

A WHITE-BACKED VULTURE AT A CAPE VULTURE COLONY

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Accepted: February 1978

Although nestlings of the Cape griffon vulture *Gyps coprotheres* have been ringed at colonies in the Magaliesberg mountains, Transvaal, since 1950, it is only since May 1973 that the foot of the cliffs has been regularly and thoroughly searched. In this way, many rings have been recovered, and a couple of hundred carcasses of nestling and fledged Cape vultures examined. In September 1977, under the two main colonies in the Magaliesberg, a total of 64 carcasses was found, of which 35 were fledged birds. This total in itself was unusually high, and moreover some birds showed signs of having been shot (Ledger & Mundy in prep.). However, in addition to these, one carcass of a white-backed vulture *G. africanus* was found at the foot of the west face of the colony at Roberts' Farm (25° 51' S/27° 18' E). As with so many of the carcasses, this one had been scavenged, presumably by a porcupine, and only one wing, the head, and the tail remained (intact, so the carcass had not been scavenged in the veld by a Cape vulture and brought to the colony to feed its chick). Because this find was unique, the remnants were examined in detail (and photographed) so as to make absolutely certain of the specific identification.

The contour feathers were dark brown in colour, and were narrowly and longitudinally streaked with white; contour feathers of immature *G. coprotheres* are slate-grey in colour and broadly streaked. The length of the wing was 626 mm. The mean wing length (with range in brackets) of 17 immature *G. coprotheres* was 701 mm (655-730 mm), and of 16 immature *G. africanus* captured near Kimberley (28° 39' S/24° 50' E) was 621 mm (590-650 mm). The tail had twelve rectrices which is the proper

number for *G. africanus*. Among a total of 100 *G. coprotheres* of all ages, all had fourteen rectrices which is normal for the large *Gyps* vultures (Brown & Amadon 1968).

The feathers were pointed at their tips which showed the bird to be in its first year, and it doubtless fledged at the end of 1976. The state of the carcass suggested that the bird had died about two months earlier, at a time which is the height of the breeding season for *G. coprotheres*. The nearest known breeding site of white-backed vultures is in the Warmbaths area, a distance of about 125 km to the north-east (A C Kemp pers. comm.), although of course this individual could have come from further afield. In many hours of vulture-watching at this and other colonies of Cape vultures, no white-backed vulture has ever been seen, though the two species can often be seen together at carcasses, and perched on pylons around the Magaliesberg, elsewhere in the Transvaal, and in the northern Cape. It should be emphasized that Cape vultures are obligate cliff nesters, as white-backed vultures are obligate tree nesters (pers. obs.). Cape vultures will, however, roost for the night on trees and pylons, but the present instance is apparently the first record of a white-backed vulture roosting on a cliff. The Cape vulture is declining in numbers, but the population in the Magaliesberg mountains, and the Transvaal generally, appears stable (Ledger & Mundy 1976), and it is therefore unlikely that the white-backed vulture is extending its range or niche in this Province. The presence of a young *africanus* at a *coprotheres* breeding colony is thus a mystery and completely out of character.

I thank the Project Fund of the South African Ornithological Society for supporting the work on Cape vultures, Clive Slater for help in the field at that time, and Tom Choate and an anonymous referee for commenting on the manuscript.

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