

Hooded Vultures *Neophron monachus* at Kamfinsa Farm

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The Hooded Vulture *Neophron monachus* occurs naturally in most of Zambia's rural areas, especially around large cattle farms and human habitations. Being next to a large game farm, The Meintjes have a number of Hooded Vultures on their farm, Kamfinsa Dairy Farm. About seven years ago they slaughtered a sheep for their kitchen and the crows and an eagle that was hanging around at the time, got the pickings. To their surprise, that afternoon a few vultures arrived for a meal too. After circling above for a while, they all took turns to make an ungraceful landing and jostle for the best place to dine. After the surprising encounter they implemented a rule that all offals and in-delicacies were left aside for what were now known as the 'Bwana's birds'. They have adopted the role and they now feed around twenty individuals on a regular basis. They breed inside the trees around the farm and are a regular site near the calves who provide another treat in their droppings which are rich in calcium and protein due to their milk diet. They have been spotted feeding on locusts and other invertebrates around the farm yard as well as making use of the water troughs for their ritual baths, often up to four times a day. Hooded Vultures are fairly small, around 26 inches or 70 centimetres

long, the females being larger than the males. They are dark brown with short, rounded tails and thin slender beaks, with a pinkish face that can turn blue when they are excited. They have feet that are adapted for running and walking on flat ground. They have long wings and can soar for long periods of time. They range widely in Africa, south of the Sahara desert, and are common in open plains, savannas, forests, coastal areas and villages. Only Hooded Vultures are common in forested regions where they depend on the presence of humans. All vultures, in spite of their apparently unappetizing manner of feeding are quite clean birds, which bathe frequently. Vultures detect dead animals by sight and by the movements of other vultures and other carrion (decaying flesh) eating birds. They sometimes gorge so heavily that they can scarcely fly. Hooded Vultures are silent birds, especially around their nests which contains only one egg that has reddish spots on a beige base. Vultures cannot expect to eat every day as carcasses may not be available. So their crops and gizzards are distensible and can hold enough food to last for several days. Even young vultures survive without feeding daily. Hooded Vultures are scavengers that consume food from a variety of sources. Decaying

flesh from animal carcasses is a principle source. Because of its relatively small size and weak bill it generally awaits its turn at a carcass to pick up minor scraps left behind by the other vultures. In towns or cities they search for food in refuse dumps and gutters. On sea shores they feed at low tide on mussels, spiny lobsters, molluscs, dead fish and other stranded edibles. These vultures breed all year long and normally nests in trees constructing their nests from

huge sticks lined with leaves. Although wild, Hooded Vultures tolerate and sometimes depend on humans to help stem their appetite. The Meintjes family from Kamfinsa Farm have come to look at the vultures there as an integral part of their farm and surroundings. Providing a service the vultures clean and control the amount of carrion left from the butchery and provide hours of entertainment for onlookers, while also being a valuable part of Zambia's natural wild life.

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