

Age structure of a Palm-nut Vulture *Gypohierax angolensis* population

W.R.J. Dean

In the course of a survey of birds along the Congo River at Soyo, Angola, I collected some data on the demography of Palm-nut Vultures *Gypohierax angolensis*. These birds are common in the area, and can be seen at all times of the day patrolling the river or cruising over mangrove patches, or roosting in large trees. From 19 to 25 May 2006, for about one hour each morning, I counted and noted the ages of Palm-nut Vultures that flew west along the Congo River. Juveniles (<2 years) and adults (>4-5 years old) can be aged on plumage characteristics, but intermediate age classes, between 2 and 4 (or 5) years cannot be more accurately aged than “subadult” (Brown et al. 1982). The method I used – counting birds

flying past – is statistically unsound in that I could have been counting the same birds that circled around unseen and went down the river again, and thus may include repeat sampling, but it is nevertheless of interest to present the results.

A total of 73 adults, 37 subadults and 22 juveniles were counted (Table 1). This gives overall proportions of 55.3% adults, 28% subadult and 16.7% 1st or 2nd year birds. This is, in fact, remarkably similar to the proportions of adults (60%) and juveniles given by Brown et al. (1982), presumably for the Ivory Coast population as a whole.

Table 1. Numbers of adult, subadult and juvenile Palm-nut Vultures moving west along the Congo River between 06h00 and 07h00 during 17-25 May 2006.

Day	Adults	Subadults	Juveniles
17/05	6	4	5
18/05	6	3	3
19/05	1	1	0
20/05	17	10	5
21/05	18	9	3
22/05	7	2	1
23/05	5	2	1
24/05	9	2	1
25/05	4	4	3
Total (%)	73 (55.3)	37 (28.0)	22 (16.7)

Palm-nut Vultures were observed carrying nest material and, in one case, to a nest in a tall mangrove. The finer details of nest building in this species seem sketchy in the literature. The first description of a nesting pair was by Serle (1954), who stated only that both sexes build, and this is repeated by Brown et al. (1982), presumably based on Serle's account, and by Mundy et al. (1992), and by Chittenden (in Hockey et al. 2005). Nest material at the Soyo nest was brought by one bird (male?) and

delivered to the second bird (female?) that was on the nest, sitting as though incubating. I did not see whether or not the sitting bird worked the material into the nest (the nest was partly obscured by foliage), but it did not move from the nest when it received the material. Material delivered to the nest on the first trip was a short length of shredded palm frond, probably lining material, and subsequent deliveries of smaller, finer material could have been for lining, so the sitting bird could have been incubating.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Sheryl Maruca and Brett Thomas at the Chevron/Angola LNG Project for the opportunity to visit Soyo and Kwanda base, and to the HES staff at Kwanda base for logistics and accommodation during my stay.

References

- Brown, L.H., Urban, E.K. & Newman, K. 1982. *The Birds of Africa*, Vol. 1. Academic Press, London.
- Chittenden, H.N. 2005. Palm-nut Vulture. In: Hockey, P.A.R., Dean, W.R.J. & Ryan, P.G. 483-484. *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa*. Trustees for the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town.
- Mundy, P., Butchart, D., Ledger, J. & Piper, S. 1992 *The Vultures of Africa*. Acorn Books, Russel Friedman Books and the Vulture Study Group, Johannesburg
- Serle, W. 1954. A second contribution to the ornithology of the British Cameroons. *Ibis* 96:47-80.

Keywords:

Survey, demography, population, Congo River, Soyo, Angola. Palm-nut Vulture *Gypohierax angolensis*.

Author's address:

W.R.J. Dean, DST/NRF Centre of Excellence at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa. E-mail address: lycium@telkomsa.net