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Marc Dürr *1967 †2010

How do you pay tribute to a good friend who is suddenly gone? Words seem so inadequate and knowing Marc as we did, I do not think he would have wanted a fuss.

Instead, I will rather talk about some of the good times we had. We first met in the early nineties at Sesriem. Marc was working for Wilderness Safaris and one morning he came to the office with the late Jacques Erasmus who was the ranger stationed there. Marc wanted to know what the thorny little shrub was growing at the Sesriem Canyon. Luckily, it was one of the few plants I knew. Subsequently, we spent many pleasant hours over the years looking at and identifying plants. In 2000, the good rains made the desert bloom and we were in seventh heaven on NamibRand Nature Reserve. The hills, mountains and plains had so many new plants we could not identify. Luckily, Elinor's parents came for a visit. Bernard and Mayda de Winter were both botanists and we spent hours collecting and learning to ID new species. This learning process never stopped and when Marc and the family visited us at Gondwana Canyon Park, we were like kids in a candy store. So many new plants we had not seen before and lots of them endemics. Marc had an interest and knowledge of so many aspects of natural history and was always reading to increase his knowledge. It was a pleasure to go into the dunes with him in the early morning and have him interpret the myriad of tracks and signs left by nocturnal creatures. Marc and Elinor started Tok-Tokkie Trails and built it into one of the leading guided walking-trail companies in Namibia. Because of his practical experience gained over many years, enthusiasm and knowledge, he was the ideal instructor to train desert guides.



Marc

Photo: Peter Bridgeford

Marc enjoyed hiking and he assisted ranger Jaco Steenkamp with the maintenance of the Naukluft 8-day hiking trail. Later he took clients hiking in the Naukluft. He also accompanied Jaco on a vulture-ringing trip to Tsondabvlei in 1997 and 1998. From these trips, he developed a passion for vultures and became one of the most ardent and enthusiastic vulture conservationists in Namibia. Over the years, we were very fortunate to spend many hours together, driving across the vast plains of the Namib-Naukluft Park and along the ephemeral rivers looking for vulture nests. We also talked loads of nonsense during the long hours getting to and from the nesting sites. On one trip to the south, we were in fine form and had hardly left Walvis when Marilyn told us we were more than normally raucous. Many of the friends that went ringing will remember the days in the field and evenings around the campfire with Marc. I do not think I will ever use a Kelly-kettle again without thinking of him and the tea stops and ginger biscuits.

Rest in peace my friend.
Peter Bridgeford

Hawk Trust sees increase in injured birds of prey

BBC, Environment, 26/12/2010

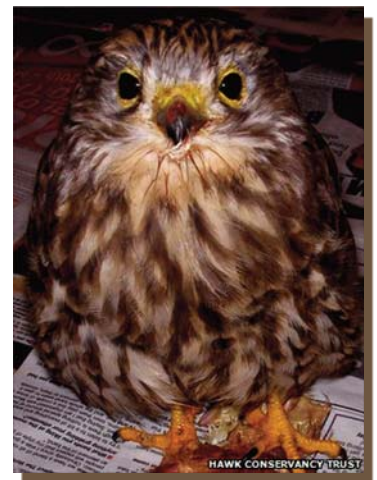
A Hampshire conservation centre has seen a big increase in the number of injured birds of prey this winter. Twenty-five birds - including buzzards, kestrels and tawny owls - were brought to Andover's Hawk Conservancy Trust in December - 20 more than in the same period last year. Most were suffering from the effects of hunger or road accident injuries.

Manager Kim Kirkbride said: "The heavy frosts and snow have made hunting for food extremely difficult." It is thought many of the birds were forced to hunt close to verges and roadsides where they were in collision with cars or lorries.

Some of the birds are juveniles which hatched earlier this year and have not developed enough experience of coping with harsh weather. The injured birds are treated before being released back into the wild when they are fully fit. The trust is asking people to be vigilant for other birds of prey who may be in distress.

Campbell Murn, chief scientific officer, said: "Unlike garden birds, who can be supported using nut and seed feeders, there is little people can do to supplement a bird of prey's diet."

"Only by protecting their habitats can we ensure that they have enough to live on".



HAWK CONSERVANCY TRUST

The following are from: **Birds and People # 27 - September, 2010** www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw

LESOMA VULTURES BREED WELL

Earlier this year, a substantial number of White-backed Vultures were poisoned near Lesoma Village (see Birds and People newsletter #25 - March, 2010), and in this light it was expected that the breeding colony in the Lesoma Valley would be decimated. Imagine our surprise and pleasure when a survey led by Pete Laver of the BirdLife Botswana branch in Kasane, showed a record of 85 active nests this season!



Photo: Pete Hancock

A White-backed Vulture comes in to land

The survey was conducted on 1st August, by 10 BirdLife members who covered the standard 6 kilometre stretch of the valley. Last year, just over half this number of nests was recorded along the same stretch.

This colony straddles the international border with Zimbabwe, and it is not known how many nests are on the Zimbabwean side; however, it is clear that this is a very important colony.

Special thanks to the BirdLife Botswana members in Kasane for undertaking this sterling monitoring work, underscoring once again the value of 'citizen scientists'.

Unfortunately, poisoning incidents are happening all over the world and for reasons most of us don't understand. See the next article from Botswana.

Ed.

VULTURE POISONING AT KHUTSE

It is becoming monotonous reporting on vulture poisoning incidents, but the recent death of a single vulture at Khutse is worth highlighting for the simple fact that it illustrates that even the huge protected areas in Botswana do not provide a year-round safe haven for these peripatetic birds.

This incident was reported by BirdLife Botswana member, Patrick Taylor, who writes "We were up in Khutse and saw four Lappet-faced and three White-backed Vultures at the new solar pump pan at Khutse 1 on Sunday the 29th of August 2010. The Lappet-faced Vultures were all fine, as were three of the White-backed Vultures. Sadly we found the fourth White-backed Vulture in severe stress, partially paralysed and fading fast. It looked like a clear case of poison".

This incident is under investigation by colleagues from the Dept. of Wildlife and National Parks.



Letter from Spain

Hello
I'm Gonzalo Gil, I work for a regional government agency in charge of biodiversity conservation in Spain. One of my duties is related to vulture conservation. We have tagged some 400

European Griffon Vultures in our region (and many others have been so in our neighbouring regions in Spain). As youngsters of this species usually fly south across the Straits of Gibraltar into Africa I am writing to people involved in birdwatching and nature conservation in order to let you know about our tagging program.

We use both wingtags and PVC rings as well as conventional and mandatory metal rings. Tags are yellow with black digits and are read top to bottom. A photograph showing it is enclosed.

We will be very grateful to receive any sighting from you if it ever happens considering the distances and the odds. Thank you very much in advance.

Yours.

Gonzalo Gil, ggil@sodemasa.com



Photo: Patrick Taylor



The dying vulture at Khutse

Successful 2010 vulture ringing season in the Namib

Peter Bridgeford

In October 2009, many of the Lappet-faced Vulture chicks in the Namib-Naukluft Park (NNP) were found to be too young to ring or too small to fit a patagial tag. We therefore had to go back later in November and some chicks were only ringed in January 2010. These second and third visits incurred additional travelling costs. We then considered ringing later in October 2010 so that we did not have the same problem again. However, because of other commitments, we ringed more or less the same time as in October 2009.

Surprise! Surprise! We only had two chicks too small to ring, but we had many that were VERY big. Several were almost ready to fledge. The other surprise was the large number of breeding birds. After the aerial survey during the first week of October, we had more than the normal number of marked points on our GPS. Did we mark too many roosting birds as breeding birds or did we have a bumper crop of breeding vultures? We knew that some occupied nests were plotted twice, but these showed up as soon as the maps were printed and they could be deleted.

As usual, the aerial survey started at Ganab, on Monday 4 October and ended at Weltevrede Guest Farm on Thursday. Rob Field came to our rescue once again, the seventh time he has flown the aerial survey for Vultures Namibia. Rob now lives in Port Alfred in the Eastern Cape. Neil Sloane, a friend of Rob's, assisted with the survey and ringing and helped ferry the vehicles. Holger Kolberg, our vital link to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, arrived from Windhoek. As soon as the plane left after the survey, we started ringing the closest chicks in the Namibwater area. On Friday, we ringed two vulture chicks in the Sossusvlei area, but two other nests each contained a breeding Black-chested Snake-Eagle.

On Friday evening, we met the rest of the ringing crew at Namibwater. They were Jannes Brandt from the capital and his friends Johan van der Hoven and Christo Aldrich who flew in all the way from Pretoria that morning. Sandra Gush and Val Barsdorf came from Windhoek, via a long detour through the desert. On Saturday morning, our first stop was at Namib Naukluft Lodge. Fritz Curschmann took us to a nest and he helped ring and tag the first vulture for the day.



Photo: Sandra Gush

Fritz Curschmann

The next stop was on Escourt in the NNP. We spent the rest of the day finding and ringing the birds in the Tsondab River and Tsondabvlei. On Sunday morning, Neil left us as he and Rob had to return to the Cape. Sandra and Val returned to Windhoek. The remaining ringers processed the last chicks on the Tsondab Plains and then crossed the dune barrier to reach the plains of the Kamberg and our campsite overlooked the Kuiseb River.

On Monday, it was hot and when we ringed the last chick south of the Saagberg at about lunchtime, we were all happy to stop for the day. Jannes, Christo and Johan returned to Windhoek, while Holger left for Ganab and I headed for Walvis Bay. From Tuesday to Thursday, Holger ringed in the Mirabib area with two of his colleagues, Mwaka Sinchembe and Frans Kamenye.

The group on the next ringing session at Ganab met on Friday evening at the VIP campsite. Holger Kolberg, Joe Walter, Uschi Kirchner, Marcia and Mark Stanton, Peter and Annegret Sander, Glynnis Humphrey, Leon Jooste, Phillip Plarre, Martin



Photo: Holger Kolberg

Lappet-faced Vulture nest in a *Commiphora glaucescens*

Wood (all the way from Johannesburg), Philip, Nathan and another young man from Gobabeb whose name eludes me. The next morning, Anne-Sophie Gillard and two friends from Reunion joined the team. Holger led one team to ring north of Ganab and I took the other to the south.

On Saturday and Sunday, the two teams drove many kilometres to find and ring the chicks across the vast plains of the Namib. By late afternoon on Sunday, we had almost completed our task and most people headed for home. Holger, Joe, Uschi, Martin and I stayed another night. The next morning we said our farewells and all headed for home. On the way to Walvis Bay, Martin and I ringed the last two chicks at Tumas View. We arrived home tired but happy.

It was a good year for the vultures of the Namib. We ringed 86 Lappet-faced Vulture chicks, the same number as in 2007. Why so many chicks this year? The majority, (64), were on the plains between the Swakop and Kuiseb Rivers. Here we found huge herds of gemsbok and springbok and many, many Hartmann's mountain zebra. Ostrich numbers have also increased the past few years. Why were the chicks so big this year during October, in comparison to last year? I assume the abundance of food may have something to do with it, although last year there was plenty of food as well. The Tsondab, with ten chicks, was the area with the second highest number of breeding birds.

Next year the project will be 20 years old. Without the help of many friends and sponsors, this could not have happened. Thanks to all who have helped in one way or another, for the many miles we have travelled across this fascinating country, the simple pleasure of countless evenings around the camp fire (when we solved the world's problems), and were finding a common goal in trying to help the vultures of the Namib.

Another bird strike at Windhoek international airport

Peter Bridgeford

Pilot Francois Hugo had a narrow escape when his Cessna 441 Conquest was hit a large bird during September 2010. The twin-engine aircraft was taking off from the Windhoek international airport and still climbing, when at about 750 feet above the ground, at a speed of 130 knots (240.76 kph), it was struck by a large bird. Francois says he suddenly saw a big black bird heading for the plane. He dipped the wing in an attempt to avoid the bird hitting the engine. He succeeded, but unfortunately, the bird hit the horizontal stabilizer (tail).



Photo: Peter Keil

Damage done to the aircraft's tail.

Francois, who was on a med-rescue flight, safely landed the aircraft. From the size and description of the bird, it must have been a Lappet-faced Vulture. Both Lappet-faced and White-backed Vultures breed on farms near the airport.

Peter Keil, technical director of WestAir Maintenance in Windhoek states: 'This was quite a sizeable vulture that hit the aircraft. The force of the impact was so hard it actually damaged the attachment point of the stabilizer at the back of the aircraft'. The damage to the aircraft is estimated at US\$60,000. Peter has handled a number of large Lappet-faced Vulture chicks in the Namib while ringing with Vultures Namibia.



Bird books available

The Sam Cohen Library in Swakopmund has the following journals/magazines that need a good home. If you are interested, please contact Trudi Stols at 064-402695. They would accept a cash donation.

Birds of the World, 1971. 108 weekly parts to form a complete 10 -volume encyclopaedia. Printed in England.

African Wildlife 1971-1997. Official journal of the Wildlife Society of South Africa. Bound in 13 volumes.

South African Archaeological Bulletin 1948-1971. Various duplicates available

Satellite tagging

Munir Virani

New technologies in Satellite tagging have enabled scientists to get some exciting data about little known species. The Amur falcon still has a wide distribution and a large global population, which is believed to be stable. However, the grassland areas the Amur Falcon inhabits in its wintering quarters in southern Africa are under intense pressure from agriculture and commercial afforestation which could bring the species under increasing pressure across its non-breeding range. The falcons also create noise and mess in urban areas, leading to the felling of roost trees, and suffer high mortality on major roads when catching insects. The congregation of thousands of Amur Falcons at their winter roosting sites gives the perfect opportunity to census the species' global population, allowing population numbers and trends to be quantified, and any potential conservation threats to be identified and addressed. The Migrating Kestrel Project, co-ordinated by the Birds of Prey Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, South Africa, was initiated in 1994 for this purpose, and continues to date. This project performs counts at a large number of roosts in South Africa, with the highest total of Amur falcons so far counted being around 110,000 birds. Compared to the million or so birds potentially estimated by the current literature, this is relatively low, suggesting that there is a need to continue closely monitoring this attractive small falcon.

Click on <http://www.africanraptors.org/amur-falcon-migration-route-finally-plotted/> to read more about the work of Prof Meyburg and his team on the latest progress of the migration route of the Amur Falcon.

Osprey photographed in November by Dirk Heinrich at Pelican Point, Walvis Bay. Is this the same bird that has been seen here during the last few years?

Newsflashes

- Danny Bartlett, from Onguma Game Ranch, bordering Etosha NP, was hunting near Mahango Game Park in July 2009. While tracking a buffalo, he spotted a dead African Fish Eagle, *Haliaeetus vocifer* hanging in a tree. It managed to break free from a snare, but with the string and stick still attached to its neck. When it flew into a tree, the string tangled in the branches and the eagle was strangled. Danny also found a dead White-backed Vulture chick; possibly, it fell out of its nest.



Photo: Danny Bartlett

- Claus Bergmann found a dead eagle hanging from a power line on his farm Okatumba in August 2010. It seems as if the eagle caught its neck in the V of the anchor wires. Was it dead before this happened? It does not appear to have been electrocuted. Can someone ID this eagle please?



Photo: Claus Bergmann

- Florian Wiese, chief researcher for the NGO, N/a'anku se, sent a photo of a Lappet-faced Vulture caught on their camera-trap at Vista water point on NamibRand Nature Reserve (NRNR) on 9 July 2010. Simone Swarts ringed the chick on 9 October 2006 on the Tsondab Plains of the NNP. Thanks to wardens Ann and Mike Scott and Florian for sending the information. Time elapsed: ±1365 days, distance 165kms.
- The mystery bird in the last newsletter (#3) on page 2 was identified by Bill Clark as a juvenile African Black (Verreaux's) Eagle and confirmed by Rob Davies
- Rob Thomson and James Slade of the Cheetah Conservation Fund, Otjiwarongo district, sent details of a tagged White-backed Vulture caught on their camera trap, on 15 August 2010. Maria Diekmann at REST ringed it as an adult male on 12 October 2008. Time elapsed: ±22 months, distance ±50kms. Thanks to Rob & James.

- Tour guide Me-Gusto Busch of Wilderness Safaris reported a tagged Lappet-faced Vulture feeding on a dead gemsbok on 17 November 2010. It was with other Lappet-faced and White-backed Vultures on the Palmwag concession in the north-west of Namibia. Wilferd Versfeld ringed the chick on 13 October 2009 on Grootvlakte in Etosha NP. Time elapsed: 400days, distance ±200kms. Thanks Me-Gusto.

- Sean Gibson and Peter Woolfe discovered the remains of several dead vultures in May 2010 on the farm Excelsior, bordering NRNR. Further investigation yielded eight Lappet-faced Vulture skulls. They found a tag and a ring, G 17355. The late Marc Dürr ringed this chick on 17 October 2005, on the dunes of Bushman Hill in the NNP. Danica Shaw and Nils Odendaal of NRNR accompanied him in this difficult terrain. Time elapsed: 1708 days, distance 102kms.

- Tag V020. This chick also ringed and tagged by Marc Dürr, at Mirabib in the NNP on 19 October 2008. Time elapsed: 564 days, distance 274kms. Police and conservation officers investigated this case, but it is unlikely that any prosecution will result.

- Exciting news: Allan Walkden-Davis and Dr. Ian Sinclair reported a confirmed sighting of a Black Harrier at 11h15 on the 3rd of September on Aandster, NamibRand, Namibia. Mike Scott will ascertain the exact location.Nils Odendaal

- Martial Eagle photographed in Etosha, Namibia during October 2010 by Dennis Sumrak Arlington, Texas, USA



Websites

www.kestreling.com
www.nnf.org.na
www.ewt.org.za
www.africanraptors.org/category/african-raptor-news/
www.vultureconservation.co.za/



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