

## NOTES

### More vulture deaths in Namibia

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*This report, details the poisoning or drowning of 125 Lappet-faced Vultures *Torgos tracheliotos*, 44 White-backed Vultures *Gyps africanus* and six White-headed Vultures *Trigonoceps occipitalis* in Namibia from May 1995 to August 2000.*

Deliberate and inadvertent secondary poisoning of vultures in southern Africa is insidious and persistent. One only has to read a few recent issues of *Vulture News* to get some idea of the seriousness and extent of the problem. Although many incidents of poisoning are reported, I agree with Carl Vernon: "These ..... episodes could represent the tip of the iceberg, as to learn about such episodes requires that someone find the poisoned birds and the matter is reported. It is far more likely that many vultures die undetected .... " (Vernon 1987).

In Namibia, where many areas are not intensively farmed, and farms are very large (10,000 ha or more), finding a vulture carcass is a matter of luck. Farmers have admitted shooting vultures; others drown in reservoirs and the carcasses are burnt and/or buried, even those with rings. The matter is never reported to the relevant authorities and so the deaths remain unrecorded. As coordinator of the Namibian section of the VSG, I have received some information of poisoning and drowning of vultures and record these incidents below.

In May 1995, the vultures of the Namib were dealt a hard blow when they were deliberately poisoned on a farm in the Usakos district. A farmer, who alleged that the vultures were killing new-born lambs, placed carbofuran (blougif) in two carcasses. According to him a total of 86 Lappet-faced *Torgos tracheliotos* and eight African White-backed Vultures *Gyps africanus* were poisoned and those that did not die immediately, were shot (Simmons 1995).

In August 1995 on the farm Constantia, bordering the Namib-Naukluft Park, 12 Lappet-faced Vultures were poisoned when they fed on lamb carcasses fitted with poison collars. The lambs were fairly large and the collars should have been removed. Black-backed jackals *Canis mesomelas* chased the lambs and attacked them from behind, but not biting the collar and throat as usually happens with small lambs. The poison pouch was probably punctured by the vulture that had its claws and legs stained red by the carbofuran poison. During the feeding frenzy the poison was presumably spread over the carcass. Three of the dead birds

had been ringed in the Namib-Naukluft Park. At least two birds survived until the following day, but their ultimate fate after leaving the feeding area is unknown.

In the far south of Namibia, on the farm Vaaldoring in the Warmbad district, nine vultures drowned in a reservoir in 1995. This incident was recorded in a report written in August 1995 by Ministry of Environment and Tourism (M.E.T.) Warden E. Naude. When I received the report and spoke to the farmer in May 1999, he claimed that the drowned birds were all Lappet-faced Vultures. The same report states that, at the time of the drowning, there were about 300 vultures on the farm. It does not specify which species, but they were probably Lappet-faced and White-backed Vultures.

In September 1996 M.E.T. Warden Anton Esterhuizen found six Hooded *Necrosyrtes monachus* and two White-backed Vultures dead after feeding on a poisoned black-backed jackal carcass. This was on the southern boundary of the Mangetti Game Camp, bordering commercial farms. Mangetti is approximately 50 km east of the Etosha National Park. However, on inspecting two photographs sent with the report, Dr. P. Mundy identified two of the birds as juvenile White-headed Vultures *Trigonoceps occipitalis*. Several attempts to contact Mr Esterhuizen and clear up the confusion have been unsuccessful, as he has left the M.E.T. I assume that the two White-backed Vultures were correctly identified, as they are the most common vulture species in that area. If this is so, then the six Hooded Vultures were actually six White-headed Vultures, the latter being more common in the Mangetti area. Hooded Vultures are relatively rare in Namibia, and "The Atlas of Southern African Birds" (Harrison *et al.* 1997) shows only a few records in the Etosha National Park and eastwards to Caprivi. Furthermore, according to Mundy (1997) Hooded Vultures are seldom found poisoned.

In March 1997 south of the Waterberg Plateau Park in the Middelbult area, the carcasses of three cattle struck by lightning were laced with strychnine. This was ostensibly to combat so-called problem animals. Twenty-two vultures were poisoned of which three White-backed and one Lappet-faced Vulture died. The prompt action by Warden Trygve Cooper saved the remaining 18 White-backed Vultures. They were immediately taken to the Otjiwarongo Veterinary Clinic and treated. The clinic verified that the poison was strychnine.

M.E.T. Warden Tommy Hall reported that six Lappet-faced Vultures drowned in a reservoir on the farm Okatare in the Outjo district in November 1997. The reservoir was three-quarters full and nearby was a full drinking trough. According to Hall, poison was being used on some farms in the area, and it is possible that the birds had ingested poisoned meat.

In January 1998, a dead Lappet-faced Vulture was found on the farm Kunjas, a few kilometres south of the small settlement of Helmeringhausen, apparently after eating poisoned bait.

In September 1998 the owner of the farm Transvaal, 80 km south of the Etosha National Park, found dead vultures on his farm. When contacted in May 1999, he thought that there had been 20 White-backed and five Lappet-faced Vultures. Apparently Black-backed jackals, a Warthog *Potamochoerus porcus* and a Leopard *Panthera pardus* were also poisoned. Although the person responsible was not identified, a farmer in the vicinity was suspected. The initial report was by Tim Osborne.

No further information could be obtained on the three Whitebacked Vultures found in February 1999 in the Dordabis area or the one found in July 1999 in the Okakarara district.

Lions *Panthera leo* cause problems for stock farmers bordering the Etosha National Park. In August 1999 journalist Dirk Heinrich and conservation staff found a dead White-backed Vulture close to the Park boundary. It had apparently died after eating poisoned meat put out for lions. The owner of the game farm Safarihoek, bordering the farm on which the poisoning took place, claims that "many" vultures were poisoned. However, this could not be verified despite contacting various conservation officers and no one seemed particularly interested in the fate of the "many" vultures.

South of Grunau on the farm Kirchberg a Lappet-faced Vulture died after eating poisoned meat put out for Black-backed Jackals (September 1999).

While ringing Lappet-faced Vulture chicks in the Namib-Naukluft Park in October 1999, the desiccated remains of an adult Lappet-faced Vulture was found in a tree. The dead bird was caught in the thorns about one metre from a nest containing a Lappet-faced Vulture chick. The cause of death was unknown.

Dirk Heinrich reported the poisoning of six White-backed Vultures in December 1999. This took place near Okakarara, south of the Waterberg Plateau Park. The birds were again poisoned after a carcass was laced with strychnine. Two of the vultures found alive were treated by the Otjiwarongo Veterinary Clinic but the birds did not survive.

While patrolling the boundary fence of the NamibRand Nature Reserve in April 2000, the remains of an adult Lappet-faced Vulture was found next to the fence on the farm Dina. Poisoning was suspected as the remains of a lamb were found next to the dead bird. This farmer is known to use poison for problem animals.

The owner of the farm Wêreldend reported that he had found two dead vultures in June 2000. On inspection, two adult Lappet-faced Vulture carcasses were found about 200 m apart and from the condition of the carcasses it appeared as if they had died at the same time, which was supported by the farmer's observations. Why, I wonder, should two adult birds die so close in time and locality on a 10,000 ha farm if they were not poisoned? Although poison is not used on Wêreldend, a neighbour is known to use poison for problem animals.

Not all the information in the incidents documented here could be verified and the reports have been accepted at face value. In conclusion, I would like to quote again from the article by Vernon (1987): "I am sure that what I have heard is only a small portion of what actually goes on, since I am buffered from potential sources of information by my nature conservation authority connections." The same applies to these data from Namibia and unless the attitudes of farmers here can be changed soon, the future of vultures in this country looks very bleak. Many thanks to all those Vulture Friends who sent in valuable information, Dr Rob Simmons for assistance and data supplied, and the referees for their suggestions.

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