

VULTURE SNIPPETS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Are the Kruger National Park's vultures history?!

We spent a week in the Kruger National Park (KNP), South Africa, from 27 June to 4 July 2006. We drove around the southern part of the Park between Malelane, Berg-en-Dal, Afsaal, Pretoriuskop, Skukuza, Tshokwane, Sweni (trails camp near Nwanetsi), Lower-Sabie and Mbiyamiti. Being keen bird-watchers, we made a list of all the bird species seen during our time in the Park. With all the migrants gone we only managed to see 140 bird species. With my special interest in vultures, we were constantly on the lookout for them, but only managed to observe three species. What is alarming is the fact that we only saw seven vultures in total, one

White-headed *Trigonoceps occipitalis*, five Hooded *Necrosyrtes monachus* and one African White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus*! Interesting though was the fact that the White-headed Vulture was sitting in a tree with a Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* and a Ground Hornbill *Bucorvus leadbeateri* along the Sabie River. The five Hooded Vultures were together in a tree also along the Sabie River and the African White-backed Vulture was seen soaring near Malelane. Is it normal to see so few vultures in five days in the whole southern part of the KNP? I remember seeing lots of vultures almost every day when I working in Berg-en-Dal, Lower Sabie and Skukuza from 1992 to 1996. Are the KNP vulture numbers known or counted annually?

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Kunkilling Forest Park, The Gambia

Kunkilling Forest Park is situated in the Central River Division in The Gambia just east of JanJanbureh Island. I worked with the Department of Forestry and the local community to open the site up for bird-watching in 2006. There are good numbers of African White-backed Vultures *G. africanus* breeding in borassus palms. This signboard painted by a local artist in the area shows the logo of a *G. africanus* soaring past a borassus frond.

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Cape Vultures at Oribi carcass

While travelling from Lydenburg to Dullstroom, South Africa, at 12h20 on 11 August 2006, I noticed five Cape Vultures *Gyps coprotheres* standing near an *Oribi Ourebia ourebi* carcass about 30 m from the road, 16 km from Dullstroom.

The birds were extremely nervous, and had not started feeding on the carcass. After watching them for about five minutes, they started taking off without feeding. I then left hoping that they would return to finish their loot.

Pieter du Plessis; e-mail address: prop@wol.co.za



Bearded Vulture Annual Report (Reintroduction in the Alps)

The new Bearded Vulture Annual Report (Reintroduction in the Alps) for

2005 is available as two .pdf files (4 MB). For a copy of this report, contact Schaden Gabriele at: Gabriele.Schaden@vu-wien.ac.at



Breeding hopes high as Andean Condors settle in new home

Andean Condors Sonya and Gus were last night settling into their new £100,000 Welsh Mountain Zoo home. The majestic birds have lived at the zoo in Upper Colwyn Bay for 20 years. Their new Condor Haven boasts two breeding caves, lots of perches and a bathing pool. Hopes are high that the condors will breed next year. The Condor Haven is part of a project involving conservationists in Ecuador and Wales. The Zoological Society of Wales Association helped pay for the enclosure to be built. It has also pledged to pay a minimum of \$1,000 each year for five years towards the Ecuador project. WMZ zoological director Nick

Jackson said: "By investing directly in condor conservation in their native habitat as well as in our breeding project in Colwyn Bay we can help sustain these magnificent birds into the long-term future." The project, called Condor Huasi, is a conservation and education scheme that aims to raise awareness in Ecuador of the importance of wildlife in the Andean highlands known as Paramo. Fernando Polanco, executive director of Fundación Galo Plaza Lasso, the organisation which governs the Condor Project, said: "We believe that commitments such as this one will help the majestic Andean Condor to once again soar the Andean skies of Ecuador in greater numbers."

From: ICI North Wales, 23 August 2006
<http://tinyurl.com/kbnj2>

Egyptian Vulture tracking

The movements of "Arianna", a young of Egyptian Vulture which hatched at our center and was released with a satellite

tag in southern Italy in August 2006, can be followed on the following site: www.capovaccaio.it.

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***Some more links to articles about lead poisoning and California Condor conservation efforts***

<http://www.condorinfo.org/default.htm>

http://www.azgfd.com/w_c/california_condor.shtml

***90% decline in vulture population in Kundian***

Lahore – There has been a 90% decrease in the population of White-backed Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* in Kundian near Mianwali in three months, according to a World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) survey. In March 2005, the Punjab Wildlife Department (PWD) observed 650 White-backed Vultures in Kundian. Only 71 vultures were spotted in Kundian in a WWF survey in June, said Uzma Khan, WWF project coordinator. She said that of the 60 nests investigated, only 17 nests showed signs of life. Khan said 93% of nests were

on Shisham trees and the rest were on Sumbal trees. She said that a formal survey in collaboration with the PWD was underway and its details would be revealed soon. The vulture population in South Asia is critically endangered. The main cause of this decline is diclofenac, a widely used anti-inflammatory drug in livestock. Vultures that feed on the carcasses of animals treated with diclofenac develop kidney problems and die. In 2001, it was reported that there had been a 50% decline in the vulture population, but the recent studies have put the figure at 90%. According to PWD experts, the remaining vultures could

vanish in months if preventive measures are not taken. "Vultures are extremely important to a healthy ecosystem and their extinction will lead to loss of biodiversity and shrinking of the gene pool," they said. PWD sources said that various wildlife forums have been asked to submit recommendations on how to save this critically endangered species. They said that the first recommendation they received was to ban diclofenac use in veterinary medicines. The Punjab government is planning a 'two-phase captive breeding' programme for vultures, both White-backed and Long-billed *G. indicus*, to save them from

extinction. The programme will probably be at Changa Manga. According to project documents, in the first phase, 75 White-backed Vultures, 64 nestlings and 11 adults, would be collected to form 25 pairs. Closed-circuit television cameras would be installed at Changa Manga to monitor the birds. A slaughterhouse, livestock corrals and freezers would be built near aviaries to ensure the vultures are fed meat not contaminated by diclofenac. Sources said that international agencies related to vulture conservation were being contacted to fund this project.

Shoaib Ahmed, 15 January 2007
<http://www.dailytimes.com.pk>



Cape Griffon school badge

A minibus that belonged to the Cala Community School in Cala, a small village in the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, was observed by AFB on a field trip in the north-eastern Eastern Cape in August 2006. The school badge (shown here) on the vehicle contains a very good image of a Cape Griffon, a species that was once common and widespread in the Cala district. It still occurs there but only occasionally and in small numbers. The badge was designed by two pupils at the school, indicating an awareness of the wildlife of the region. The teacher accompanying the pupils in the minibus was aware that the species was almost extinct in the Cala area.



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Royal support for Save the Vulture campaign

On Saturday 7 October 2006, a gala dinner was held in Tokyo where Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado of Japan, Honorary President of BirdLife International, launched a campaign to support BirdLife's initiative to rescue Asia's ailing vulture populations. Her Imperial Highness spoke of the importance of BirdLife's quick actions to save vultures in the region. Vultures were once a common sight throughout South Asia, particularly in India, but three species have suffered declines of up to 97% in recent years because of poisoning by the veterinary drug Diclofenac. Vultures feeding on cattle carcasses treated with Diclofenac become lethargic and eventually die through kidney failure and dehydration. BirdLife partners in India, Nepal, Pakistan and the UK have been involved with others in the identification of Meloxicam as a safe alternative to Diclofenac. The Indian

authorities have been quick to react to the crisis, with a national ban on use of Diclofenac as a veterinary medicine and the establishment of captive vulture breeding centres. "Asia's vultures are in severe crisis and funds are urgently needed to support captive breeding schemes to prevent their extinction whilst Diclofenac is phased out in favour of Meloxicam," said Richard Grimmitt, Head of BirdLife's Asia Division. The Save the Vulture campaign was launched as one of the global activities celebrating the 2006 World Bird Festival, and will run until April 2007. 2007 also marks the 50th anniversary of the cultural exchange agreement between Japan and India. Those attending the dinner included His Excellency Mr Hemant Krishan Singh, Indian Ambassador to Japan, and Mr K. Ramadoss, Chief Executive of the Bank of India in Japan. The event was sponsored by the Bank of India and with the support of Taj Enterprise.

From: BirdLife International website, 11 October 2006

http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/10/vulture_campaign.html



Articles on California Condors and lead

For those interested in the subject of mortality and morbidity in California Condors exposed to lead toxicity from spent ammunition, the following papers are available as .pdf files at www.peregrinefund.org. From the main page click on Research Library, then on The Peregrine Fund Publications, then PDF Files of Recent Publications.

Hunt, W.G., Burnham, W., Parish, C.N., Burnham, K.K., Mutch, B. & Oaks, J.L. 2006. Bullet fragments in deer remains: implications for lead exposure in avian scavengers. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 34(1): 167-170.

Hunt, W.G., Parish, C.N., Farry, S.C., & Lord, T.G. In press. Movements of introduced California Condors in Arizona in relation to lead exposure. In: Mee,

A., Hall, L.S. & Grantham, J. (eds). *California Condors in the 21st Century*. American Ornithologists' Union and Nuttall Ornithological Club.

Parish, C.N., Heinrich, W.R. & Hunt, W.G. In press. Five years of lead exposure among California Condors released in Arizona. In: Mee, A., Hall, L.S. & Grantham, J. (eds). *California Condors in the 21st Century*. American Ornithologists' Union and Nuttall Ornithological Club.

Woods, C.P., Heinrich, W.R., Farry, S.C., Osborn, S.A.H. & Cade, T.J. In press. Survival and reproduction of California Condors released in Arizona. In: Mee, A., Hall, L.S. & Grantham, J. (eds). *California Condors in the 21st Century*. American Ornithologists' Union and Nuttall Ornithological Society.

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Rare condors being poisoned by bullets in their food, study confirms

Hunters in California may be unintentionally killing off the state's rare California Condors. Lead from shotgun pellets and other ammunition is poisoning many of the vultures as they scavenge abandoned carcasses and gut piles, a new study confirms. The poisonings are threatening efforts to re-establish wild populations of the scavenger, which nearly died out 20 years ago because of dwindling food supplies and poison traps left by ranchers. The new research compares the types of lead found in condors' blood with the lead from ammunition and from dead wild animals not killed by hunters. The results, which were published online last week by the journal *Environmental Science and Technology*, show a match between the lead in acutely poisoned birds and the lead in hunters' bullets. California Condors first began

to decline during the Pleistocene era, which ended about 12,000 years ago. The extinction of many large mammals left the vultures with little to eat. A remnant population survived near the U.S. Pacific coast, where they fed on dead whales and seals that washed ashore. Whaling and fur hunting further restricted the birds' food supply. Dead livestock from increased ranching provided no relief, as ranchers often intentionally poisoned carcasses to kill predators such as wolves, which also kill the condors. By 1982 only 22 condors were left, 19 of them in the wild. Four years later 11 of the wild birds had died, prompting a controversial decision to catch the remaining birds and breed them in captivity. The last wild condor was captured in the spring of 1987. The condor recovery project has since succeeded in raising a number of chicks to adulthood, but many of the birds don't survive after being released into the wild.

Susan Brown, *National Geographic News*, 7 September 2006

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/09/060907-condors.html>

Bearded Vultures on the Move

In the project “Bearded Vultures on the Move”, initiated by the Foundation Pro Bearded Vulture, young Bearded Vultures get released into the wild, marked with small satellite transmitters. The website www.bartgeier.ch/unterwegs

provides regular information about the journeys of the transmitter-marked Bearded Vultures. The website is available in English, French, Italian and German (see language buttons upper right).

***Cape Griffon completes an epic journey***

A one-year-old Cape Griffon *Gyps coprotheres* made an epic journey across three international boundaries from South Africa to Namibia in 190 days. This young vulture was rescued by children of the Indermark community at Blouberg in Limpopo and rehabilitated at the De Wildt Vulture Unit in the Magaliesberg. Upon its release it flew off with a yellow wing tag number B017 and this was what triggered Maria Diekmann's (Rare and Endangered Species Trust, REST) interest on 17 August 2006 when the vulture arrived at their vulture restaurant close to the Waterberg north of Otjiwarongo, Namibia. The De Wildt Vulture Unit rehabilitates injured, poisoned and orphaned vultures of which a significant number come from the Blouberg Cape Griffon colony in Limpopo. As the Cape Griffon is nearly extinct in Namibia, a number of these birds have been sent to REST for a population supplementation project in northern Namibia. This particular bird, however, did not require an airticket or a CITES permit for his epic journey! The vulture was released on the game farm, Nyoka Ridge, on 2

February 2006 after being rehabilitated and fitted with the wing tag at De Wildt. The farm is situated near the Scheerpoort Cape Griffon colony in the Magaliesberg and it was hoped that the vulture would survive and contribute to the survival of this endangered species. To the surprise of the researchers, the vulture flew across the western region of South Africa, then over Botswana to reach its destination in northern Namibia, covering well over 1500 km. Vultures are soaring birds and thus require suitable thermal conditions to fly. This means that the vulture would have had to roost many nights somewhere in the bush after a day's journey. The De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust accommodates a large number of captive vultures for the purposes of research, education, breeding and rehabilitation. The De Wildt Vulture Unit was a key player in the search for the answers to the detrimental effects of diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory drug that was responsible for the recent decimation of the Oriental White-backed Vulture. Tracking vultures to determine their movements is part of the De Wildt Vulture Unit's commitment to save this majestic species. Some vultures have been fitted with cellular tracking devices

and this has also proven to be a valuable method of tracking the birds in real time. The De Wildt Vulture Unit is grateful to its collaborators and sponsors, without which its work would not be possible: Sasol, Rand Merchant; Computer Facilities, Eskom; BirdLife South Africa,

Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Working Group, Wildlife Biodiversity Resources of the National Zoological Gardens, the Veterinary Faculty of the University of Pretoria, Air Namibia and the Bateleurs.

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Palm-nut Vulture in Western Cape, South Africa

An adult Palm-nut Vulture was seen by Andrew Schofield at the Bot River lagoon (34o19'S, 19o08'E), Western

Cape, South Africa, at 11h00 on 12 August 2006. After the bird took off from its dead tree perch, it was chased by an African Fish-eagle.

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Lassoing a California Vulture (Condor)

"I had heard of California Vultures being lassoed, but had been somewhat sceptical of the actual occurrence, because I had never seen their near relatives, the Turkey Vultures gorged to the necessary extent. As others may have doubted the probability of this statement also I will relate the circumstances of the capture of a California Vulture near here with a riata. May 24, 1899, I was at the principal dairy of the Santa Ysabel Rancho. Late in the afternoon Massimo Morelli, a Swiss vaquero employed on the ranch, came to me and said that he had that afternoon caught a California Vulture with his riata and it was then at one of the other dairies,

alive in a box. I arranged to purchase it and sent a wagon after the bird, which he returned with after dark. As the box it was in was too small to allow the bird to stand upright I changed its quarters, but it seemed unable to stand up. I meant to keep it alive some time to study its habits in captivity and photograph it; however in the morning it was dead, greatly to my disappointment. On skinning it I found the flesh discolored on the lower part of the neck and believe the choking of the rope caused its death. The bird was an adult male in fair condition; weight 20 pounds; stomach nearly empty; length 45 inches; spread of wings 112 inches. I have known Morelli several years, and know him to be reliable. The following is

his account of the capture. He was out on the range looking after the stock as usual. Shortly after noon he saw this vulture at the carcass of a calf. As the bird seemed stupid he made a dash at it and threw his riata over its neck before it rose. He says the bird ran but did not seem able to fly. The bird proved difficult to handle, and struggled so that he was afraid it would get away. So he tied its wings together

across its back with his handkerchief, and finally had to lash the bird to a pole to keep it from flapping under his horses (sic) feet, as he was afraid to drag it behind him too much. Massimo says when he caught the bird it disgorged and stunk horribly. From his manner I fancied that he received more of the veal than he liked. The bird struck him several severe blows with his bill."

From: Stephens, F. 1899. *Bulletin of the Cooper Ornithological Club*. 88



Vultures lay siege to Amazon jungle city

Lima, Peru – Hundreds of vultures have swarmed the airport of the biggest city in Peru's Amazon jungle, putting planes at risk and threatening to cut off the city of more than 400,000 people from the rest of the country. The birds already have forced the airport in Iquitos – a popular tourist destination that can only be reached from the capital Lima by air – to shut down eight hours a day, said Aurelio Crovetto, head of Peru's state-run airport authority. "One of these birds only has to bump into a plane and the effect could be devastating," he said. "If one gets into an engine, it will destroy it, the motor will stop and the plane will come down." Set on the banks of an Amazon River tributary, Iquitos is one of the

world's largest cities inaccessible by road. The vultures became a problem when migration swelled Iquitos' population and extra trash pushed the edge of a garbage dump, which attract the birds, closer to the airport. The vultures have collided with planes at least 19 times since 2002, according to the airport authority. Photographs show engine parts and wing flaps mangled by avian encounters. The airport authority blames local officials, whom they say have ignored nearly a decade of complaints about the dump. But the city's mayor says airport operators should be better equipped to scare away the vultures. Peru's commerce and tourism minister has referred to the situation as "surreal" and promised action.

From: *Planet Ark*, 21 August 2006

<http://www.planetark.com/dailynewsstory.cfm/newsid/37759/story.htm>



Vulture hide built on NamibRand Nature Reserve, Namibia

During April and May 2006, a vulture hide was built on NamibRand Nature Reserve. Raleigh International sent two groups of 14 Venturers to Keerweerder to build the hide. During the first week, the group from various parts of the UK, plus three Namibians, dug out old telephone poles. In the sandy areas it was easy, but in the rocky parts, the going was harder, but everyone learned to work with a pick and a shovel. The next two weeks were spent preparing the site, cutting the telephone poles and building some of the steps up the dune to the hide. The hide was built on a granite koppie and some of the large boulders were incorporated in the walls, also built of the telephone poles. The group was taken for two game drives on the Reserve and also visited the Dunes Lodge. The next group again assisted with the removal of telephone poles, but certainly worked hard in the rocky

terrain. This group included Namibians and three Venturers from Uganda. The steps and a toilet were completed. The hide was given a shade-cloth roof, benches and a shelf for binoculars, books and cameras. Now all that is missing are the vultures. NamibRand will supply food for the vultures and carcasses of domestic stock from neighbouring farms. Posters on the threats facing vultures, their breeding biology, the species seen on NamibRand, research and monitoring and other information, are being prepared. The Vulture Study Group of Namibia would like to thank wardens Danica Shaw and Nils Odendaal for having the hide built and promoting vulture conservation. Andreas Keding is thanked for organising the building material, helping with the planning and assisting with the construction. Namibia Nature Foundation is thanked for their financial assistance. Without the help of the Raleigh Venturers, it would not have been possible.

Peter Bridgeford, Vulture Study Group, Namibia
From: ***Raptors Namibia Newsletter*** No. 6, July 2006.



African White-backed Vultures nesting in Acacia trees

During the past four years a concerted effort has been made to ring African White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus* nestlings in the area to the east of Windhoek, Namibia. During the ringing expeditions we have come across several nests in tree species that are not mentioned in “The vultures of Africa” (Mundy, P, Butchart, D, Ledger, J. & Piper, S. 1992. *The Vultures of Africa*. Acorn Books, Randburg, & Russel Friedman Books, Halfway House, South Africa). Many

of the nests are along ephemeral river courses where the dominant tree species is *Acacia karroo* (sweet thorn), but we have also found nests in *A. haematoxylon* (grey camel-thorn) and *A. mellifera* (black-thorn acacia)



Table 1. Species, number and minimum and maximum height of trees utilised by African White-backed Vultures in the area to the east of Windhoek, Namibia

| <i>Tree species</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>Min height (m)</i> | <i>Max height (m)</i> |
|------------------------|----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>A. karroo</i> | 19 | 8.9 | 15.5 |
| <i>A. haematoxylon</i> | 6 | 7.0 | 11.0 |
| <i>A. mellifera</i> | 2 | 10.0 | 10.5 |

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