

Vultures, crows and carrion

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In 1983, Macdonald & Macdonald (1985) advanced the hypothesis that a cause of the decline of certain large scavenging birds – termed by them the ‘solitary scavengers’ (Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus*, White-headed Vulture, *Trigonoceps* (now *Aegyptius*) *occipitalis*, Bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus*) in southern Africa is competition from artificially abundant corvids (especially the Pied Crow *Corvus albus*) for the limited small carrion food resource; small carrion has been shown to form an important part of the diet of the listed ‘solitary scavengers’. These authors showed that corvids were the major avian scavenger on roads in parts of South Africa, and contended that they had a competitive advantage over the large ‘solitary scavengers’ because of their small body size and ability to use energy-expensive flapping flight, which allowed them to forage relatively early in the day, in comparison to the large ‘solitary scavengers’ which required diurnal thermals to enable them to forage in an energy-saving manner. In addition, these authors argued that populations of the obligate large carcass feeders in southern Africa, the two griffon species – Cape Griffon *Gyps coprotheres* and White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus* – were “not abnormally affected” by

competition for small carrion from corvids.

In 2007, concern was raised at the apparent increase in the density of corvids (especially the Pied Crow) and the possible negative impacts of this on raptors (including vultures) in South Africa, and this was associated with a call for further investigation (Anderson 2007).

The observation reported here is relevant to the above topic. On 19 July 2007, whilst travelling by road through a mixed stock-farming area in mountain grassland between the towns of Cathcart and Queenstown in South Africa’s Eastern Cape Province, we saw two Cape Griffons circling about 200 m above the ground, and then we noticed two more on the ground about 70-80 m from the road. We also saw a group of 19 Pied Crows flying around, with some circling, perhaps 50 m above the griffons on the ground, and four more – on the ground or just above it - near the landed griffons. It seemed to us that the griffons (four in total) and crows (25 in total) had been attracted to some carrion; unfortunately, the height of the grass, and the angle of the road, made it impossible for us to see what kind of carrion it was. However, had it been large stock (e.g. a cow) we would probably have been able to see it,

and we therefore considered it to have been either a medium-size carcass (most likely a sheep) or a small carcass. We did not observe any feeding behaviour by the griffons, the necks and heads of which we had a clear view. We could not say whether the landed crows were, or had been, feeding. Almost immediately, some (4-6) of the crows started mobbing the landed griffons which, after a few minutes, flew up and departed the scene. By this time the two circling griffons had disappeared from view. Three crows were seen to land at the spot again, while

the remainder circled above. We then proceeded on our journey.

The incident described above provides evidence of corvids (here the Pied Crow, which has increased in range and abundance in the Karoo, and in abundance in some urban areas (Dean 2005)) outnumbering and displacing an obligate medium to large carcass scavenger at a food source.

Hopefully this note will stimulate other observers to report similar observations.

References

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