

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS, NOTES AND REPORTS

Silent Skies – The Humansdorp Cape Griffon Site

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As is the case elsewhere in southern Africa, many historical roost and breeding sites of the Cape Griffon *Gyps coprotheres*, a now threatened vulture species endemic to the sub-region, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa are now inactive (Boshoff *et al.* 2009). Whilst the exact location of many of these sites in this province are known, that of others is not and it is therefore useful to

document this information as it comes to hand.

According to Masterson (1916), this species “bred regularly until 1898 in a big krantz [cliff] about nine miles from town”. Humansdorp is a small town in the south-western part of the Eastern Cape and lies some 13 km from the Indian Ocean and 70 km west of the coastal city of Port Elizabeth. The exact location of

this cliff had not been established and, consequently, we attempted to do so.

As a first step we drew a circle with a radius of nine miles (14.5 km) around Humansdorp on a topographical map. We studied the map and marked the hilly and mountainous areas that could conceivably contain a cliff suitable for roosting and/or (especially) breeding by griffons, namely one with a high vertical face, with horizontal ledges that cannot easily be accessed by predators, such as leopards and baboons. We then visited the selected areas, on 16 July 2009, and searched for a cliff that

possessed these basic characteristics.

Within our overall search area we found only one cliff that qualified; all the other cliffs were too small or too broken, and lacked suitable ledges. This WNW-facing cliff (Figure 1) is at $33^{\circ} 56'S$ $24^{\circ} 41'E$, on the northern side of a range of mountains, 12 km (7.5 miles), as the griffon flies, from Humansdorp, and just to the east of the highest point on the topo map (Bakenberg, 784 m.a.m.s.l.). This cliff is about 9 miles from Humansdorp, if one were to travel to it along a road or track.

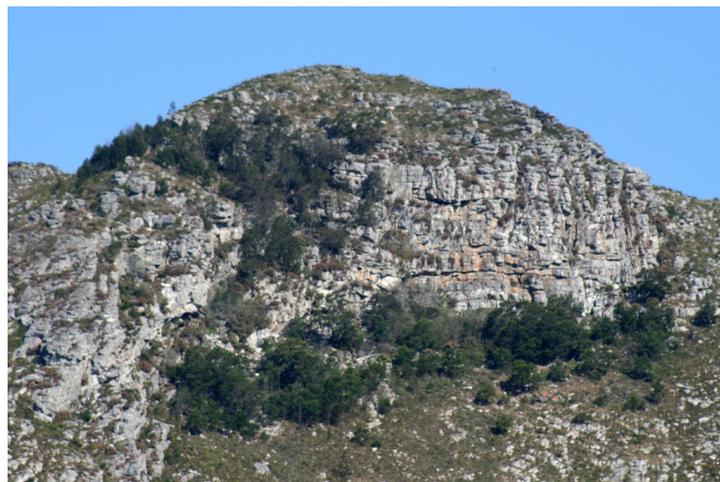


Figure 1. The cliff north-west of the town of Humansdorp, Eastern Cape, South Africa, where a small group of Cape Griffons *Gyps coprotheres* roosted, and reportedly bred, until the end of the 19th century. The trees seen in the picture are all alien, invasive, black wattles *Acacia mearnsii* (Photo: A Boshoff).

We viewed the cliff from a distance of about 1 km and could not see the most prominent sign of a currently or recently active griffon colony, namely the presence of 'whitewash' (white faecal matter) on the cliff face. This was not surprising, given that Masterson (1916) stated that "This bird has entirely disappeared from this [Humansdorp] district and has not been seen for 15 years [i.e. about 1900]". In a vulture survey conducted in the Cape Province in 1965/66, it was recorded that the species had "disappeared from the area" (Boshoff & Vernon 1979) and there were no reports of it there in the 1976 Cape Province vulture survey (Boshoff & Vernon 1979, 1980). Since then, only a few vagrants have been recorded from the general region (Mundy *et al.* 1997).

Based on the relatively small number of suitable ledges on the cliff face, we considered that probably only about 30-35 griffons would have used the site and, if breeding did indeed occur,

there were, at best, probably no more than around 10-12 nesting pairs. However, there is no hard evidence that the griffons did breed on the cliff and we are of the opinion that it is more likely to have been a roost site.

In early historical times, the coastal plain on which present-day Humansdorp is located supported a, generally, low-growing and grassy vegetation and a large variety of game species was recorded in the area by 19th century observers (Skead 2007). Thus, the griffons that used the Humansdorp site must have foraged over this plain, as well as over the wide and fertile floodplain of the nearby Gamtoos River, to the east.

The reasons for the abandonment of this site by the griffons as far back as 1900 can only be speculated upon. It is likely to be the result of a combination of a number of human-related activities, e.g. a shortage of carrion caused by the shooting out of all the game animals,

improved animal husbandry on stock farms, direct persecution through poisoning and shooting, and inadvertent poisoning during predator control operations by small-stock farmers (see Boshoff & Vernon 1980).

However, it has also been postulated that the decline of the Cape Griffon in the southern parts of South Africa may have been related to two events to the north that attracted the birds to those parts (Boshoff & Vernon 1980). These events, which both resulted in the availability of significant amounts of carrion on the veld, are the Rinderpest Epidemic, which ravaged large parts of

southern Africa in 1895 and in subsequent years, which killed millions of head of livestock, and even game, and the 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer War, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of horses. Did the Humansdorp griffons perhaps leave to take advantage of these feeding opportunities, never to return?

As we sat and surveyed the cliff in the warming winter sun, enjoying our picnic lunch, we imagined that we could hear the rush of wings as these great birds lifted on the fresh south-westerly breeze as it swept in over the mountain from the nearby Indian Ocean. All that greeted us were empty, and silent, skies.

Keywords: *Gyps coprotheres*, roost, breeding colony, Humansdorp, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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