

ten had been banded when stopping over during northward migration in Delaware Bay, USA and four had been banded in the wintering area at Río Grande, Tierra del Fuego, Argentina in December 2000.

In 2002 at Colombo beach, we recorded 36 banded Red knots, 1.6 % of the total birds scanned. Of these, 12 (a third) had been banded in Delaware Bay, USA, 16 had been banded at Río Grande, Tierra del Fuego and/or San Antonio Oeste, Río Negro, Argentina (44%), three had been banded in Brazil (8%) and two had been banded in another part of the wintering area, Bahía Lomas, Tierra del Fuego, Chile (5%). The origin of three other banded birds could not be determined because they had apparently lost their country-specific flag (Table 2).

These observations confirm that the Red Knots that stop over at Península Valdés belong to the *rufa* population that winters in Tierra del Fuego and migrates through Brazil and Delaware Bay to breed in the central Canadian arctic.

It is a matter for concern that the numbers of shorebirds we recorded in 2002 were much less than those reported in only very recent years by Bala *et al.* (2001) and Bala *et al.* (2002). We know of no change in our study sites that could have accounted for these declines.

Although the number of Red Knots at Fracasso Beach was almost negligible in 2002 compared with the recent past, it is possible that they – or at least some of them – had transferred to Colombo Beach. However, even if this is the case, the peak count there of 1,500 is only half the number recorded at Fracasso in 1999 and 2000.

Although one year's counts cannot easily be put into a long term context, it is well established that the *rufa* Red Knot population has been in decline for at least the past twenty years (Morrison *et al.* 2001). Therefore the reduced numbers may simply reflect that this trend is continuing.

More surprising is the reduced numbers of White-rumped Sandpipers and Two-banded Plovers. The populations of both of these species have recently been assessed as 'stable' (Wetlands International 2002) so the significance of these reduced counts is not clear; possibly they have been affected by local factors, such as the food supply or changes in the risk of predation.

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Mole Snake *Pseudaspis cana* predation of African Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus moquini* eggs

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Many species of breeding birds are found on Robben Island, off the coast of South Africa near Cape Town (33°49'S 18°22'E). The island is host to about 100 pairs of African Black Oystercatchers *Haematopus moquini* which breed on the rocky shores (Calf & Underhill 2002). Their nests vary from a mere scrape in a collection of stones to an elaborate nest carefully lined with small fragments of shells (Calf & Underhill 2002). Incubating oystercatchers are themselves at risk of predation but their eggs, when exposed, are particularly vulnerable (Hockey 1983). Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus vetula* are known to be opportunistic predators of eggs (Maclean 1993). One often finds the remains of Kelp Gull-predated eggs, mainly those of African Penguins *Spheniscus demersus*, on the roads around the island and oystercatcher eggs showing the same signs of predation have been found on the shore (KMC pers. obs.). Feral cats *Felis catus* are also potential predators of oystercatchers on the island – the number of cats observed on the shoreline having increased since 2001 (KMC pers. obs.).

Robben Island is the only offshore island along the South African coastline on which mole snakes *Pseudaspis cana*

occur (Crawford & Dyer 2000). Mole snakes were not introduced, and were reported to be present on the island in the early 1600s prior to human colonization (Crawford & Dyer 2000). The snakes are found on the island in low numbers and they are both morphologically and behaviourally different from mainland mole snakes (Crawford & Dyer 2000). Of particular interest is the increasing frequency with which mole snakes were encountered on the shoreline around the whole island since 2001 (KMC pers. obs.). FitzSimons (1970) noted that mole snakes eat primarily rodents: rats, mice and moles. The Cape golden mole *Chrysochloris asiatica* inhabits Robben Island (Crawford & Dyer 2000) and may be included in the diet of mole snakes. Dyer (1996) reported that mole snakes on Robben Island are dependent on seabird and game bird eggs and chicks for food. A mole snake was observed attempting to swallow a Kelp Gull chick that weighed c.200 g in December 2003 (T. Bakker pers. comm. and KMC pers. obs.) and mole snakes have been observed to depredate Swift Tern eggs and peafowl chicks (B. Dyer pers. comm.). Mole snakes congregate in areas where gulls and terns breed and, in years when seabirds do



not breed on the island, the snakes may starve (Dyer 1996). Adult mole snakes settle in favoured areas and stay in the area for as long as food is available. The foraging range of the snakes expands in summer once the seabird breeding is over and food availability at the colonies decreases. As a result, mole snake numbers on Robben Island have been reported to wax and wane.

On 2 February 2004, a mole snake was observed at an oystercatcher nest. The nest had two eggs on 30 January 2004. As I approached, the snake writhed, and swallowed the second egg and made an escape. The nest had survived 24 days. This pair of Oystercatchers did not attempt to relay that breeding season. This nest was about 200 m from the Kelp Gull colony where the mole snake predation on the Kelp Gull chick had taken place two months earlier.

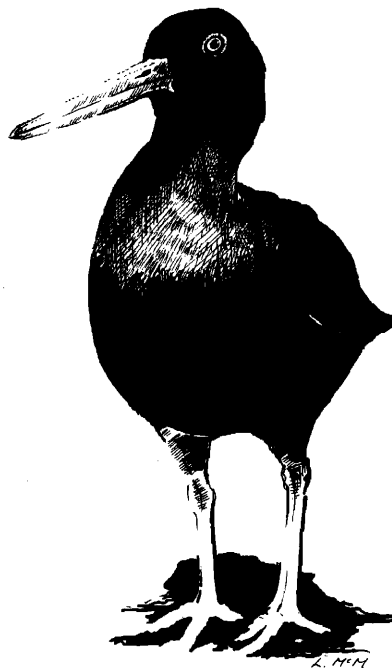
This is an interesting observation because mole snake predation of oystercatcher eggs has not been previously described. Mole snakes would need to be quite large (>40 cm) to be capable of depredating seabird or shorebird eggs the size of an oystercatcher's.

The predation rate on oystercatcher nests on Robben Island has increased since 2001 (Calf & Underhill 2003). Few predation events are actually observed and in most cases the predator is unknown. Predators on the island could include feral cats, Kelp Gulls, house rats *Rattus rattus* or mole snakes. An important question is: are mole snakes sig-

nificant predators of African Black Oystercatcher eggs or chicks? To answer this, the proportions of oystercatcher eggs lost to the various predators should be monitored, perhaps with time-lapse video photography and infrared light at night.

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