RAPTORS NAMIBIA
Working together to conserve our birds of prey!

NEWSLETTER

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In this issue:

1 A tribute to Steven Piper

1 Rock Kestrels . . . . . .Liz Komen

1 Do vultures attack and kill sheep? .Peter Bridgeford

2 Vulture resightings on Wiese

3 Vulture going walk-about! . . . . . .Mark Anderson

3 INFORMATION needed . . . . . .NARREC

3 The mystery of the missing mice . . .Holger Kolberg

3 Tourists of another kind . . . . . .Liz Komen

5 Newsflashes

A tribute to Steven Piper

We met Steven Piper many years ago at a bird-ringing weekend at Bonamanzi Game Park. Little did we realise that we would see him several times thereafter, mainly at Vulture Study Group meetings. The first was in 1997 at Kimberley and then annually for several years.

In April 2003, the meeting was held on Aandstêr, NamibRand Nature Reserve and for a few days our house and garden was the scene of organised chaos, as about 70 vulture fanatics and normal people met.

The Namib is a desert, but the first evening, our lamb on a spit-braai was rudely interrupted by a shower of 8 mm, a heavy downpour in that arid part of the world. It did not dampen the high spirits of the guests and the braai carried on in the very large tent.

Steven was there, as at every other meeting of the VSG that I attended. We always marvelled at his knowledge of so many subjects and the amount of work he did for the wellbeing of vultures, besides his busy life at the university.

We had just read one of his amusing newsletters and discussed whether to attend the next meeting in May in the Drakensberg, when we got the news of his passing.

To his wife Andy and family our sincere best wishes.

It was an honour and pleasure to have known Steven.

Peter & Marilyn Bridgeford

Rock Kestrels

Liz Komen

One of the most common urbanized raptors is the Rock Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*. Throughout Namibia this 200 gram kesrel has adapted to nesting on buildings and providing that their prey items, rodents, lizards, small birds and insects, do not become scarce, they can be seen around their city blocks throughout the year. As the summer approaches and usually with the onset of the first rains the city kestrels will take up their nest sites on a building ledge. Pairs prefer to use the same site each year and if the rain season begins early and is extensive, a single pair of kestrels may have two clutches of eggs in one summer season.

The Rock Kestrels begin their breeding season in spring to early summer. After a 4 week incubation period and an approximate 5 week nestling period, great activity can be seen as 2 - 4 young birds leave the nest site and spend much of their day over the next month or two playing in the wind and practicing their flying and predatory techniques between the buildings.

The city kestrel nest sites are often on window ledges of buildings. Many people only begin to notice the Rock Kestrels when the chicks are part grown and become vocal in their demands for food and attention. This period is when the city kestrels are at their most vulnerable. Quite often, because of disturbance, young birds leave the nest before they are able to fly properly. These young birds are at the mercy of people, as they are unable to get back easily or quickly to a safe high perch on a building. Every year Namibia Animal Rehabilitation, Research & Education Centre (NARREC) receives calls from people who have found young birds on a city street. These immature birds have an excellent chance of being released and joining the wild population if they are correctly assisted.

Do vultures attack and kill sheep?

Peter Bridgeford

A perusal of the vulture bible, *Vultures of Africa* by Mundy, Butchart, Ledger and Piper (1992), refers to several incidents where vultures and sheep were involved

“The killing of small stock by vultures seems to have been an authentic phenomenon of the early part of the twentieth century, and it may have been the result of a general food shortage resulting from the collapse of the wild ungulate population” (Page 363).

On Page 283: “Cape Griffons are ‘very partial’ to dead newborn domestic lambs in the south-western Cape” and on Page 272: “We think that perhaps some, if not most, of the cases of so-called predation on domestic livestock by griffons are in fact the vultures gathering at an animal in

Continued on page 2

distress or *in extremis*. Females giving birth are likely to produce most of these incidents, and the vultures might then finish them off - they would have died anyway"

A similar incident involving wildlife is on Page 269: "The most complete description to our knowledge, comes from the Mana Pools National Park in Zimbabwe where an old impala ram was stumbling around on collapsed hindquarters and bent forelegs. Many vultures had gathered and a few of them were both swooping at the antelope and springing at it from the ground with outspread feet. Eventually the ram collapsed and was soon despatched; within moments the birds had removed both eyes and had started to disembowel the impala through the torn skin of its belly".

The reason why I asked the question and included these references is because we have had similar incidents in Namibia. In November 2008, Ranger Henog Frederick of the Keetmanshoop office of the Ministry of Environment contacted me about an alleged incident of vultures killing sheep. He paid a visit to the farm concerned, in the Koës area and reported that although he had not seen the White-backed Vultures (WBV) attacking and eating lambs and ewes, he certainly found the remains of both. He and the farmer went to a camp about 1.5 km from the homestead and found seven WBV around the carcass of an ewe. Both eyes were pecked out and still leaking blood and the birds has started feeding on the soft, thin-skinned inner thigh. The birds had flown off at their approach. The remains of two lambs were found at the spot. The ewe was skinned and signs of other predators having killed the sheep were looked for. All they found were what appeared to be peck wounds on the sides of the ewe. No bite marks from jackals, caracal or honey badger were found and there are many of these predators in the area. The farmer claimed to have lost about 45 sheep since May of that year.

Neither the farmer, nor the ranger, nor farm workers had actually witnessed an attack. Then in March this year, Ranger Henog received a call from another farmer in the same vicinity, complaining that vultures were eating his sheep. Henog contacted Liz Komen and I and I then went to Keetmanshoop to investigate the incident. Chris Brown of the Namibia Nature Foundation arranged the funding for the trip. True to Murphy's Law, Henog and I did not see a single vulture during the two days we drove around the area talking to the farmers and their workers. What we did find was an area with very few wild ungulates and a mono-culture: Dorper sheep. There are literally thousands and thousands of Dorper sheep in the Koës district.

Dorper sheep are not herd animals. Most other sheep stay in flocks and are relatively easy to herd. The Dorpers will disperse over the large camps, some thousands of hectares in size, and are usually only herded to a single point when treated against ticks or other diseases. As long as there is food and water, lambing ewes are left unattended and are not moved to safer places away from predators. On two neighbouring farms, no losses due to vultures were reported. On one, the Angora goats were looked after by herders and not left to fend for themselves. They had no losses due to predators or vultures. The other farm, with Dorpers, suffered from the depredations of jackal, caracal, wild cats and honey badgers.

Dr Hartmut Winterbach who was a State vet in the Mariental district several years ago, reports that at a farmers' meeting about problem predators, one farmer stated that vultures had attacked and killed his lambs and he had photos of the incident. Whether these were photos of the dead sheep or vultures attacking the healthy lambs could not be ascertained and we have not been able to trace the farmer. Another report from a game farmer north of the Namib-Naukluft Park stated that during a recent drought, many springbok and gemsbok died. He witnessed Lappet-faced Vultures attacking a springbok that was stumbling around on its last legs.

Abrie Maritz of the Zurich Kalahari Raptor Project, a very experienced raptorphile and a farmer himself, was asked for comment. He has had reports of vultures attacking sheep, but has found that in most cases, other agents were responsible for the death of the sheep. These include *Clostridium* related diseases such as pulpy kidney and quarter-evil (sponssiekte) and in the wet season, bluetongue. Vultures were feeding on the dead or dying animals, but mistakenly seen as the cause of death.

From my brief visit to the area, it appears that good management practices play a very important role in the safeguarding of domestic stock. Stock left unattended for lengthy periods, are easy targets for the many mammalian predators in the Koës area.

If anyone has any information of similar incidents, we would like to hear from you.

Vulture resighting

Early in August 2008, Dirk Heinrich and Werner Bader found a small Lappet-faced Vulture chick in its nest on the farm Wiese, southeast of Windhoek. It was too small to ring then, but they returned a month later to do so. They also attached a yellow patagial tag on the right wing (J001). Just before Christmas 2008 they saw the fledged chick roosting on the nest and even managed to get a good photo. Then on 14 March 2009, they saw the young bird again perched on a tree.

Photo: Dirk Heinrich Photo Library

Taken just before Christmas on Wiese

Vulture going walk-about!

(Update, see #1 January 2009) Mark Anderson

Amur's GPS positions on Google

You may be interested in following the adventures of our GPS-tagged White-backed Vulture, Amur. Click on the "Vulture tracking" link on our website, www.birdlife.org.za.

We attached GPS-units to four vultures. One of the units, fitted to Angus, has unfortunately gone on the blink.

Two of the vultures, Acacia and Alpha, are still hanging around their nest sites (they probably took their first flights in November), but Amur is really going walk-about! Some of our ringed/tagged vultures have ended up very far from their natal site, such as at Hoedspruit and Etosha, so it will be interesting to see where Amur, Acacia and Alpha go!

We will be attaching more GPS-units to vultures in October, hopefully half a dozen adults this time. These birds will have names starting with "B". I hope that I will still be around when, in 25 years' time we name one of our GPS-tagged vultures "Zephne", after that famous raptor ringer and conservationist from Middelburg!

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

Together with students from the Polytechnic of Namibia, a survey of urban Rock Kestrel nest sites and other city nesting birds of prey is being conducted. Any person that knows of a city or town bird of prey nest-site is asked to call NARREC on Tel: 061 264409 / 264256 Cell: 0811290565 Email: liz@narrec.net

The mystery of the missing mice!

Holger Kolberg

Whilst recently raptor trapping in the deep south, the following happened: Holger (HK) spots Jackal Buzzard (JB) on telephone pole (TP) next to Rosh Pinah / Aus road. HK drops trap near TP for JB and whilst turning around JB is spotted descending on trap. Unfortunately the trap slid behind some tufts of grass so what happens was only seen in a blur.

Now the strange stuff starts happening! JB is seen “vroeteling” at trap (unfortunately there is no good English word for “vroeteling”) and then takes a walkabout, apparently not interested in trap anymore. HK decides to investigate: finds trap door wide open, both mice gone! Presumed eaten! This is a great loss as these were the two best and most highly decorated fighting mice. Both had been awarded the Purple Heart, Iron Cross 1st class with oak leaves and the Pro Patria! But I could swear I saw the JB carry a small oxy-acetylene torch as it flew off, how else would it have opened the trap? Perhaps its a distant relative of the drill wielding pelican from Mile 4?

Or is this the avian world telling us “Enough is enough! No more rings!”? Any even remotely plausible explanations to this story will be highly appreciated.

Or, was it the mice?????????

Tourists of a different kind

Liz Komen

During the rainy season, and particularly in a good rainy season, the increase in the number of small, medium and large birds that grace our skies is astounding.

The bird species that migrate to southern Africa and to Namibia range from tiny 8-gram warblers to large 3-kilogram eagles.

Photo: Liz Komen

Migratory raptors hawking insects

One of our visitors, the Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*, holds the record for distance. This bird species weighs only 100 grams and migrates 15 000 km, halfway around the world, twice a year.

Most migrant birds arrive from around September. Some species arrive to feed, nest and breed. Others breed in Europe, Asia, some as far north as the Arctic Circle, and they only migrate to the southern hemisphere to escape the icy northern winters and to utilise the abundance of food available in our warm and wet summer months.

News Flashes

Photo: Ingrid Wiesel

- We don't often get news from the new Sperrgebiet National Park, but brown hyaena researcher Dr Ingrid Wiesel saw two Lappet-faced Vultures near the Agub Mountains, about 45 kms southwest of Aus, in March 2009. She notes that Warden Trygve Cooper reported seeing old nests in that area. Ingrid also saw three Black-chested Snake-Eagles in the same vicinity.

- There were plenty of vulture sightings from NamibRand Nature Reserve. On 9 Feb., 27 Lappet-faced Vultures and 11 White-backed Vultures were reported from the far south at Satanskop. Later that day, 12 Lappet-faced Vultures and one White-backed Vulture in the central part of the reserve and at another point, 24 Lappet-faced Vultures. Some of the same birds could have been seen at the various places, but White-backed Vultures are not seen that often. These sightings were reported by Ann and Mike Scott, the reserve managers.
  Ten days later also at Satanskop, Andreas Keding saw 20 Lappet-faced Vultures and 14 White-backed Vultures. One Lappet was tagged, but the number could not be read.
- Rob Simmons paid a flying visit to Namibia and reported the following on 29 January 2009:
  beween 300 and 600 Red-footed Falcons in two groups swirling low over the road and trees. No fatalities due to traffic seen, despite suicidal tendencies with moving vehicles. However, north of Windhoek on the main road, he recorded 639 live raptors and 21 dead ones, mainly Yellow-billed Kites. Near the Gamsberg, about 100 Red-footed and Amur Falcons feeding on flying alates. In the same area, two Steppe Eagles. As far as Rob is concerned, everything else pales into insignificance with the sighting of a "stunning male Pallid Harrier" near Witvlei, east of Windhoek. Amazing what turns some ornithologists on. To confirm that Rob did not misidentify the Harrier, it was seen later the day in the same locality by Hoens Potgieter.

Photo: Le Roux van Schalkwyk

- Le Roux van Schalkwyk, writing from his farm Kumbis, bordering the Namib-Naukluft Park, sent this photo of a Lappet-faced Vultures perched on a telephone pole. The Namib has had good rains and everything is green. He has also seen cheetah and porcupine.
- **Thank you** to all those who counted kestrels on the National Kestrel Count Day. Reports have been pouring in and we have currently counted over 135,000 falcons. The surprise so far has been the large number of Amur Falcons counted compared to last year! You can keep updated on the counts by looking at the www.kestreling.com web page. It is also worthwhile looking at some pictures posted by Whitey van Pletzen of hundreds of Amur Falcons on the power lines around the Viljoenskroon roost in the Picture Gallery under Amur Falcon. A most amazing sight. If you have not sent in your counts for the National Kestrel Count Day, please do so when you can. I am still missing information from a number of key sites such as Harrismith and surrounding towns, Colesberg, Winburg, Kimberley, Vereeniging, Naboomspruit, etc. I know that counts from some of these roosts will also boost the Lesser Kestrel numbers, which are still below behind the normal count.

Anthony van Zyl, Migrating Kestrel Project

Photo: Naude Dreyer

- Naude Dreyer of Sandwich Harbour 4X4, saw an Osprey at Sandwich Harbour in February. Holger Kolberg, while doing his counts of wetlands in January, saw Osprey at Sandwich Harbour, Hardap Dam, Naute Dam and the Orange River mouth.
- Since the start of the summer season, NARREC has received nineteen raptors of nine species (African Hawk-eagle, Lanner Falcon, Rock Kestrel, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Spotted Eagle Owl, Gabar Goshawk, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Tawny Eagle & White-backed Vulture). Thirteen of these were released and one remains in rehabilitation. One bird was dead on arrival and five were euthanized.

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