

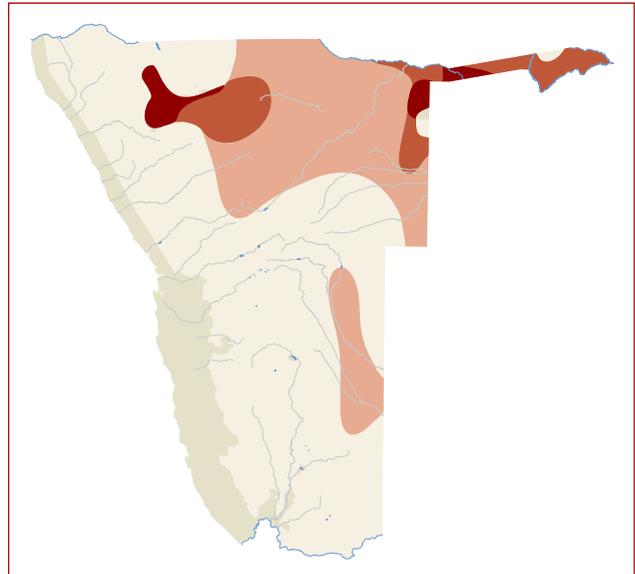
# WHITE-HEADED VULTURE |

## *Trigonoceps occipitalis*

RE Simmons | Reviewed by: MD Anderson



© Wessel Swanepoel



### DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

The White-headed Vulture is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa's woodland savannahs, but nowhere is it abundant (Mundy 1997d). Its global population is estimated at 10,000 to 20,000 birds (IUCN 2012) or 7,000 to 12,500 mature individuals (Mundy *et al.* 1992). The southern African population numbers about 500 pairs (Mundy 1997d), of which up to 120 pairs breed in South Africa (Anderson 2000h). Its core areas are the Kruger National Park, the regions surrounding the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe, and large parts of Botswana. In Namibia, it is found primarily within Etosha National Park and throughout the Caprivi Strip, with a small pocket of birds apparent in the Kavango woodlands north of Tsumkwe (Mundy 1997d). There is no estimate of the Namibian population size (Simmons & Bridgeford 1997), but raptor road counts in the Etosha National Park and the Caprivi region indicated between 0.1 birds and 7.2 birds per 1,000 km driven (Jarvis *et al.* 2001). Based on a South African population of about 120 pairs recorded from 59 quarter-degree squares, Namibia's population at about the same reporting rate from 86 quarter-degree squares would be about 175 pairs or about 400 birds, less than 5% of the estimated global population, but this needs confirmation.



### ECOLOGY

The White-headed Vulture prefers the mixed broad-leaf tropical woodlands of southern Africa, particularly those

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Conservation Status:</b>    | Vulnerable  |
| <b>Southern African Range:</b> | Namibia, Botswana, north-eastern South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique |
| <b>Area of Occupancy:</b>      | 78,500 km <sup>2</sup>  |
| <b>Population Estimate:</b>    | About 400 birds   |
| <b>Population Trend:</b>       | Has declined  |
| <b>Habitat:</b>                | Mixed woodland savannah   |
| <b>Threats:</b>                | Poisons, decline in prey abundance, disturbance                     |

occurring on Kalahari sands in Botswana. In Namibia, this explains its presence in the Kavango and Zambezi regions and the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, but it is also found in arid thornveld areas where potential prey populations are intact, such as western Etosha National Park (Mundy 1997d). It breeds mainly during winter and spring in southern Africa (Mundy *et al.* 1992, Mundy 1997d). Eleven breeding records for Namibia have the single eggs laid in June (seven records), July (three) and August (one) (Brown *et al.* 2015). The median egg-laying date across 22 pairs monitored for five years in the Kruger National Park was 27 June, with northern nests about 30 days later than southern nests. These pairs, monitored for 73 pair years, made 55 breeding attempts and produced on average 0.69 chicks per pair (Murn & Holloway 2014).

It feeds by scavenging from both large and small carcasses and, like the Bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus*, it is skilled at finding smaller carcasses (Steyn 1982, Mundy *et al.* 1992). It has also been confirmed to directly kill small mammals (Steyn 1982, Mundy *et al.* 1992, Murn 2014) and procures some prey by pirating from other species (Mundy *et al.* 1992).



## THREATS

Like other vultures, this species almost certainly suffers from poisoning, even though few poisoned birds have been found (Anderson 2000h). However, between 1995 and 2001, two birds were found poisoned in the Mangetti farming block, about 100 km east of Etosha National Park, together with four White-backed Vultures *Gyps africanus* (P Bridgeford, RE Simmons unpubl. data). Given its similar foraging methods to the Bateleur (Steyn 1982), it will be vulnerable to small poison baits, although it is rarely reported from the larger poison incidents that are still common in Namibia (Brown 1988a, Simmons 1995, Bridgeford 2001, 2002). Further evidence for poisoning is based on the complete lack of birds in Namibia adjacent to protected areas where they are relatively common, such as the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park (South Africa and Botswana) (Mundy 1997d). In addition, they are absent from small-stock farming areas in southern Namibia, where poisoning of small carnivores is common (Brown 1988), and in northern Namibia they are confined to the Etosha National Park or to areas where small-stock farming does not occur.

A more recent threat is the deliberate poisoning of vultures by commercial poachers, particularly in north-eastern Namibia and northern Botswana. Their purpose is to remove these birds from the area so that they no longer draw the attention of wildlife authorities to the crime scenes by circling over carcasses (Hancock 2013). Trampling and over-grazing in rangelands may reduce the small mammal populations on which it feeds (Mundy

1997d), and this, too, may explain its absence from cattle-farming areas where poisons are used less often. Breeding birds are especially prone to nest desertion (Steyn 1982), and this may prevent birds from breeding in any areas where human disturbance is high.



## CONSERVATION STATUS

This species is classified as *Vulnerable* because its population in Namibia is suspected to have declined by 10% in the last three generations, based on the high incidence of poisoning in Namibia (P Bridgeford, RE Simmons unpubl. data). Its absence immediately outside conservation areas such as Etosha National Park, and from suitable regions between there and the Kavango woodlands to the east suggest that poisons are the main source of mortalities. Since 2007 the White-headed Vulture has been classified as globally *Vulnerable*, because of a small total population that appears to be declining (IUCN 2012a). In South Africa it was classified as *Vulnerable* based on a suspected 10% decline (Anderson 2000h), probably also as a result of poisoning associated with problem animal control operations and the acquisition of birds for traditional medicines, but it has recently been upgraded to *Endangered* (Taylor *et al.* in press). Any revised or future Namibian Parks and Wildlife legislation need to list this species as *Specially Protected*.



## ACTIONS

Decreasing the incidence of poisoning is paramount in preventing further population declines in all species of vultures. A two-pronged approach is necessary, to deal with (a) collateral poisoning on farmland from predator control and (b) deliberate poisoning of vultures by commercial poachers. To address poisoning on farmlands, farmer awareness campaigns and environmental education programmes have played and continue to play a role in reducing poisoning incidents. However, on their own, they have failed to reduce the decline in poisoning of scavenging birds, both in Namibia and in other regions. A complete ban is required on the use of poisons for killing carnivores in Namibia, and this should be introduced in the next revision of the Parks and Wildlife legislation, with severe penalties for transgressors. A protocol has been developed to help address poisoning by commercial poachers (Brown *et al.* 2013), the main points of which are summarised under the “Actions” of the White-backed Vulture. It is important that this protocol is seen as part of the larger initiative to address, control and eliminate commercial poaching in southern Africa.

The status of White-headed Vultures in Namibia needs to be better understood, which requires monitoring breeding pairs and understanding their population dynamics.