

NOTES

Sightings of European Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* in eastern Gambia from December 1999 to January 2005

Kev Roy

I first saw a single European Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* in The Gambia in December 1999. This individual was with a large group of African White-backed Vultures *Gyps africanus* on a carcass beside a bolong, east of Soma in the Lower River Division. Villagers in Gambia have traditional sites for dumping dead livestock, often alongside seasonal watercourses (pers. obs.). The bird immediately stood out because of its larger size, heavier bill, and much lighter brown plumage on the body and upper-wing coverts. I identified it as an immature due to its black bill and lack of a white ruff. Since Barlow *et al.* (1997) refer to the European Griffon Vulture as an 'uncommon Palearctic migrant', albeit first recorded in 1991, I regarded the sighting as a pleasant surprise though not a totally exceptional sighting.

My next sighting was on 15 March 2000 beside the bolong immediately west of Soma. Seven *G. fulvus* were among a mixed group of vultures, including African White-backed Vultures, Hooded Vultures *Necrosyrtes monachus* and a single Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*, feeding on a donkey carcass beside the bolong. A Gambian bird-guide and I realised this was an exceptional sighting (though Barlow *et al.* 1987 mention one record of eight birds)

and we thus spent a considerable amount of time carefully scrutinising the various vultures in view from our Land Rover parked only 30–40 m away. Four adult European Griffon Vultures, with white ruffs, yellowish bills, pale eyes, blue-grey skin on the face, and ginger tones speckling the upperwing coverts, were on the carcass during this time. The other vultures including the Lappet-faced Vulture were standing short distances away apparently awaiting their turns to feed on the carcass. Three immatures, with black bills and white thighs, were later located standing some distance away in the shade of a tree.

My next record was not until 11 May 2003. This was of a single adult on a cow carcass just outside the village of Burreng, Lower River Division. The only further notes I made at the time (I was travelling back to my home in Upper River Division from the coast) state that the bird was accompanied by African White-backed, Hooded Vulture and Rüppell's Griffon *Gyps rueppellii*.

Since 19 January 2004, I have had numerous further sightings of European Griffon Vultures around the Basse to Sabi area in the Upper River Division. The first of these was of an immature on a goat carcass by the side of the road just south of Basse, accompanied by seven Rüppell's Griffons.

All these birds were remarkably tolerant of the Land Rover's presence only 25 m or so away. The immature *G. fulvus* was noted to be "sandy-coloured with a sandy ruff, black bill and white-fronted thighs". Another *fulvus* flew low over the group and was noted to have sandy body and under-wing coverts.

Between then and 6 February 2004, a succession of sightings, mainly of soaring birds culminated in 12 individuals gliding directly over our compound in Upper River Division, at a height of not more than 30 m, at about 10h00. Presumably they were seeking the first thermals of the day. All birds were noted to have 'tan' bodies and underwing coverts with one or two paler bars across the latter. This was a surprise, as I realised it was probably the highest number ever recorded in The Gambia. (Clive R. Barlow and Jason Wayne recorded 20 birds on the ground at Jahally Pacharr, Central River Division, 5 March 2000, *in litt.*).

Weekly maxima of *fulvus* seen from my compound in Sabi Upper River Division since the third week of January 2004 were 0, 3, 12, 0, 0, 3, and 1. After which I was then not present in the area for seven weeks. From the last week in April 2004 the weekly maxima were 35, 7, 5. Excepting the astonishing maxima of 35 in the last week in April most of these were of soaring birds. For comparison the maxima for Rüppell's Griffon were 2, 1, 1, 0, 0, 1, 1 and 40, 5, 2; and for African White-backed Vulture 0, 5, 5, 0, 10, 3, 1 and 45, 0, 0.

It can be seen from these numbers that both Rüppell's Griffons and African White-backed Vultures are frequently sighted over

Sabi and its immediate environs. Larger numbers are obviously seen when animal carcasses are present close to the site. The main criteria used for the identification of soaring *fulvus* were sandy bodies, sandy wing coverts (clearly distinct from the comparatively dull brown of WBVs) with one or two roughly Y-shaped paler bars, and a shorter tail.

About mid-morning on 28 April 2004 I noticed a very large accumulation of large vultures circling over the area to the west of Sabi. A preliminary scan with binoculars revealed at least 15–20 *fulvus*, with similar numbers of *rueppellii* and *africanus*. Shortly afterwards, I visited the carcass site (once again at a seasonal watercourse) to witness the largest congregation of large vultures I have ever seen in The Gambia. Over 120 birds were within 200 m of the location. Seven *fulvus* were actively feeding on the carcass of a horse, with a single Hooded Vulture. Several *rueppellii* were standing quietly 3–4 m distant. A large number of mixed vultures mostly in monospecific groups stood in the shade of a large dead tree about 10 m away, with more vultures in the branches. Further large groups were visible in trees and under the shade of nearby trees, some more than 100 m away. The *fulvus* were seen to have sandy plumage, paler and more richly coloured than that of African White-backed Vultures. They were also clearly larger, taller and longer-necked than the *rueppellii*. This was particularly evident in the nearest groups in the dead tree branches and under its shade. I was able to positively identify and count 30 *fulvus* (not an estimate). It was more difficult to be sure

of the birds waiting in the shade of distant trees but all three species appeared to be more-or-less equally represented. My upper and lower estimates of the total number of large vultures present at the time is 120–150, and those for European Griffons 30–50. Overall, immature *fulvus* considerably outnumbered the adults, though most of the birds on the carcass were adults. The birds were feeding through the rear orifices of the carcass and the lower abdomen had been partially split open. Occasional vigorous and vocal squabbles broke out between the birds on the carcass, with the *fulvus* spreading their wings to reveal the Y-shaped paler bars on the sandy underwing coverts. The dark-centred, pale-tipped greater upper wing coverts of the adults were also noted. Unfortunately I was only able to visit the site again briefly early on the following morning. The vultures were scattered over a wide area, roosting in relatively small groups of six to 12 birds per tree, with few birds near the carcass. Further close views of *fulvus* were obtained, with a total of perhaps 20 seen that morning. As mentioned earlier, maxima of seven and five were seen in the following two weeks. I was then absent from the area for one week and have not seen any *fulvus* since my return, though I have seen one *rueppellii* and four *africanus*.

It should be remembered that the sightings since January 2004 were all from a single location. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that a population of *G. fulvus*, the majority of which were immatures, and with a maximum of over 50 birds, have inhabited eastern Gambia and the contiguous areas of Senegal between January and May 2004.

Update (1 March 2005)

Gyps fulvus sightings over our compound in Sabi in 2004 petered out in about mid-June with records of three in both the first and second weeks of the month, but then, except for two possible records of singles in the wet season, none until November (*africanus* and *rueppellii* were seen throughout the wet season). Singles were seen in the first, third and fourth weeks, with six to ten at the end of the month. The only sighting in December was 23 in the third week, around and over a donkey carcass. Ten were on the ground and thirteen aerial. Unfortunately, in seeking to get close enough for a photograph the birds were disturbed and did not reappear.

During January, *fulvus* was clearly the most common of the *Gyps* vultures seen around Sabi. Groups of up to 20 were also seen soaring over Basse. On 9 February, 49 *Gyps fulvus* (a new maxima) were counted leaving a donkey carcass just east of Sabi. Due to its position in a small hollow, the site was difficult to approach without causing disturbance, and sure enough the birds flushed in a succession of small parties. This, however, made them easy to count. Only two *africanus*, five *rueppellii* and ten *Necrosyrtes monachus* were noted.

The large group was still present the following day, though the birds were not recounted. Remarkably, on the same day 90 km to the north-west, Clive Barlow viewed an estimated 20+ on a carcass outside Wassu (14°53'W, 13°41'N) in the Central River Division.

A mixed group of *Gyps* vultures including over 40 *fulvus* was also noted in February, 5 km south of Sabi (just over

the Senegalese border) by Luc and Beatrice Greiner, residents of Doubirou. Luc and Beatrice succeeded in obtaining a series of photographs of this group, and have photographed *fulvus* in the area on several other occasions.

Reference

Barlow, C., Wacher, T. & Disley, T.1997. A Field Guide to the Birds of The Gambia and Senegal. Pica Press, Robertsbridge. 400 pp.

Keywords: Observations, records, distribution, The Gambia.
Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus*.

Author's address: Kev Roy, Sabi, Upper River Division, The Gambia; Postal address: P.O. Box 00604, Basse, URD, The Gambia; E-mail address: kroy@pmbx.net

