

# Guest Editorial

## ON DISTURBING SEABIRDS

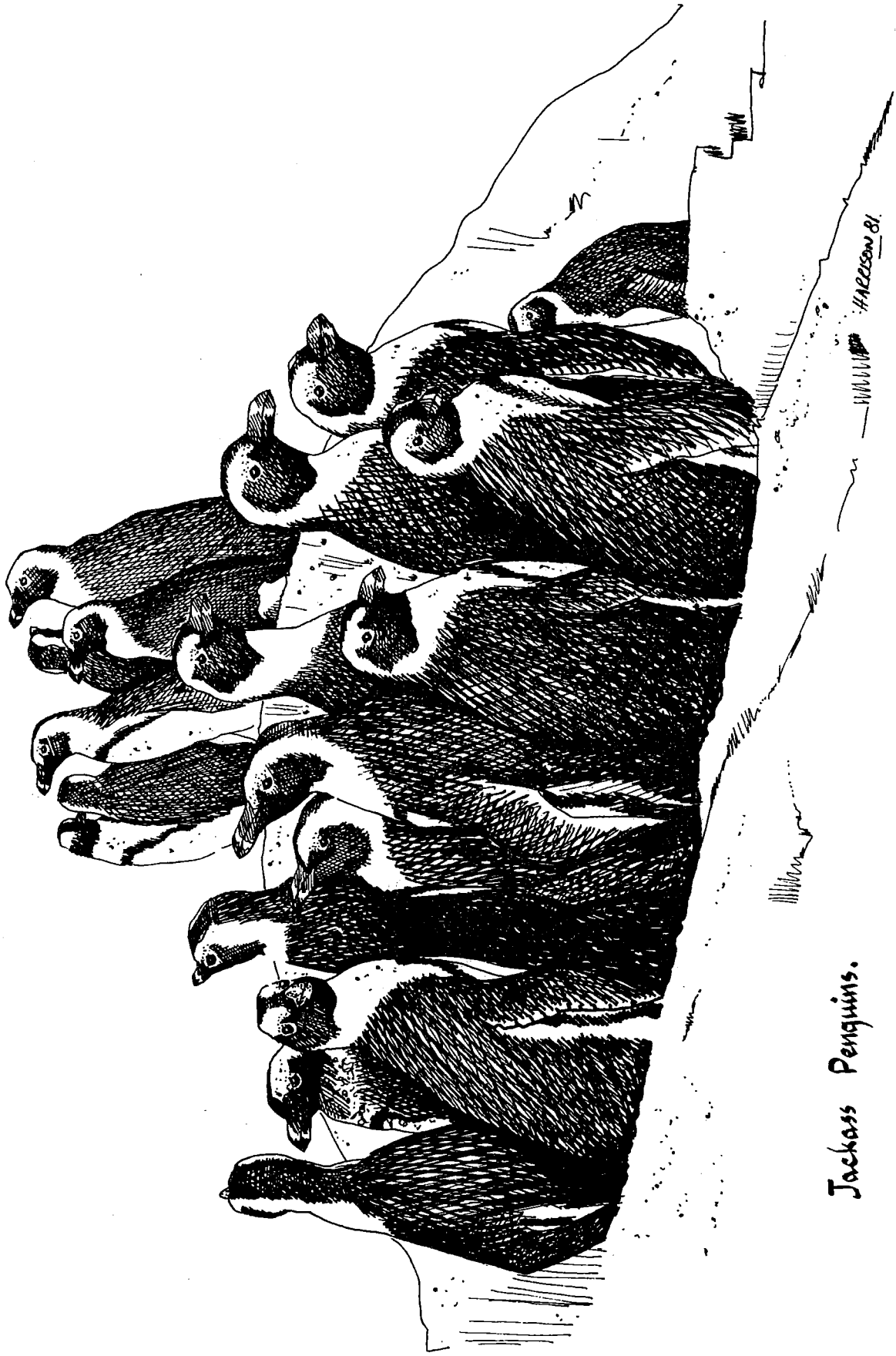
North Americans would seem from the literature to have just discovered that seabirds are not idiot-proof or at least scientist-proof. Paper after paper has showed that if treated wrongly, seabirds may raise fewer young, desert nests, or even abandon entire colonies. I am a little worried about some of these studies. The scientist studying the disturbance is the one doing the disturbing, so he or she is likely to ensure that the disturbance is in fact suitably disturbing. A brass band with showshoes is an exaggeration but some of the methods used seem unlikely to be employed by anyone with any 'field sense'. Also I wonder how many journals would publish negative results : that the observer had no effect?

Given these comments, I'd like to reverse myself and argue that we haven't gone far enough. Perhaps the observer can cause birds to alter their behaviour in subtle little ways which bias the results. For example, Hockey & Hallinan (1981. *S. Afr. J. Wildl. Res.* 11: 59-62) found that Jackass Penguins alter their behaviour when the observer is between 30 and 60 m distant. A study of penguin behaviour would have to take this into account.

Similarly, what is the effect of the observer on nonbreeding birds? Palaeartic waders and terns in Africa may be under food stress during their stay here. Disturbing a roost to count it's contents may cause birds to move elsewhere or could even conceivably be the lethal difference for younger or weaker birds.

As a newcomer still very ignorant of much of what has already been done, there does seem to be an immense amount of work still to be undertaken on African seabirds. Almost anyone can make a contribution. These contributions will be more valuable and lasting if observers try to understand - quantitatively or not - what biases they add to their own studies.

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Jackass Penguins.