

Sighting of rare vagrant Palm-nut Vulture Gypohierax angolensis in north-east Limpopo Province, South Africa

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On 16 September 2006, a sub-adult Palm-nut Vulture *Gypohierax angolensis* was observed in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. On a field trip to ring free-flying raptors, at 06h15 the authors dropped a balchatri for a medium-sized brown raptor that was perched on a telephone pole adjacent to a tar road. As is practice, the vehicle was turned and a telescope fixed on the bird. The bird then revealed its identity. It was a subadult bird (Dean 2006), by virtue of its mid-brown colour but with the upperparts a motley white with the typical two-tone perched wing pattern of the adult bird. The bare facial skin was pale yellowish. The bird was not attracted to the bait mouse, but instead dropped down onto the verge where it fed for a short while. It then proceeded to move forward, pole by pole, scanning the ground below. All that remained at the site at which the vulture had fed was a few feathers from a very squashed hornbill road kill. The Palm-nut Vulture then flew north-east just above the surface of the tar road at a height of about 1.5 m (seeming to follow the white line!). It landed now and again to feed on small prey – single mouthfuls – on the road surface. The flight was heavy and quite slow, with

glides interspersed with strong wing beats. After we had watched the bird with both telescope and binoculars for at least 15 minutes, our ever bolder advances caused it to move off to the south.

The area where the Palm-nut Vulture was sighted was between Lephalele (previously Ellisras) and Tom Burke, after the road to Stockpoort splits off to the west, and just before the Besca turnoff (coordinates 23°17'.471''S, 27°46'182''E), at the farm Rustenburg. Vegetation in the area is dry bushveld with the Limpopo River approximately 9 km away, but the Mogul (Mokolo) River only 3 km away. The altitude of the area is below 900 m a.s.l. (not checked by GPS). The Palm-nut Vulture generally occurs at low altitudes – below 1000 m a.s.l. – but most often below 500 m.

The normal distribution of this species in southern Africa is limited to the northeast coastal area in KwaZulu Natal, where the species is invariably associated with Kosi/Raphia Palms *Raphia australis*, the oil seeds of which are the main source of food (Mundy *et.al.* 1992). This particular bird appeared to be feeding on carrion, and to the best of our knowledge there are no Raphia palms or Oil palms *Elaeis guineensis* within several hundred

kilometres of the locality where we observed the vulture. A grove of exotic palms houses a collection of palm species to the north of Tzaneen.

The record described here is typical of the vagrant sightings of especially immature birds that are occasionally seen far from the normal southern African distribution region. The presence of these occasional vagrant birds is explained by Tarboton & Allan (1984) to be wandering immatures from Angola or Zambia. In the period until 1984, there

were six records in the former Transvaal. An immature bird was recorded at the Lichtenburg vulture restaurant in June 1998, and there was an unconfirmed sighting near Thabazimbi in November 1998. In 2005, a single Palm-nut Vulture was recorded at a vulture restaurant near Polokwane (A.J. Pienaar, pers comm.) There have also been occasional records from the Berg River, Dassen Island, Elands Bay, the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape, and Namibia.

References

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