

EGYPTIAN VULTURE | *Neophron percnopterus*

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Conservation Status:	Extinct as breeding species
Southern African Range:	Rare in southern Africa, most common in north-western Namibia
Area of Occupancy:	7,250 km ²
Population Estimate:	One to five individuals
Population Trend:	Stable in last 25 years
Habitat:	Arid and semi-arid open plains near inselbergs
Threats:	Poisoning, food shortage

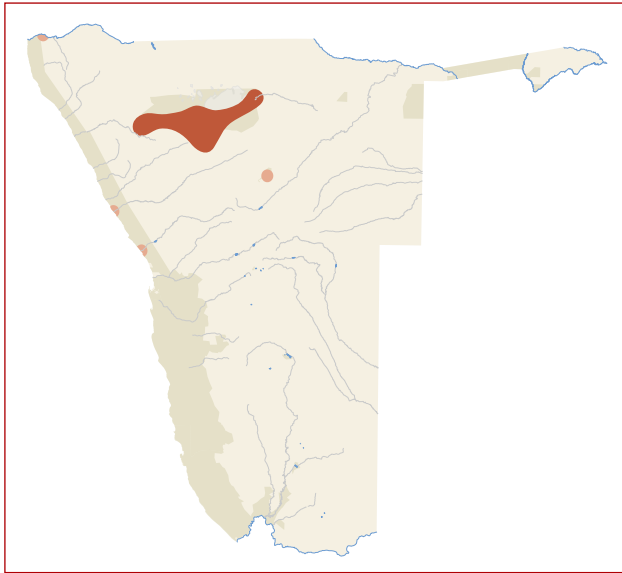
DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

This species was once seen in the mountains around Cape Town in 1670 and was common around ostrich farms and rural villages of South Africa in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Mundy *et al.* 1992). It is no longer found in any of these areas and isolated sightings occur mainly from northern Namibia, south-western Angola and the Eastern Cape, South Africa (Clinning 1980a, Mundy *et al.* 1992, Jenkins 1997a, CJ Vernon *in litt.*).

The African subspecies *N. p. percnopterus* ranges through arid areas of North and East Africa and into Europe and India, where a second smaller subspecies *N. p. ginginianus* occurs (Brown *et al.* 1982, Mundy *et al.* 1992). The southern

African birds that are limited to Namibia and Angola – with the occasional sighting from South Africa – are thought to belong to a third subspecies (Bloomer *et al.* 1996) but genetic evidence is lacking, and the nominate subspecies is unique among vultures for its migratory habits (Mundy *et al.* 1992). Thus, most southern birds may simply be migratory birds from Tanzanian populations that lie some 2,600 to 3,000 km to the north (Mundy *et al.* 1992).

Since Clinning (1980a) and Berry & Berry (1984) first drew attention to a number of sightings in Etosha National Park, at least 27 birds have been recorded and reported over the past 36 years in Namibia. Most of these birds had the brown plumage of immatures (59%); eight were adults, including two pairs. The majority of the sightings



were from Etosha National Park (67%), but 16% were from coastal regions (very unusual for vultures in Namibia, but consistent with the unusual behaviour of Egyptian Vultures) and the remainder were from inland areas. The fact that the majority were immature suggests that breeding still occurs sporadically in Namibia or southern Angola.

Population size has been estimated at “perhaps 10 pairs or so” in southern Africa, including Angola (Mundy *et al.* 1992), but no recent surveys can confirm this (Simmons & Bridgford 1997). Its population may be stable, despite the very small numbers, given that sightings have been maintained at about two birds every three years for the last four decades.



ECOLOGY

Breeding was confirmed in Namibia in 1988 when a pair of birds was seen at its cliff nest, incubating in September (Brown *et al.* 2015). This and other sites were revisited 11 years later but no birds were evident during a short helicopter survey (Simmons 1999). It is unlikely that birds still breed in Namibia, but remote parts of Angola (Iona National Park) and southern and west-central parts of Angola (Dean 2002) may be more likely breeding localities. Steep cliffs with potholes or large ledges are preferred nesting habitat in arid and remote areas. When breeding still took place in South Africa, birds nested in trees, but they are best known for breeding on cliffs, building large untidy structures that may be used for several decades (Mundy *et al.* 1992). Old records from the Eastern Cape in South Africa had egg-laying from August to November (Tarboton 2011).

The Egyptian Vulture feeds on large carcasses, especially of migratory ungulates, as well as domestic stock, and this can attract large groups of 20 to 40 birds (Mundy *et al.* 1992). It is attracted to rural human settlements where it scavenges offal and rubbish. It will also take faeces, fish

and whale offal, and feeds among piles of vegetables where it truly cohabits with man (Mundy *et al.* 1992). It is also a predator and will take insects, birds and large white eggs up to the size of an ostrich egg, smashing them open with stones (Mundy *et al.* 1992).



THREATS

The decline of large herds of migratory ungulates throughout southern Africa, the gradual decrease in indigenous people living traditional lives and the increasing use of poisons are believed to have been the main reasons for the demise of this species from virtually all of southern Africa (Mundy *et al.* 1992, Jenkins 1997a). This may explain why most Egyptian Vulture sightings in Namibia occur in Etosha National Park, where large herds of ungulates living and dying under natural conditions still occur, and why most sightings in South Africa are in the Eastern Cape, where people still live a largely traditional rural lifestyle.



CONSERVATION STATUS

This species is classified as *Extinct* as a breeding species in Namibia because no breeding birds have been seen in southern Africa since 1988 when a pair was reported near a nest site in northern Namibia. It was uplisted globally from *Least Concern* to *Endangered* in 2007, following rapid, large-scale population declines in India, Europe and West Africa (IUCN 2012a). The sighting rate of about one bird per year in Namibia, of which 59% are immature, suggests that Egyptian Vultures may still occur and breed in the region and the estimate by Mundy *et al.* (1992) that perhaps up to 10 pairs still persist in Angola or Namibia is still relevant today. It is listed in Appendix II of the Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and Namibian Parks and Wildlife legislation needs to grant the Egyptian Vulture *Specially Protected* status.



ACTIONS

Surveys are needed to locate breeding birds and to determine the origin of the birds that frequent Etosha. Both ground and aerial surveys of inselbergs and mountain chains in northern Namibia and south-western Angola – including coastal areas where the escarpment reaches the ocean in Angola (Dean 2002) – will determine if pairs are still resident here. Feathers from live or dead birds will be useful to compare with genetically finger-printed birds from North Africa to determine the status of this presumed unique subspecies (Bloomer *et al.* 1996).

The actions set out in the Cape Vulture Action Plan for Namibia (Anon 2010) and summarised in the text for that species, to halt the use of poisons to control predators on farmland, are equally applicable to the conservation of the Egyptian Vulture in Namibia.