

10. Orange River Mouth

Geographical Coordinates 28°40'S 16°30'E

Area 2,000ha

Location About 1km west of the town of Alexander Bay, on the west coast of the province of Cape, west Republic of South Africa, on the border with Namibia.

Date of Ramsar Designation 28 June 1991.

Other International Designations None.

National Designations None.

Principal Features The site comprises a 9.5km section of the Republic of South African part of the Orange River, the northern bank forming the border with Namibia. The area features extensive salt marshes, freshwater lagoons and marshes, sand banks, and reed beds (dominated by *Phragmites australis*, *Scirpus littoralis* and *Sporobolus virginicus*). The river is isolated from the Atlantic Ocean by constantly developing sand bars at the river mouth, which are frequently breached by the build up of water. However, the extent of salt water intrusion into the fresh water system is limited, but during periods of low water flow, increasingly saline conditions can develop, to the extent that salinity exceeds the limit of acceptability for domestic use. The site is seasonally important for locally migrant water birds, including* *Pelecanus onocrotalus* (115), *Phoenicopterus ruber roseus* (219), *P. minor* (1,107), *Recurvirostra avosetta* (251) and *Charadrius pallidus* (127). Resident species include *Phalacrocorax carbo* (129), *P. capensis* (7,000-10,000), *P. africanus* (43), *Anhinga melanogaster* (49), *Ardea cinerea* (56), *Egretta garzetta* (128), *Alopochen aegyptiacus* (66), *Tadorna cana* (64), *Anas capensis* (130), *Oxyura maccoa* (57), *Charadrius marginatus* (144), *Vanellus armatus* (107), *Larus dominicanus* (932), *L. hartlaubii* (2,511) and *Sterna bergii* (230). Staging water birds include *Calidris minuta* (204), *C. ferruginea* (1,496), *Philomachus pugnax* (111), *Sterna hirundo* (7,000-10,000) and *S. sandvicensis* (200). (1a,2a,2b,2c,3a,3b,3c)

*Figures refer to maximum day counts in December 1985 and April 1986.

Conservation Issues State owned. Two diamond mining companies hold concessions to most of the site, and public access is strictly prohibited. An extensive area of marshland along the south bank of the river has been seriously degraded by the construction of an embankment, causing a substantial decrease in the amount of fresh water entering the marsh. The marsh dried out as a result and desertification is proceeding. During dry periods (August-September) under natural conditions, the river mouth would dry out temporarily, before being re-flooded in wet periods. However, water regulation projects upstream, particularly the P.K. le Roux Dam (1,335km upstream), have provided a more constant water flow through the river mouth, with less frequent flooding and a reduction in sediment input. In future, increasing water demand in the upper sections of the Orange River and further damming operations may severely restrict the amount of water reaching the site.