

# black MAGIC



GRANT ATKINSON (4)



After spending several days observing how a pair of African black oystercatchers provisioned their chicks, wildlife photographer **Grant Atkinson** came away with a new respect for the energy these birds expend on parenting.

**E**NDEMIC TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN AND NAMIBIAN coasts, the African black oystercatcher is a shorebird that, once in dire straits, now seems to be doing relatively well, with numbers growing steadily in some parts of its range. Increased food availability in the form of an invasive Mediterranean mussel can be thanked for that, as well as the banning of vehicles from beaches where the birds nest or roost.

With their striking coloration of near-black plumage, orange-rimmed red eyes, pink legs and bright red bill, these oystercatchers are a joy to photograph, and their busy behaviour, especially when feeding chicks, is fascinating to watch. The male and female adults are almost identical, although the female is slightly heavier and has a longer, thinner bill.

The pair I photographed were raising two recently fledged chicks, which could only fly very short distances and were still some months away from looking after themselves. The family was located near an open estuary, with rocks on one side of the river mouth and a sandy beach on the other. When the tide was high and it was more difficult to locate their shellfish prey, the oystercatchers were usually on the beach. As the tide fell, the adults would take it in turns to fly to a favoured hunting area along the rocky shoreline and then return with food for the young birds, each one alerting them to its imminent arrival by means of its distinctive piping call. The oystercatchers seemed to be tireless, repeating their forays again and again to ensure that their chicks would not go hungry.



OPPOSITE, ABOVE Stepping out... Although its feet are not webbed, the African black oystercatcher is a capable swimmer when necessary.

OPPOSITE, BELOW An adult oystercatcher returns to its chicks after a successful foraging trip.

ABOVE Incoming... The chicks, like this huddled individual, typically keep a low profile to avoid detection while the adults are away gathering food.

Oystercatchers forage on rocky shores, both at the water's edge and higher up among dry rocks. Oxide deposits are responsible for the rich orange coloration of these boulders.

