

Homesick vulture moves into retirement village

Craig Bishop

Residents of Pietermaritzburg's Evergreen Retirement Village had a bit of a turn recently when a rare and homesick vulture took up residence in a pine tree in their garden. Believing it to be a harbinger of bad news, one resident apparently turned to another and said, "We had better do a head count to see if anyone is missing". Village manager Jeremy Richardson called Ben Hoffman of Raptor Rescue at Umlaas Road, who identified the bird as an African White-Backed Vulture, a species seldom seen in the area, occurring closer to the Kruger National Park and Kimberley. Hoffman then noticed that the bird had a yellow wing tag. With his binoculars he was able to read the number on the tag – A019. A phone call to André Botha, manager of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Bird of Prey Working Group revealed what Hoffman already suspected. The vulture was the one he took recently to Mpumalanga for release after it was restored to health in January this year. Hoffman said a Zululand resident brought the bird in to the Centre for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (CROW) where it spent about two months receiving special care. In May the vulture, a young one hatched

in about September last year, was taken by Raptor Rescue to Mpumalanga where Botha fitted the wing tag before handing the bird over to Brian Jones of the Moholoholo Rehabilitation Centre near Hoedspruit. A week later Jones declared the bird ready for release because it was flying quite strongly. He released it into a group of the same species and it was not seen again until it suddenly turned up in the City of Choice, some 650 km away. Hoffman speculated that the bird is perhaps on its way home to Zululand where it hatched ten months before. He asked anyone who sees the bird again to contact him on (031) 785-2981. Raptor Rescue is based at the newly opened African Bird of Prey Centre on the Lion Park road where other vultures and many species of hawks, owls and eagles are on display. This is also where Hoffman's wife, Shannon, and her team, present daily flying demonstrations. "We have a wonderful new facility here," Shannon said, "and we are currently rehabilitating a critically rare Bearded Vulture that was injured in a trap. "This special bird will also be released eventually, again with a yellow wing tag but also a GPS tracking device."

From: ***The Witness***, Pietermaritzburg
Craig Bishop; e-mail address: craig@witness.co.za
10 July 2006

