

A rare photo from The Gambia of a pair of White-headed Vultures *Trigonoceps occipitalis* illustrates dimorphism in colour; in celebration of Peter J. Mundy (1941-2023)

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The late Peter J. Mundy (PJM) wrote comprehensively on the sexual dimorphism of the White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis* (Mundy 1985); the paper is illustrated with black and white images of single birds. In early 2022 CRB forwarded a colour picture to PJM of a pair of White-headed Vultures taken by AH in The Gambia in December 2021 (Figure 1) to which PJM immediately responded:

‘Wow, what a superb photo, the first time I think that I have seen a pic of an adult male (top)

and an adult female (bottom) flying together. Note that the female is likely to be heavier than the male, and therefore expected to fly below him. Is he going to try and ‘tumble’ with her? No doubt a pair i.e. mated together. Can’t see any moult in the wing feathers, so are they photographed in the early breeding season, October-January, i.e. dry season? Beautiful blue sky. Breeding severely reduces moult’.



Figure 1. Adult White-headed Vultures male above & female below separated on the difference of dark and white of the inner secondaries, near Jahally-Pacharr, The Gambia. Photograph: AH.

On 13 December 2021 at 14:00 when travelling through open agricultural land (degraded Guinea Savanna) near the Jahally-Pachar rice project, south of the Gambia River in Central River Region (CRR), AH and FB stopped to photograph a mixed group of c. 50 vultures in the process of leaving the ground and gaining altitude. AH & FB remained on the roadside to take photographs and no effort to look for scavenging activity on the ground was made. The in-flight group was made up of Hooded Vultures *Necrosyretes monachus*, African White-backed Vultures *Gyps africanus* and Rüppell's Vultures *Gyps rueppelli* none of which were individually counted. One adult Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus* and two adult White-headed Vultures *Trigonoceps occipitalis* were also present. During the short time that the dispersing assembly remained in camera range attention was focused on the gliding pair of White-headed Vultures, and on the female, which also sailed briefly in unison with the single adult Lappet-faced Vulture (Figure 2).

The White-headed Vulture is sexually dimorphic in colour, a unique characteristic among

the 15 Old World Vulture species (Mundy 1985, Brown & Amadon 1968) and the feature is clearly illustrated in Figure 1 (PJ Mundy pers comm). Figure 1 illustrates the adult male and female White-headed Vulture in flight in the same frame. The image clearly shows an adult male (dark grey inner secondaries) and an adult female (white inner secondaries) together in flight which to the best of our knowledge (and backed up by PJM) is the first time this has been photographed and herewith published in colour. A few of the female's inner all white secondaries are tipped in grey-black and this feature occasionally occurs (C. Murn pers comm). We presume these two birds to be a mated pair; No moult is visible in the flight feathers as December is during the breeding season when moult in breeding birds is halted (Mundy 1985). This short note is dedicated to PJM who took part in its preparation and who shared his distinguished knowledge of vultures with endless generosity and aplomb up to the very end.



Figure 2. Adult female White-headed Vulture (top) in gliding flight with adult Lappet-faced Vulture near Sapu, The Gambia. Photograph: AH.

Acknowledgements

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References

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- Mundy, P.J. 1985. Sexual dimorphism of the African White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis*. *Ibis* 127: 116-119.
