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CAPE FUR SEAL *ARCTOCEPHALUS PUSILLUS* CATCHES CAPE GANNET *MORUS CAPENSIS* ASHORE AT MALGAS ISLAND

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At 12h15 on 20 September 1995, on approach to Malgas Island (33°03'S, 17°55'E) in the West Coast National Park, Western Cape Province, South Africa, we observed an adult bull Cape Fur Seal *Arctocephalus pusillus* on the island near a small group of Cape Gannet *Morus capensis* nests. It was loping towards the sea, shaking an adult Cape Gannet, which it carried by the neck. At sea, the seal continued to shake the gannet, and it fed upon the bird until 12h34. It then abandoned the carcass, with a large portion of it uneaten.

One adult Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*, four immature Kelp Gulls in brown plumage, two adult Hartlaub's Gulls *L. hartlaubii* and two terns *Sterna* sp. hovered above the seal while it was feeding. They swooped on to and fed on pieces shaken from the gannet. After the seal abandoned the carcass, Kelp Gulls continued to feed upon it as it drifted away from the island.

We visited the isolated group of gannet nests near which the seal was seen. There were 35 active nests in the group, which included nest monitoring block E of the Sea Fisheries Research Institute (SFRI). A wooden peg demarcating the monitoring block had been knocked out of the ground. Outside the monitoring block a small chick in white down was lying between nests.

Approximately one hour earlier, B.M. Dyer (SFRI pers. comm.) had checked the nests in monitoring block E. The peg was firmly in the ground, and no chicks were displaced from nearby nest sites. It is assumed that, on approach to or departure from the breeding group of gannets, the seal disturbed the wooden peg. It is likely that it took the adult gannet from its nest, and in doing so displaced the chick.

At the time of capture of the gannet by the seal, B.M. Dyer was searching for ringed gannets some 20 m distant. He was unaware of the attack by the seal, and heard no undue commotion from the small group of gannets. Therefore, the attack seems to have been executed swiftly.

The distance from the seaward edge of the Cape Gannet nests to the highwater mark was approximately 16 m (measured by pacing) down a slope of guano and rocks. From there to the open sea at the time of capture was a further 10 m, over boulders lying in the intertidal region.

Cape Fur Seals regularly attack and kill Cape Gannets in the sea surrounding Malgas Island, especially fledged chicks entering the sea for the first time. Seal predation was positively implicated in the cause of death of a minimum of 1.2% of gannet fledglings banded at Malgas Island in 1990, and it was conservatively estimated that seals accounted for the loss of at least 2.5% of gannet chick production in that year (Crawford & Robinson 1990). Malgas Island supports about 20 000 pairs of Cape Gannets (Crawford *et al.* 1983).

Cape Fur Seals often eat only the viscera and stomach contents of seabirds they have attacked (Cooper 1974, Crawford & Robinson 1990). These parts are accessed via the abdomen (Cooper 1974). Many abandoned carcasses wash ashore at Malgas Island (R.J.M.C. pers. obs.) and other localities (Cooper 1974). Seabirds feeding in association with the seal would likely have been eating pieces of food from the gannet's stomach.

Cape Fur Seals have not previously been recorded taking seabirds from nesting areas. However, staff of the West Coast National Park have twice reported seeing seals chase seabirds ashore at Malgas Island (S.G. Yssel, National Parks Board, pers. comm.).

There is one earlier published record of an adult bull Cape Fur Seal catching an African or Jackass Penguin *Spheniscus demersus* on land, about 20 m from the water. It killed the penguin by beating it against the ground (Rebelo 1984). Similarly, between 1981 and 1986, it was reported that an adult bull seal caught African Penguins on the beach at Ichaboe Island near the houses. It was shot in 1986 (P. de Villiers, former headman at Ichaboe Island pers. comm. to B.M. Dyer).

Our observations at Malgas Island indicate that Cape Fur Seals have the ability to take seabirds not only from the beach, but also from nesting areas. Although seals and seabirds co-exist at a number of southern African islands (e.g. Shaughnessy 1984), in some cases seals may displace seabirds from breeding colonies, as happened at Mercury Island (e.g. Crawford *et al.* 1989).

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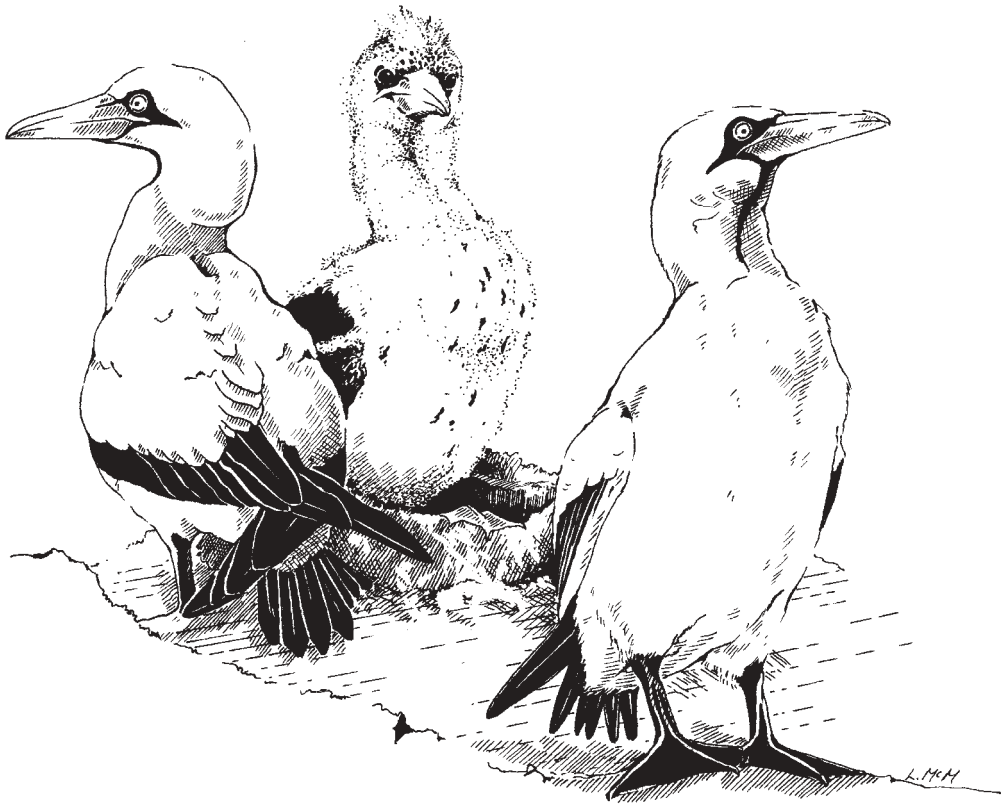

Cape Gannet by Liz McMahon
(Harrison, J.A. *et al.* 1997. *The atlas of southern African birds*)