

Watch out for washed-up seal carcasses

Words & photo: Frikkie van der Vyver

POST-MORTEM PAINT: Sometimes carcasses are marked with bright spray paint to indicate that they had been sampled for research and need not be reported again



NOVEMBER marks the start of the annual Cape fur seal pupping season, so beach users can once again expect to encounter many carcasses washed up along the Plett coastline.

Preliminary research suggests that up to 45% of Cape fur seal pups born on Robberg Peninsula drown in the first month of their lives as a result of large swells. Such high rates of mortality prior to weaning are not unusual in fur seal pups.

Young Cape fur seal pups cannot swim very well and are born with a black coat not yet insulated for survival

in the ocean. They spend the first three months of their lives in a rookery among the rocks and boulders of Robberg's north shore while suckling rich milk.

While waiting for their mothers to return during short foraging trips to sea, they form large crèches close to the water's edge. Here many are swept away from their rookeries - particularly during periods of high easterly wind and swell.

Most drown and wash up on the mainland, especially on Robberg Beach, but live ones are sometimes rescued and returned to the colony.

During previous seasons, up to 600 newborn pup carcasses were recovered along Plett beaches. In contrast, only around 50 carcasses from older age classes (i.e. yearlings, sub-adults, and adults) wash up annually, mostly from November to May with a peak in January.

Although the majority of these carcasses wash up in an advanced state of decay, necropsy (animal autopsy) records of fresh carcasses can point out a variety of mortality causes and secondary symptoms.

Breeding season is a stressful time for adult seals, especially older males that lose body condition as they spend a lot of energy on fighting to establish and maintain breeding territories.

So it comes as no surprise that over 90% of adult carcasses recovered along Plett beaches during past breeding seasons belonged to large males. Weaned yearlings are also known to struggle at this time as they learn to find their own food during their transition to adulthood.

Please report seals on the beach, dead or alive, to Plett Stranding Network on 079 463 4837. Visit www.wild-ocean.org.za for more info.

Budding Born in Africa surfers join forces to save marine life

BORN in Africa (BIA) hosts a water-awareness programme each year to teach the 400 children in its care about basic water safety.

"This has been a wonderful opportunity to connect with a local project called Adopt a Swimmer, which takes training further with experienced instructors," explains BIA director Isabelle Brink.

"Once they have developed sufficient water skills, we enrol them in an intensive swimming course with coach Chas Fraser, and theoretical sessions at Plett Surf Lifesaving Club with the main aim of training them to become lifeguards.

"Since most of the kids are only used to the pool and have no experience of the sea, they end up being terrified of the ocean. They struggle to understand its workings - reading the waves or detecting riptides," says Brink.

In an effort to solve this issue, BIA has been collaborating with the Learn to Surf Plett Development team since 2018 - with incredible results.

"We started with eight timid children and now all of them have gained the confidence to stand up on their boards by reading the waves while being much less fearful

of the sea. Another important task, this time concerning the environment, was tackled mid-October, when surfing lessons could recommence after the interminable lockdown period.

"Coach Clayton Bischoff explained the importance of keeping our beaches clean, so the surfers in training set out to collect a significant amount of nurdles around Robberg 5."

The dreaded nurdles so damaging to all forms of marine life needs no introduction: since leaking from a cargo ship off the Durban coast three years ago, these miniature components of all things plastic have been washing up on beaches from KZN to the Cape and can only be extracted by a sifting process involving thousands of man-hours [find out more on page 3 of the October 7 edition at www.cypress.co.za].

• Plett Surf Lifesaving Club is offering a slush puppy for every 500ml container of clean nurdles collected by kids on Plett's beaches. Visit www.plettsurf.org.za for details on the club, and call 082 436 6410 for more info on Learn to Surf or Isabelle Brink on 082 857 2345 to get involved with BIA.



QUELLING THE SCOURGE: A few of the surf team members sift beach sand at Robberg 5 under the watchful eye of Coach Clayton to prevent nurdles from washing back into the ocean - see the gallery at www.cypress.co.za for more images

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