

African Penguin

Spheniscus demersus



Class: *Aves*

Order: *Sphenisciformes*

Family: *Spheniscidae*

Characteristics: African penguins are about 23.5 inches in length and can weigh up to 8 pounds. African penguins have one black band across their chest and a variable amount of black spotting on their chest and belly. Penguins have several unique characteristics that make them highly functional in the water such as waterproof feathers, a stream-lined body and hydrodynamic body, and the ability to reduce their heart-rate so they can dive to considerable depths and remain there for almost two minutes.

(AZA) Penguins have small muscles at the base of each feather that enable the feathers to be held tightly against the body whilst in water, forming a waterproof layer; alternatively, on land the feathers are held erect, trapping an insulating layer of air around the body (ARKive).

Behavior: African penguins live in large colonies. The birds build nests out of their own excrement, called guano, under bushes or rocks (San Diego Zoo). African Penguins are a diurnal species that is found to be most active during dawn and dusk. So technically, it is a crepuscular species. During their active time, they can be found swimming and hunting in the sea. While on land, they primarily gather at their nesting sites.

Reproduction: African penguins reach sexual maturity from 4-6 years old. They will form monogamous breeding pairs that will remain together for decades or life. The pair will lay 2 eggs in the nest, dug from sand or guano. The pair will then alternate incubating the egg for about 40 days. Once hatched, the parents will care for and guard the chicks for 30 days. One parent will forage and regurgitate food for the chicks. The juvenile penguins will leave the colony when they develop adult plumage between 60-130 days (ARKive)(Maryland Zoo).

Diet:

Wild: African penguins feed primarily on anchovies, sardines, horse mackerel and round herrings, but also eat squid and crustaceans (AZA)

Zoo: Trout and capelin.

Conservation: African penguins are an SSP species. African penguins have been listed as endangered by IUCN Redlist since 2010. Populations have declined by more than 60 percent since 2000. African Penguins are one of the most endangered species of penguin. Commercial fishing and egg harvesting by locals are the main threats to penguin populations in Africa.

FYI: African penguins are also called black-footed penguins and “jackass” penguins due to their loud bray.



Range & Habitat:

Mostly found in South Africa and Namibia. African penguins usually stay within 40km of the coastline and nest on sandy and rocky mainland and islands.



Lifespan: up to 30 years in captivity, around 15 years in the wild.

Special Adaptations: Penguins cannot fly but are highly functional in the water, with waterproof feathers and a stream-lined body.

IUCN Conservation Status:

Endangered

