

SHORT NOTE

Sight records of the Egyptian vulture from South West Africa/Namibia

by

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According to Mundy (1978) there are no recent records of *Neophron percnopterus* from South West Africa, five acceptable records for the territory all dating from before 1945. Clinning and Jensen (1979) mention an Egyptian vulture seen on the coast, north of Swakopmund, in June 1978 without giving any evidence to substantiate this record. I know of seven subsequent records from South West Africa.

This note examines these records in the light of McLachlan and Liversidge's (1978) statement that recent sight records are required and bearing in mind the pitfalls mentioned by Mundy (1978).

The immature photographed north of Swakopmund on 25th June, 1978 was seen flying in an area almost devoid of vegetation. A strong easterly wind was blowing at the time and the bird had difficulty flying against this so that at times it appeared to be in danger of being blown out to sea. When disturbed it would fly only a short distance before settling again, and was followed for some four to five kilometres, by vehicle, before it disappeared over a ridge and could not be re-located. During this time good views were obtained of the bird both settled and in flight, using 10× binoculars. Photographs taken at the time are of too poor a quality to warrant reproduction. Observations were made in the company of my wife and Dr. P. D. Shaughnessy of Cape Town. The bird was identified as an Egyptian vulture by the following combination of characters.

- (i) Plumage dark brown, somewhat mottled with lighter brown on the shoulders and upper wing coverts, and also on the upper tail and rump. In flight the under-wing coverts paler than the flight feathers.
- (ii) Head and neck completely feathered.
- (iii) Face bare, skin pink to pale grey, lighter posteriorly, almost white where feathers replace bare skin behind the eye.
- (iv) Bill yellow with a dark tip, long and slender.
- (v) Legs bare, orangey-pink.
- (vi) Tail relatively long, and pointed.

Sources of confusion according to Mundy (1978) include booted *Hieraaëtus pennatus* and tawny eagles *Aguila rapax*, hooded vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus*, palm nut vulture *Gypohierax angolensis* and possibly immature gymnogene *Polyboroides typus*.

The two eagles can be disregarded as both have feathered legs and faces, and short dark bills. The hooded vulture has a naked head and neck and a shorter, square tail. It also lacks the yellow bill of the bird observed. It is a rare bird in SWA, recently recorded only from the north east of the territory and never in the desert. Confusion with the palm nut vulture can be ruled out as the observed bird had a slim, yellow bill, with the forehead and face entirely naked, and a relatively long pointed tail. This combination of characters, in addition to the relatively long, thin wings with no underwing barring discount confusion with the gymnogene.

What must have been a young Egyptian vulture was reported from Henties Bay by nature conservator P. Bridgeford on 10 July 1978. Bridgeford's notes and sketches made at the time clearly record the feathered head and neck, bare face, long slender light coloured bill with a dark tip, light coloured bare legs and long, pointed tail. Henties Bay is some 30 km north of where the bird previously mentioned was recorded and as only twelve days separate this and the previous observation it is likely that the same bird was involved in each case.

On 24 October 1978, P. Nel, R. Hernandez and I saw a young, brown Egyptian vulture at a feeding site at Ganab (23.05S, 15.31E) in the Namib Desert. Abbatoir offal, and the carcasses of game and domestic animals were dumped at this site over a period of four months in order to attract the locally breeding lappet-faced vultures *Torgos tracheliotus* in an attempt to re-sight marked birds. The Egyptian vulture was feeding on the remains of a horse which had been dumped at the site some days previously, and had been almost entirely consumed by lappet-faced vultures. Although there were several lappet-faced vultures about at the time, none were actually feeding and good views were obtained of the Egyptian vulture as it fed. Observations were made through 10× binoculars and a 40× telescope. All identifying characters as listed for the first bird above were noted and I am confident of the identification.

On 8 and 9 February 1973 nature conservator A. van Vuuren recorded a white vulture on Andoni Plains Etosha National Park. Dr. H. Ebedes (*in litt.*) recalls that he and Van Vuuren discussed at length the identity of this bird and eventually decided that it was a palm nut vulture. The bird is not adequately described in Van Vuuren's original records and could have been an Egyptian vulture.

Dr. H. Ebedes (*in litt.*) recalls seeing what he identified as an Egyptian vulture at Gobaub, Etosha National Park. Photographs indicate that this bird may have been a hooded vulture.

Godschalk (1976) records an adult Egyptian vulture flying over Ombika Gate, Etosha National Park on 20 January 1975 but gives no description to substantiate this record.

In late November or early December 1978 (exact date uncertain) a single bird identified as an adult Egyptian vulture was recorded drinking at Klippan, Otjovasandu area, Etosha National Park by nature conservator C. Eyre. On 12 January 1979 Eyre recorded an adult Egyptian vulture at Khaobendes, also in the Otjovasandu area of Etosha National Park. This bird was in the company of five white-backed vultures *Gyps africanus* at an eland carcass, but stood to one side while the others were feeding.

Eyre's descriptions record only that the birds were white with darker flight feathers and that they were smaller than the white-backed vultures, with feathered, not naked, necks.

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