PREDATORY INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CAPE FUR SEALS
AND SEABIRDS AT ICHABOE ISLAND, NAMIBIA

by

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ABSTRACT

Cape fur seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus*) prey on Cape gannets (*Morus capensis*), Cape cormorants (*Phalacrocorax capensis*), bank cormorants (*P. neglectus*), and African penguins (*Spheniscus demersus*) at Ichaboe Island (26°17'22"S, 14°56'36"E), Namibia. Opportunistic observations were conducted from September 1991 to May 2001, and focal event sampling and continuous observations between November 1999 and May 2000. Predatory events total 2 989, involving 932 gannets, 560 Cape cormorants, 142 bank cormorants and 552 penguins; high annual variation is evident. Individual seals specialising in seabird predation did not conform to this pattern of predation, differing in predation rate and bird species targeted. Seabird predation may be learnt from other seals, or forms an extension of play behaviour; subadult males are predominantly responsible. Incidental observations introduce a potential bias in spatial sampling but may reveal diurnal and environmental trends. Seasonally abundant fledgling gannets and cormorants contribute one-third of predations noted. Seals do not eat birds as an alternative food resource. The deteriorating conservation status of these seabirds is cause for concern; the predation impact of seals should be quantified, taking into account individual variability, and compared with other causes of mortality.
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