers of most other Benguela seabirds that feed on small pelagic fish were decreasing. One reason for the species' success is its versatility; Davide Gaglio found that although anchovy dominated the diet of the terns breeding on Robben Island, the birds delivered more than 50 prey species to their chicks, including an impressive array of fish, squid, mantis shrimps and even small crayfish and two

species of crickets (see *African Birdlife*, November/December 2017). This versatility extends to their choice of breeding site. Whereas most seabirds show strong fidelity to their breeding colony year after year, Swift Terns often move site to take advantage of > above *Adult Swift Terns start delivering prey to their chicks shortly after sunrise.* opposite *Some of the 1750 pairs incubating on the main roof of the Nedbank building.*



OTTO WHITEHEAD



above Wire excluders have proved effective in keeping gulls and terns off the roof of another building in the vicinity.

top A bird's-eye view of the more than 2700 pairs breeding on top of the restaurant block.

Strandfontein Sewage Works and the salt pans at the Berg River mouth. In the late 1990s, Dassen Island became popular and in the 2000s Dyer Island hosted a large colony as the terns followed the pelagic fish south from their traditional strongholds off the west coast.

But Robben Island remained a key breeding site throughout the 2000s, supporting as many as 13 000 pairs. In 2012, small numbers of Swift Terns began breeding on the flat roofs of buildings in the Waterfront area of Cape Town's harbour precinct. Most used the roof of the Robben Island Gateway building, from where hundreds of tourists depart every day to visit the famous island prison, and smaller numbers nested with Hartlaub's Gulls on the roof of the warehouses on the East Pier.

favourable feeding opportunities. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Western Cape population typically was divided between Robben Island and one of the islands in the Saldanha Bay region, although the birds occasionally bred on islands at

Although convenient for the birds to exploit the many schools of anchovy that occur close inshore in Table Bay, breeding at the Waterfront has its drawbacks. Not everyone appreciates having terns



and gulls breeding on their buildings. The constant calling – day and night – coupled with the rain of guano (with its distinctly pungent aroma) is viewed in a dim light by many people. Ill-advised attempts to discourage the birds after they have started breeding often result in chicks leaping off the roof. Returning chicks that survived the fall to the roof often causes even more chicks to panic and jump to their deaths. Unfortunately, taking the chicks to a rehabilitation centre is also not viable because, even if raised in captivity, they are unlikely to survive after being released; terns rely on an extended period of parental assistance after fledging as they learn how to catch their own food.

After making various attempts to dissuade the terns from breeding on the Gateway building, managers chose to cover the roof with netting to physically exclude them. This caused the birds to explore other buildings in the vicinity and they settled on the Nedbank building. Its large, flat roof covered with pebbles provided an ideal nesting site. At the end of 2017 the terns occupied the top of the roof-top restaurant and it was only

after they spilled over onto the restaurant level in January 2018 that the building's managers realised they had a significant problem on their hands.

The building's ventilation intakes were situated on the roof, right next to the tern colony, and to avoid flooding the building with guano-tainted air, these had to be closed, which affected the building's climate-control system. The terns' presence also precluded maintenance work being carried out on the building's fire-damping systems, understandably worrying the building's managers. Even tenants of neighbouring structures were affected; guests in a nearby five-star hotel complained about the noise of the birds calling throughout the night.

Not much can be done once the terns have started to breed. Seabirds are protected under South African environmental legislation and they cannot be disturbed while breeding. CapeNature advised the building managers to leave the terns alone as much as possible, so that they could breed successfully and there would not be failed birds trying to re-lay, prolonging their occupancy of the roof. Once the chicks fledged, the roof

Swift Terns tend their newly hatched chicks on the roof of the restaurant block on top of the Nedbank building.

could be fitted with physical excluders to prevent the terns returning next year.

Unfortunately, roughly two-thirds of the chicks on the Nedbank building died, probably from avian influenza. 2018 was a torrid year for Swift Terns; avian influenza apparently killed almost all the chicks at a large colony on Malgas Island and even some adult birds at other colonies. Only the relatively small colony on Robben Island in 2018 seemingly escaped the worst impacts of the disease.

Closing off breeding options in the Waterfront area one building at a time is not an ideal solution. The question that remains to be answered is why 4500 pairs of Swift Terns bred on the Nedbank building in 2018, almost twice as many as at their traditional sites on Robben Island. Breeding on Robben Island was unusually late in 2018, possibly as a result of disturbance on the island. Every effort needs to be made to encourage as many terns as possible to breed on Robben Island, where conflicts with people should be easier to manage. ♦