Natural mortality factors for African White-backed Vultures in Namibia?

Ann & Mike Scott & Peter & Marilyn Bridgeford

On October 2006 we visited the Kalahari Desert, Namibia, to ring African White-backed Vultures *Gyps africanus*. On 18 October we visited the property of Torgos Safaris, just west of the Mata Mata border post between Namibia and the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in the Northern Cape, South Africa. The farmer, Dirk Kotze, and his worker Linus Brandt took us to a 10 m high nest in a camel-thorn *Acacia erioloba* tree, at coordinates 25° 43.587 S, 19° 58.190 E. An adult White-backed Vulture took off from the nest at our arrival. On the nest was a large chick (standard wing length 535 mm) with food in its crop. Hanging in the branches just below the nest, however, was the fairly fresh carcass of a second bird (Figure 1). According to Peter Mundy (pers. comm.), this bird appears to be an adult as it has white underwing coverts, slightly paler secondary vanes and a 'powder puff' ruff.

Dirk Kotze and Linus Brandt pointed out the way the thick bark of the tree had been ripped from top to bottom (Figure 2), suggesting a lightning strike during a recent thunderstorm. Mundy notes that the head and tail of this bird have suffered, although he can't tell if these parts have been singed by lightning. Otherwise the shock of a lightning bolt hitting the tree could have killed the vulture, or more likely the hail stones did. Some distance away there was a smaller, dead chick on another nest, 7 m high in a smaller *A. erioloba* tree. This carcass was also relatively fresh. Here Dirk Kotze mentioned that he had been caught nearby in a storm with huge hail stones, also a week or two before. Is it possible that this chick could have been killed by hail?

No mention of natural mortality of White-backed Vultures due to thunderstorms was found in either Mundy *et al.* (1992) or Piper (2005). In view of the climatic conditions prevailing in this part of the species' distribution range, however, this factor must play a role, albeit to a limited extent.

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Figure 1. Carcass of an African White-backed Vulture below a nest in a camel thorn tree in the Kalahari Desert, Namibia (photographer: Ann Scott).

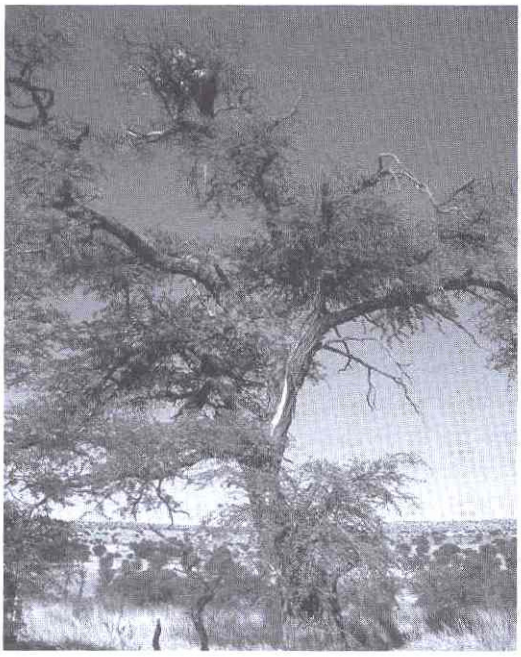

Figure 2. Lightning damage to the bark of the above camel thorn tree (photographer: Ann Scott).

References

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Authors' addresses: H.A. & R.M. Scott, P.O. Box 2604, Swakopmund, Namibia; e-mail address: ecoserve@iway.na; P. & M. Bridgeford, P.O. Box 3699, Walvis Bay, Namibia; e-mail address: pmbridge@iway.na.