RAPTORS NAMIBIA
Working together to conserve our birds of prey!

NEWSLETTER

January - March 2011 # 1

In this issue:

Nature's pest controllers

Liz Komen

The year 2010 was a busy one for the Namibia Animal Rehabilitation Research and Education Centre (Narrec) due to the number of birds of prey that were rescued by members of the Namibian public and given to the rehabilitation centre.

The most endearing were a pair of nestling owls that arrived wide-eyed. Of the approximately 150 species of owls found throughout the world, only eleven are in Namibia. Because most owl species are nocturnal and largely secretive they are often not encountered, yet many live in close proximity to people in both rural and urban settings. Owls evoke a wide variety of emotions in people, adored by some and feared by others.

Namibian schoolchildren visiting Narrec usually admit to knowing of the local superstitions that link owls with bad luck and death. Although most students emphatically state that they do not believe in these old folk tales, it does not take much telling to prove that these stories are based on fact, but a link has been lost.

Owls eat creatures that are pests to people, namely insects, rodents and seed-eating birds that can destroy crops in the fields or harvested grain in the stores or food in kitchen cupboards. Owls are sedentary birds that will only choose a living space where there is sufficient 'owl' food with safe places to roost and nest.

We now know that human suffering from disease and famine has often been caused by pest species, insects and rodents.

Somehow in the passing down of folklore owls have been blamed for bad luck and death instead of for alerting people to the true culprits, the owls' prey.

Vulture ringing in Etosha 2010

Wilferd Versfeld

And now, a word of wisdom …

Photo: Wilferd Versveld

If you keep them in the dark they keep quiet and do not bite!

Photo: Wilferd Versveld

If you do not hold your bird properly this happens!!

We are poisoning our world

Liz Komen

The year started with yet another reported case of vultures being poisoned, again on the road from Wilhelmstal to Omaruru. This is close to where three of our specially protected Lappet-faced Vultures were found dead in August 2009.

All signs point to this being the same farmer using the same deadly chemical in the same ignorant way. The Namibian public is the owner of Namibia's wild birds.

Other than ostriches, birds cannot be fenced in to a yard or a farm. All of us are given the gift of over 650 bird species in Namibia. Some species are tiny, weighing around 7 grams and others are the bird giants weighing up to 10 kg. All have roles to play in life and the services that birds offer to people are far beyond the simple joys of hearing their song or watching their aerial acrobatics.

Many bird populations around the world are showing signs of decline. Two obvious and well-documented reasons for this are the changes that are happening to natural habitats and the use of chemical pesticides. Pesticides can either severely reduce birds' food source, thereby effectively starving the population or contaminate the food source to the extent of poisoning the birds through secondary intake of the chemical.

This fabulous wet summer season will bring a host of problems to farmers, gardeners and householders. Wet weather increases plant growth that in turn encourages insects and other consumer loads. Fungi, viruses and bacteria that are unusual in our dry climate will likely also increase.

The chemical pesticide manufacturers and retail companies are potentially going to have a bumper season. Pesticides are a multimillion-dollar business. Companies have dedicated marketing that make it so easy for the public to grab the relevant container off the supermarket shelf or receive their product from the well-primed retail salesman.

Today's chemical companies that produce pesticides are well aware of the extent of damage that has been done to the environment by their products. They also know that there is a global lobby against such environmental damage. More and more these companies are attempting to develop products that are highly target specific, killing just one pest type.

Recognised companies comply with international regulations designed to assist the public on exactly how, where and when to use their potentially lethal products in order to minimise the fall-out. However, they have to rely on an intelligent and environmentally aware end-user.

A correctly used pesticide may be the most immediate and effective way to deal with a pest problem, but there are considerations. Researching the specific environment will yield the first clues as to why there is a pest problem. Then one of the first things to consider is the extent of biodiversity in the garden or on the farm. The emphasis on biodiversity is not just to save plant and animal species, nor to keep them as a potential cure for some disease. Diversity allows for the proper spread of organisms and it encourages natural control agents, preventing pests and diseases from attacking a single species or an unusual host and thereby reducing our risks of epidemics.

Organic pesticides are often thought of as a safe alternative to chemical products, but they can be as lethal and damaging. Repellents, be they pungent garden sprays made from herbs, cleverly designed scare objects in fields or livestock guard dogs, are effective in many situations.

Manual removal of pests is time consuming but at least both effective as well as target specific. There are hosts of websites giving advice to the problem of pests and a little time spent researching will yield a range of possible remedies that are target specific and will cause the least long-term damage.

Predation is a most serious farming issue, be it on crops or livestock. Control must be well thought out, not only because of the immediate financial burden of crop loss or cost of pesticide but also because of the long-term effects on the land. Using agricultural pesticides must be strictly in line with the recommendations of chemical manufacturers as printed on the product's container.

Agricultural pesticides are not designed to kill mammalian predators because they are not target specific and they do exactly what the pesticide companies are trying to prevent, they poison animals in a slow and painful way and they kill along the food chain. Using products "off-label" is illegal as is killing of nationally protected wildlife species.

For those farmers who continue to laugh in the face of law and order and who are either too lazy or too ignorant to adapt well-designed land and herd management techniques to their livestock farming practices, there must surely be retribution from the Namibian public.

Another poisoning

During January, Michael Tröh from Falcon Safes found this very ill vulture next to the road. He took it to Narrec for treatment and rehabilitation.

Photo: Michael Tröh

Alarming drop in Kenyan vultures

Birdlife Release

Vultures in one of Africa's most significant wildlife reserves are declining at an alarming rate according to a new study in Biological Conservation.

Researchers found that vulture populations – including African White-backed *Gyps africanus*, Ruppell's *Gyps rueppelli*i, and Hooded *Necrosyrtes monachus* vultures – around the Masai Mara National Reserve in southwestern Kenya have dropped up to 60 percent over three decades. The primary causes are changes in land use and other human activity, particularly the poisoning of livestock carcasses intended to kill lions and other large predators. Vultures quickly die after scavenging on the tainted carcasses.

"Staggering declines in abundance were found for seven of eight scavenging raptors surveyed," said co-author Munir Virani. "Better land management and a ban on certain pesticides are needed to preserve these keystone members of the scavenging community."

"The situation in Kenya perhaps mirrors the situation throughout eastern Africa," Virani said. "This is the first time that large-scale population declines in vultures and other scavenging raptors in and around the Masai Mara have been documented."

Another study published in early 2010 by the Journal of Raptor Research showed similar trends, revealing declines of 70 percent for scavenging birds, primarily vultures, over a three-year period in central Kenya. The authors determined that food and weather were not limiting factors and suggested that poisoned bait was responsible for the die-offs.

The latest study compared trends between the migration season of large ungulates like wildebeest and the non-migration season on reserve, buffer, and grazed lands. Large declines in all areas, including the reserve, during the ungulate migration – when food supplies are abundant for vultures – suggest that they are affected well beyond the study area.

In many areas, livestock owners misuse a pesticide called Furadan to poison lions and other large predators that kill their livestock. They set out a carcass laced with the poison, which is subsequently scavenged by vultures. Because they are social animals that feed together, many vultures can be killed by a single poisoning event.

Scavengers occupy an essential niche in the ecosystem as a clean-up and recycling crew. Vultures quickly consume the carcasses of dead animals before they decay and develop diseases harmful to humans, livestock and wildlife.

Paul Matiku, Executive Director of Nature Kenya (Birdlife Partner) said: "if the use of Furadan and other chemicals like Dichlophenac are not removed from the Kenyan market, Kenya is likely to not only lose all the wildlife but also wipe out the entire vulture populations and other target species".

The BirdLife Africa Partnership and many other conservation organisations across Africa are working to address the problems caused by avian poisoning, and are calling for increased concerted efforts to deal with the rapidly intensifying problem.

Furthermore, a survey has been undertaken on the use of chemicals in BirdLife network countries in Africa, and the BirdLife Secretariat and Partners are lobbying relevant authorities to inform them of the extent of the problem and urge increased vigilance.

With funding from the Rufford Maurice Laing Foundation – through the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) – over 2,000 posters have been produced to raise awareness of the threat to vultures; and coordinated counts are being undertaken in East Africa to verify the extent of the problem and make recommendations for mitigation.

The recent Kenyan study was conducted by The Peregrine Fund, National Museums of Kenya, and Princeton University and was published in Biological Conservation.

"Major declines in the abundance of vultures and other scavenging raptors in and around the Masai Mara ecosystem, Kenya"

From:Day in pictures: 10 January 2011 - BBC

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, they say, but it looks like this bird was either annoyed or threatened by this bird-shaped kite - it attacked it during a kite festival in India.

Letter from America

via E Breiting

January of last year, 2010, the weather stayed so cold in St. Louis, Missouri and Alton, Illinois that the bald eagles were cruising over houses in hopes of a quick meal. They could not access fish that were at the bottom of the river and the eagles had gathered together.

Some kind souls decided to feed the eagles so they would survive the cold spell. They gathered fish and started feeding the group of eagles huddled on the shore.

Once the fish were thrown, the eagles did not seem to fear the good Samaritans and word spread fast!

The photos below show what happened. A former teaching colleague took these photos in front of his home.

As you know, it was not too long ago that the American Bald Eagle was an endangered species. Incredible!

No zoom lens used here! The photographer was this close!

Many thanks for these and the email from Erdmutter *Ed.*

Plastic adorns the nests of birds fit for a fight

Jonathan Amos Science correspondent, BBC News

It might not seem de rigueur but for a black kite furnishing one's nest with white plastic is a major statement.

Spanish scientists have documented how this bird of prey will decorate its nest with large amounts of rubbish. It is a symbol of success, apparently - the biggest collections of plastic are displayed by the black kites with the most chicks and the best territory.

The research, conducted in Donana National Park, is reported in this week's edition of Science magazine. The Spanish team behind the study says the strips, mostly from old bags, are a signal to other birds that the incumbent will put up a fierce fight if any rival tries to move in on the local patch.

Black Harriers

Rob Simmons

Following the renewed signal from the Black Harrier female Sarri, in the Northern Cape coast, close to the Bitter Rivier I visited the site last weekend to cogitate and try to see her.

After a fruitless misty day on Saturday I was walking to a good vantage point on Sunday am (still in the mist) when I found her. She was dead with satellite transmitter intact on the ground, partly under a bush, belly-down. From her skeleton I could deduce quite quickly that she had actually died when I first reported her as dead on 11 January. We must have missed her by metres before, as she was only 57 m from the centroid of her last best positions in early January.

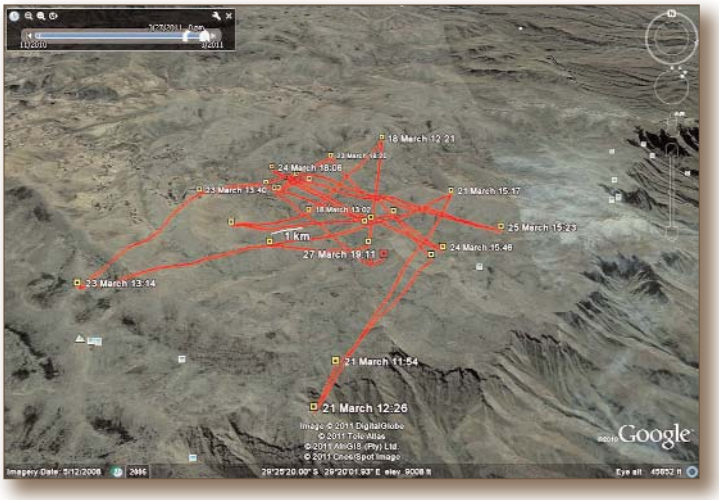
Moraea is still in the eastern highland areas of Lesotho where the weather forecast indicates that it is still raining and a maximum of 15°C. She clearly checked it out and is heading for sunny skies and warmer temperatures to the north (Bethlehem due north has some sun and up to 24°C). Like, Lockie before her, signal quality is poor in the mountains, which is expected under overcast conditions.

Moraea's movements

Update on Harriers

Rob Simmons

Sorry for the delay, with England and South Africa out of the cricket world cup and my prodical daughter arriving home from her sailing trip in piratical waters its taken me away from watching over Moraea.



Moraea, 18 to 27 March 2011

As you will recall we left her last in the eastern highlands of Lesotho, near the large town of Mokhotlong. Well she is still there and she's been foraging in a very small area of about 36 km2 [6 x 6 km] over the last month (21 Feb-21 March). She's been roosting in an area of hilly country above the Mokhotlong River away from human habitation. The altitude is approximately 3200 m asl.

I've checked the weather forecast numerous times and its showers, showers and more showers - a far cry from the west coast where she breeds which is currently very dry.

Of late she is getting slightly more adventurous, with a foray to the escarpment edge on 21 March of about 10 km, and a foray of 6 km (straight line) also eastwards from her roost site today (27 March) at 7pm.

Considering the date - late March - and the fact that the other satellite-tracked harriers were heading back in April, I am expecting her to start her journey back westwards within the next 2 weeks.

You will recall that Lockie the female that undertook a very similar journey at the same time last year, died under powerlines on 18 Feb 2010, so all going well this return journey we will be the first satellite-tagged Black Harrier followed back "home" to the west coast.

No Poles, No Birds

Neil Thomson

In a previous article (Raptors Namibia #2 April – June 2010) I mentioned that the majority of the raptors seen on a trip to the south of Namibia were perched on either telephone poles or the wooden masts and pylons carrying electricity distribution lines up to 66kV and I speculated on the effects of the removal of the telephone poles.

On 14 & 15/01/2011 I accompanied my daughter on the long drive to Cape Town where she was to commence her second year at university and en route from Windhoek to the South African border we did a raptor road count. All in all we counted 48 raptors (43 birds of 7 identified species plus 5 unidentified birds). Once again the vast majority of the raptors seen were in areas where there are either telephone poles or wooden power pylons.

Of the 48 raptors seen a whopping 69% (33) (including the only African white-backed vulture seen) were perched on these posts or pylons. (I can't recall ever seeing a vulture perched on a telephone pole before). Of the remaining birds one was (presumably feeding) on the tarred road, 5 were flying, 2 were perched on trees, 4 were perched on fence posts, one was perched on the elevated air release valve of a water line, one was perched on a sign next to the railway line and one (a martial eagle) was perched on a huge steel electricity pylon.

Again I am forced to wonder where those raptors utilizing the telephone poles will go when the last remaining poles are removed. To me it is very obvious that these poles are important perching sites for some species and there are simply very, very few raptors to be seen from the road in the areas where there are no overhead telephone or low voltage electricity lines.

Photo: Peter Woolfe

Vultures on NamibRand Nature Reserve, Namibia!

Newsflashes

- On 31 January 2011, Dirk Heinrich caught a ringed Black-chested Snake-Eagle about 60km north of Okahandja. The bird was originally ringed by the Red Bishop aka the Revd Yates about 40km north of Okahandja on 13 October 1990!! Now that's a neat retrap!

  Holger Kolberg

  I remember that bird, it was on the trap and we (Tom Newton and I) had to be quick because a tawny eagle had spotted the flapping BBSE and was contemplating a nice meal. Great that this character has survived for so long. .....The Red Bishop

- We would appreciate reports of any interactions between raptors and power lines – nesting activity, but also mortalities due to electrocution/collision. We have been receiving good feedback from A.C. van Zyl of NamPower at Aranos, which shows that raptors/vultures are indeed being electrocuted, especially on the smaller power lines when they all try to perch on the same pole. Therefore, it would be good to alert your workers to keep a look out for any carcasses. Once we identify problem areas/hotspots (e.g. near water points), it is easier to try to apply some form of mitigation. An incident report form is available from **ecoserve@iway.na** that should be accompanied by photographs of the incident, as indicated. You will find further information on the NamPower/NNF Strategic Partnership on our website (**www.nnf.org.na/nampowerproject.htm**). We will also put you on the mailing list for our newsletter.
  .....*Ann & Mike Scott*

- During January at Maria Diekmann's aviary in Otjiwarongo, Namibia, I observed how a Cape Vulture started salivating at the sight of meat. Now I should have recalled the Lion King's Vultures with big streaks of saliva hanging off their faces, but never did cotton on to the fact that vultures may have salivary or salt glands in their heads and/or beaks? The observation was new and news to me. Hence, I am on a quest to find out what the discharge was. Maria could not answer my question. Can anybody answer this question?
  Christian Boix

- On 31 January, Katharina Reddig, took this picture of two rock kestrels in Vineta, Swakopmund. *Elke Erb*

Photo: Katharina Reddig

- During September 2010, driving from Maltahöhe, Namibia towards Tsauchab River Camp, I saw a pair of Martial Eagles sitting on the farm fence. I slammed on the brakes and told my guests that these birds are red-listed, quite rare and to see a pair of them was a privilege. The last pair I saw was in Botswana. Nocturnal raptors are active in Otjiwarongo, although not continuously. Recently, I heard a Pearl-spotted Owlet near my house. In the past, they were confined to the area of the dam. The Barn Owls are quiet now, but I suspect they are breeding in the vicinity. We also have Southern White-faced Scops-Owl and African Scops-Owl. .....*Hugo Haussmann*

- Saturday 22/1/11, Fog and 100 plus vultures on NamibRand, Namibia. .....*Peter Woolfe*

Photo: Peter Woolfe

- Poison was put out for predators. A jackal took the poison and died away from carcass, which vultures picked up. A total of 1 White-back Vulture and 3 Lappet-faced Vultures were poisoned. The White-backed Vulture was tagged (EO31) by Gabriel Shatumbu and fitted with a satellite tag. *Wilferd Versveld*

- On 28/01/11, Mr Klaus von Baum of the farm Otjimukona found wing tag L101 next to a dead cow on his farm. Tag belonged to a White-Backed Vulture ringed on 13 Sept 2010 by Peter Bridgeford on farm Rainhof (Mr Düvel). There was no sign of a dead bird. Could the tag possibly have fall off? ....*Holger Kolberg*

Websites

www.kestreling.com
www.nnf.org.na
www.ewt.org.za
www.africanraptors.org/category/african-raptor-news/
www.vultureconservation.co.za/
http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?vol=1
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