Monitoring White-backed Vultures *Gyps africanus* in the North West Province (Stellaland), South Africa

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Introduction

We became involved with the ringing of birds in 2002 and started to ring raptors actively since 2003. To date we have ringed more than 1770 raptors from 37 species.

We became involved with the Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres* project at Blouberg Nature Reserve with Johan van Wyk and David Pretorius in 2008. We have also transported many sick or injured *Gyps coprotheres* to the rehabilitation centre at Vulpro, in the Northwest Province.

We started with the Stellaland Raptor Monitoring Project in early 2012. Our area of monitoring stretches from Setlagole in the east of the North West province to McCarthy's Rest in the west of the North West province, covering an area of ± 250 km as the crow flies.

Planning and preparation:

We visited the area in 2012 well in advance of the breeding season to search for White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus* nests.

Exact co-ordinates, farm names and contact details of farmers were not available at that time (only approximate co-ordinates were available for some nests), so we were forced to do some footwork in the area in preparation for the 2012 breeding season.

With the aid of topographical maps and Google Maps we plotted co-ordinates to locate possible farms where there could be *Gyps africanus* nests.

First visit:

During our first visit in April 2012, we met with several farmers and explained the purpose and goals of the project. All the farmers were enthusiastically interested and gave

their consent for us to explore and work on their farms. Some of the farmers also provided us with leads as to where more nests could be found on other farms. At the end of our April 2012 visit we managed to locate a total of 33 possible vulture nests distributed over seven farms. At that time there was no concrete evidence of any breeding activities.

Returning home with a total of 33 possible vulture nests, we realised that our work had now started. We needed to improvise a method to determine which nests were active and we have subsequently, with the aid of telescopic poles and a camera, managed to reach the expected height of 15 meters minimum.

Second visit:

During July 2012 we visited the nest sites again only to learn that the breeding season was in full swing. We experienced very cold and windy weather conditions.

We visited each known nest, and with the aid of the 'extendable' camera we were able to take photographs of the nests and its contents to determine if the nests were active or not. We also started a photographic database of each tree to enable identification of the tree species that are used by White-backed Vultures for breeding. During this visit we also found 30 additional nests.

Third visit:

At the end of September 2012 we re-visited all known nests sites with the aim to ring and fit patagial tags. To our disappointment we found that most of the eggs and chicks that were found during our July visit had disappeared. There was no trace of any remains of chicks or eggs, but there were signs of nest usage during preceding weeks (whitewash).

We managed to ring and tag 13 White-backed Vulture nestlings out of a total of 40 active nests. Two additional White-backed Vulture nestlings were too small to ring or tag. One nest had two eggs in – it is not known if both eggs were of one breeding attempt or if both chicks hatched.

At the end of our September 2012 visit we went home with 40 active and 38 inactive nests in our database.

Reports & Re-sightings:

During January 2013 one incident of poisoning was reported to us from the Stella region.

Our first re-sighting on one of the tagged White-backed Vultures was reported after 5 months and 20 days. This individual, K420, was photographed on a farm southwest of

Koffiefontein in the Free State – a distance of 422 km from where it was originally tagged in the North West province. Koffiefontein is close to Mokala National Park and also a vulture restaurant at Dronfield Nature Reserve, operated by De Beers north of the city of Kimberley. K420 was also seen and photographed several times at the Dronfield vulture restaurant.

The way forward:

a) We need to investigate the reasons for the low rate of breeding success. Possible reasons include:

- Weather conditions
- Predation by other raptors, snakes, baboons, crows, monkeys etc.
- Poisoning
- Muti (traditional use) trade

b) It is possible that utilisation of camera traps could assist investigating why eggs and chicks appear to be disappearing.

c) Possible utilisation of satellite tracking devices to study movement ecology.

d) The continuous long term monitoring of the nests to determine breeding success.

Conclusion:

Our visit was well worth the effort and enables us to monitor over the long term population growth or decline in an important transitional area between the Northern Province breeding colonies (bushveld) and the Kalahari breeding areas.

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