

## Information from 2006, 2010 and 2011 for the Karnmelkspruit Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres* colony, Lady Grey district, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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The Cape Vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*), a southern African endemic, is listed as a threatened species ('Vulnerable') in southern Africa (Barnes 2000) and globally (IUCN 2012). Information relating to the structure, size, breeding status and conservation of a Cape Vulture colony (at 30° 50'S; 27° 14'E) in the Karnmelkspruit Gorge in the Lady Grey district in the north-eastern region of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province, is available in the literature (Boshoff & Vernon 1979, 1980; Vernon *et al.* 1983; Vernon 1984, Boshoff & Vernon 1987; Boshoff 1990). This note provides additional information, obtained during three visits to the colony by the author.

### 5 August 2006.

#### *Number of birds*

A count of 120 vultures (comprising adults, immatures and first-year birds), either flying or perched on the ledges of the eastern wall of the colony (and including the adult birds on nests – see next paragraph), was made at 16h00 from the western wall. Since it was not known how many birds were perched on the cliffs of the western wall (i.e. below and out of sight

of the observer), at the time of the count, this must be regarded as a minimum count.

#### *Number of active nests*

The cliffs used by the vultures on both the eastern and western walls of the gorge were searched (using binoculars and a spotting scope) for active nests. Twelve nests, with adults sitting on them, all located on ledges under a large overhang, were found on the eastern wall. During the observation period, small nestlings were seen in five of these 12 nests. No active nests (i.e. with adults sitting on them or standing next to them) were observed on the western wall.

### 12 December 2010.

#### *Number of birds*

A count of flying birds (comprising adults, immatures and first-year birds) was conducted, from the eastern wall, at 16h30, when all the birds then present at the colony were perched on the cliff ledges. A count of 165 birds was made; 150 were perched on ledges on the western wall, and 15 were on ledges on a small section of the eastern wall that could be observed from the counting position on the eastern wall. Since there may have been some unseen birds perched

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/vulnew.v62i1.5>

on the remainder of the eastern wall (i.e. out of sight of the observers), the count of 165 must be regarded as a minimum one.

### **20 and 21 June 2011.**

#### *Number of birds*

A count was made from the eastern wall of flying birds and birds perched on ledges, or sitting on nests, on the western wall. A small section of the eastern wall could also be observed from the counting position on the eastern wall. At 16h30 on the 20th, this count revealed the presence of 155 vultures. However, owing to the fact that any birds perched, at the time of the count, on out of sight ledges on the remainder of the eastern wall, this must be regarded as a minimum count. In fact, if the adults sitting on the confirmed 23 nests (see below) on the eastern wall, which could not be observed during the count, are considered, a minimum count of 178 vultures is obtained.

#### *Number of active nests*

A count made from the eastern wall revealed the presence of nine active nests (i.e. with sitting adults), and one nest that may have had a sitting adult, on the western wall. Of these, one confirmed active nest and one possible active nest were located on a wide ledge to the south-west, where the gorge makes a sharp turn to the right (to the west). The remaining confirmed nests were scattered in the main section of the colony on the western wall, and these were grouped as follows: two nests, five nests, one nest.

A count made from the western wall confirmed the presence of 23 nests, with

adults sitting on them, on the eastern wall. Another nest appeared to have an (unattended) egg in it, but owing to poor light this could not be confirmed. Of the 23 active nests, 10 were on a large round rock (boulder) under the large overhang in the main section of the colony on the eastern wall. Six were on a single ledge a few hundred metres further down the gorge. The remainder of the active nests were scattered on the eastern wall, within the colony.

In summary, the colony contained 32 confirmed active nests, and two additional nests that may have been active.

### **Temporal changes in the status of the Karnmelkspruit colony.**

The dynamic nature of a Cape Vulture colony is illustrated by the information from the Karnmelkspruit colony (see the references in the first paragraph and the information in this note). Taking into account the 13 years (during the period 1976 to 2011) that this colony has been intermittently monitored for breeding activity, it is evident that, initially, breeding occurred regularly (annually) but that the number of active nests exhibited a progressive decline from the late 1970s to 1986, at least. No monitoring took place from 1987 to 1989 and in 1990 it was established that no breeding activity occurred and the colony had declined to a small roost. When the colony was visited in 2006, there was evidence that breeding activity had resumed there. Although no breeding monitoring visits were made in the 2007-2010 period, a visit in 2011 revealed not only that breeding occurred in

that year but also that there was a marked increase in the number of active nests since 2006, thereby suggesting that breeding had indeed occurred every year in the 2007-2010 period. Thus, this colony has changed its status from that of a regular and relatively large breeding site to a small roost to a seemingly growing breeding site. The factor, or factors, whether of an internal or external nature, that brought about these changes in the status of this colony have not been researched.

### Acknowledgements

Ian Cloete and Leon Feuth kindly permitted access across their properties to the colony in 2006, 2010 and 2011. Financial and material support was provided by Eskom Holdings Ltd and the Centre for African Conservation Ecology, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth. The Mazda Wildlife Fund is thanked for providing assistance with transport. Two reviewers are thanked for feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

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### Keywords:

Cape Vulture, *Gyps coprotheres*, Karnmelkspruit, Eastern Cape, South Africa, breeding activity, number of vultures

