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Aerial Survey and Ringing of Lappet-faced Vulture Chicks in the Namib-Naukluft Park and Farms Project – September/October 2013

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All photos by Holger Kolberg

Introduction

Namib-Naukluft Park

The monitoring and ringing of Lappet-faced Vultures (LFV, *Torgos tracheliotos*) in the Namib-Naukluft Park (NNP) started in 1991. The Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) supports this long-term project. It is providing an increasing amount of data, which wildlife management can use for planning by ornithologists and biodiversity researchers. This project also generates good publicity for the vultures and the realisation of the many dangers faced by these birds when they leave protected areas.

In 2000, for the first time, an aerial survey of part of the breeding area at Ganab took place. In 2001, an aerial survey of 15 hours covered most of the known breeding areas. Because of the positive results of the 2001 aerial survey, the decision was made to continue using an aircraft to find the occupied nests. Since then, there has been an aerial survey every year, followed by the ringing. Patagial tags were introduced in 2006.



During the aerial survey, the co-

ordinates of occupied nests are stored on a GPS. From the air, adult birds, chicks and even eggs are visible in the nests. However, it is very difficult to differentiate between birds roosting on nests and breeding birds. Although expensive, the aerial survey is the most cost-effective way of finding the nests of breeding birds scattered over hundreds of square kilometres. This also reduces off-road driving in sensitive areas.

Farms Project

The project involves the farmer, his family and workers and brings the plight of vultures to the notice of these people. As the majority of vultures in Namibia feed on farms and this is where they are sometimes poisoned, the goodwill of landowners is essential to the survival of these birds. The project has been very successful because it involves the people living on the land and the ringing of the vulture chicks is a hands-on project. The landowners see and handle the vulture chicks, help with the extension ladder and it all makes a lasting impression. While in the field, we talk of the dangers faced by vultures, the misuse of poison and other threats. We have handed out booklets and posters about ringing, vultures, owls, other raptors and poison. We now ring regularly on several farms and each year we attempt to ring on additional farms. What is significant is the number of farmers who contact us and want to become involved in the project. The farmers involved have become ambassadors for vultures and the

fact that they are donating money to the project is a sign of its positive nature.



The first demonstration of bird ringing took place early in 2003 and was initiated by Dirk Heinrich and Holger Kolberg. They showed members of the Hochfeld Conservancy how garden birds are caught in nets/ traps and ringed. They discussed vulture conservation and this led to an invitation to ring vultures on farms. In September 2003, Dirk, Holger and Peter Bridgeford ringed vultures on several farms.

The ringing and tagging is now done under the banner of Vultures Namibia. This is not an attempt to take over the project from individuals, but rather market the conservation efforts of many people under one banner, and the brand is Vultures Namibia. The Vultures Namibia website can be found at: www.vulturesnamibia.com

Aerial survey in NNP 2013

The survey started on Wednesday 9 October, at the Ganab airfield in the NNP. This year we had three aircraft to do the survey – this included the two planes used last year (V5-DPP and V5-AFT) and the third plane was a newly re-furbished Wilga (a Polish made aircraft), V5-MTC. The aircraft were piloted by Gustav Holz, Peter

Keil and Paul van Schalkwyk respectively. WestAir Wings Group once again donated fuel for the survey. Observers were Adrie Holz, Telané Greyling and Hartmut Kolb. Holger Kolberg from MET was the liaison officer and kept an eye on the survey. Helen Kolb and Amy Olivier drove the backup vehicles and assisted with logistics.

On Thursday morning, 10 October, while the aircraft continued with the survey, the ground crew moved to the MET airfield at Sesriem. The survey ended on Thursday afternoon and including ferry time, took 20.8 hours.

Ringling NNP 2013

On Friday morning, the whole crew went to ring one chick in the Sesriem area. Gustav, Adrie, Paul and Peter then returned to Windhoek whilst we continued ringing in the Sesriem and Tsamsvlei area. On Friday afternoon, friends and sponsors met at Namibwater and enjoyed a swim in the reservoir before making camp under the camel thorn trees. We continued ringing in the Namibwater area on Saturday morning, where the



sighting of a partially leucistic Lappet-faced Vulture caused much excitement. In the afternoon, we moved to Escourt and the Tsondeb River and camped at the mouth of the vlei. On Sunday, we ringed three chicks in the Tsondeb River and then

moved to the Saagberg area, via Solitaire where we said goodbye to most of our friends.

We continued ringing on Sunday afternoon and Monday morning and then re-located to Ganab. Tuesday morning the last of the supporters left and Holger, Hanno, Bobby and Gisela ringed the chicks in the Tinkas/Bloedkoppie area. On Wednesday morning, the group continued ringing in the Hotsas area before driving to Swakopmund to stock up on supplies and fuel. On Friday afternoon more of our friends and supporters arrived at Ganab in preparation for the weekend's ringing

On Saturday morning, Holger took half the group and moved to Hotsas/Ganab area while Peter took the other half to the Gemsbokwater / Volstruishoogte section. On Sunday morning, some people had to leave and we then went in one group to ring the remaining chicks. By Sunday afternoon, there were only a handful of chicks left to ring in the Mirabib/Zebra Pan area. Holger and Claire ringed these birds on Thursday and Friday the following week. At Bakenkop, they made one of the most interesting discoveries during this season – a nest with two chicks! This is only the second time ever that such a case has been recorded, the previous one was in 1991 in the



Tsondab River.

Results of the ringing

A total of 63 Lappet-faced Vulture chicks were ringed, as opposed to 69 last year.

Three vulture chicks were found in the Tsauchab River although one of these was too small to ring. Another one was close to Sesriem airfield and another north of Elim Dune. Vultures breeding in the Sossusvlei area remain low, probably because of disturbance by the high volume of tourist vehicles, sightseeing aircraft and hot-air balloons.

In the Sukses/Tsamsvlei area, three chicks were ringed with also one chick too small to ring. There were no breeding birds in the Escourt area and only three chicks in the Tsondab area, with no nests on the Tsondab plains. Between Saagberg and Kamberg, we ringed four chicks and in the Ganab area, we ringed 49 chicks.

Both the aerial survey and ringing went with almost no hitches. New sponsors joined the team and we are very grateful for their support. Some of the past sponsors once again contributed to the project.

Farm Project 2013

The ringing took place from 11 to 22 September. The ringing started on farm Lauwater Suid where nine chicks were ringed. The next day it was the turn of farm Garib where five chicks were ringed and on Wednesday six chicks, including two Lappet-faced Vultures, were ringed on farm Autabib. On Thursday, Holger visited farm Rainhof where very strong winds unfortunately forced him to abandon the ringing after only three chicks. Friday and Saturday were spent on farm

Smalhoek where 18 chicks were ringed with a short detour to farm Heimat for one chick. On Sunday, a large contingent from the Namibia Bird Club joined the ringing on farm Teufelsbach (4 chicks).



On Monday Holger travelled to *terra incognita* in terms of vulture ringing – the Grootfontein area. First stop was farm Omambonde-Tal where six chicks were ringed on Tuesday. On Wednesday, the farms Schaffeld and Okatjiva were visited and another six chicks were ringed. This included another first for the Vultures Namibia team – vultures breeding in Makalani palms (*Hyphaene petersiana*). Four chicks were ringed on the farm Klein Huis on Thursday and Holger returned to Windhoek on Friday.

On Sunday 6 October, a single chick was ringed on farm Aris.

This project would not be possible without the assistance of MET. Many thanks to Deputy Director Kenneth

Uiseb, MET Scientific Services, for his support. Without the enthusiastic support of landowners, we would not have achieved a thing. Thank you. Your hospitality is truly appreciated.

Table 1: Number of chicks ringed on farms.

Farm	WBV	LFV
Lauwater Suid	9	
Garib	5	1
Autabib	4	2
Rainhof	2	1
Heimat	1	
Smalhoek	18	
Teufelsbach	4	
Omambonde-Tal	6	
Schaffeld	4	
Okatjiva	2	1
Klein Huis	4	
Aris	1	
Total	60	5

Acknowledgements

The project could not continue without the support of several people and organisations. Vultures Namibia thanks the following:

- MET for allowing the survey, tagging and ringing to continue in the park.
- Chief Control Warden Manie le Roux for enthusiastic support of the project.
- Deputy Director Kenneth /Uiseb, MET Scientific Services for support.
- Gustav Holz, Peter Keil and Paul van Schalkwyk for donating their time and aircraft.
- Sandra Dantu & Mark Boorman who organised the popular Gala Dinner in aid of vulture conservation and all those people and businesses who supported the event.
- Hilke and Hanno von Ditzfurth for promoting vulture conservation in Dordabis and organising the ringing on farms in that area.

- Helen Kolb and Amy Olivier as ground crew and Adrie Holz, Telané Greyling and Hartmut Kolb as observers.
- Birds of Prey Programme of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, for support and tagging equipment.
- Namibia Nature Foundation looked after our finances.
- All the vulture friends who helped with the ringing, carried the ladder and shared our campfires.
- If we have forgotten anybody, please accept our humble apologies. All the people who made the ringing fun and enjoyable, **thank you**. See you there next year!

Table 2: Number of Lappet-faced Vulture chicks ringed in the Namib-Naukluft Park 1991 to 2013.

YEAR	TSAUCHAB	SUKSES	TSONDAB	SAAGBERG	GANAB	TOTAL
1991	3	No ringing	12	No ringing	No ringing	15
1992	5	8	21	No ringing	No ringing	34
1993	4	5	15	3	2	29
1994	8	9	16	2	6	41
1995	6	8	6	1	8	29
1996	10	6	13	3	12	44
1997	2	2	3	0	No ringing	7
1998	7	6	7	2	14	36
1999	2	5	9	5	16	37
2000	No ringing	No ringing	0	No ringing	2	2
2001	No ringing	No ringing	No ringing	No ringing	No ringing	
2002	0	6	5	8	27	46
2003	1	10	5	3	25	44
2004	0	5	6	1	40	52
2005	1	6	4	2	23	36
2006	0	3	3	2	14	22
2007	1	8	9	7	61	86
2008	1	5	6	4	42	58
2009	2	6	10	1	23	42
2010	4	3	10	5	64	86
2011	2	3	4	1	35	45
2012	1	6	7	3	52	69
2013	4	3	3	4	49	63
Total	64	113	174	57	515	923