

The misfortunes of a Cape Vulture

This short note about a single Cape Vulture could be just an anecdote, or it may suggest something useful about the reliability of food for these birds and what limits their numbers in Namibia. The bird, a male, boringly called CV5 by me and Dragon Rider by the more evocative Maria Diekmann, has been monitored since the 15th of January 2005 when it was fitted with a radio transmitter at REST, 50 kilometres north-east of Otjiwarongo.

Later that year the bird nested in a tree near REST on the Diekmann's farm Uitsig. The breeding attempt began in late March and ended in late June when the nestling disappeared. Joerg Diekmann thinks that a Tawny Eagle robbed this nest and two others in trees nearby. Dragon Rider nested again in a tree during 2006, this time on the farm Okaputa Suid, close to the Otjiwarongo-Otavi road. The 2006 breeding attempt was probably successful because the bird was recorded at the nest consistently between February and November. The actual nest used in 2006 is shown in Figure 1, although two other vultures were there when the nest was photographed on the 29th of April 2007.



Figure 1. Dragon Rider's nest at Okaputa Suid in 2006.

Since the nesting attempts in trees in 2005 and 2006 were possibly hybrid pairings with White-backed Vultures, imagine our surprise and delight in 2007 when Dragon Rider returned to the traditional Cape Vulture breeding colony on the western cliffs of the Waterberg. Locations received from its transmitter showed the bird to be consistently at

one spot on the cliffs from late March onwards. Was it now possible that the bird had found itself a decent Cape Vulture mate and cliff nest, and was now behaving by the book?

Several of us went to the base of the cliffs on the 28th of July to search for the nest. One bird was spotted lying down as if it was incubating or brooding. Another bird twice flew onto the cliff where it perched about 10-15 metres above the nest. Two patches of fresh white-wash were visible around ledges that might have held other nests but these could also have been roost sites (Figure 2)

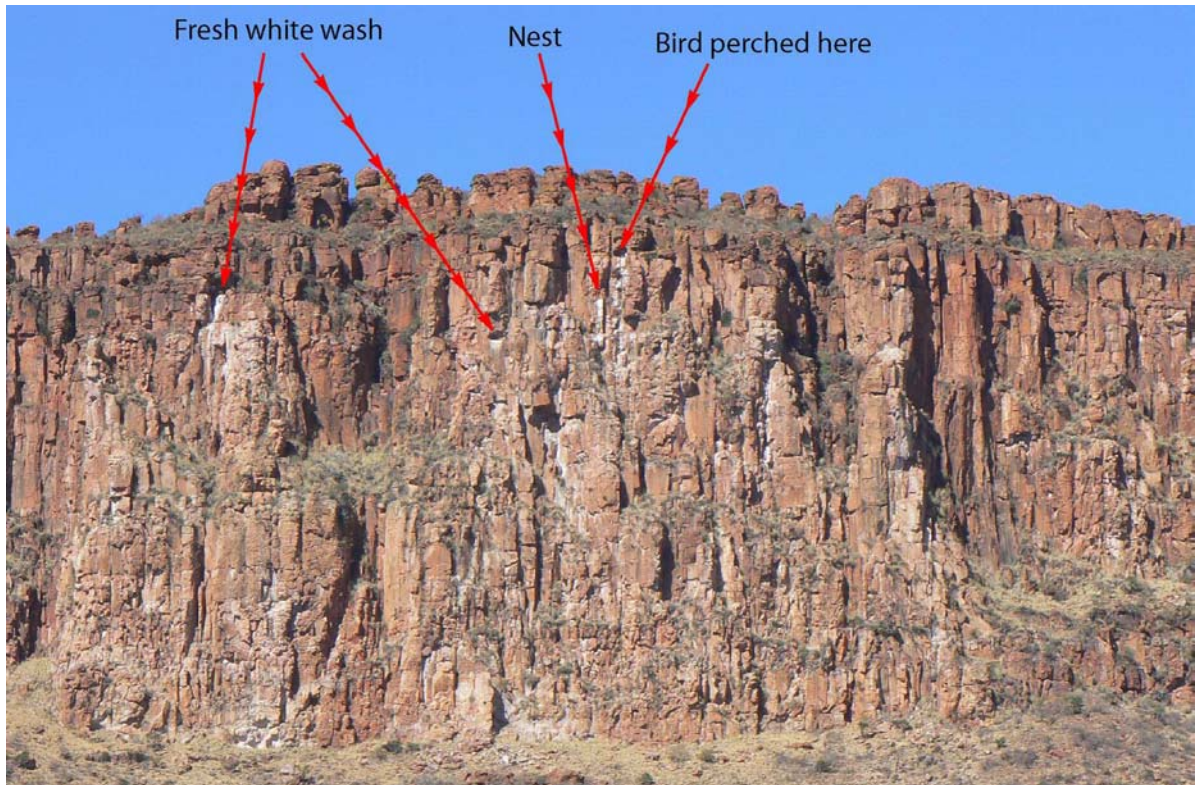


Figure 2. The nest site used by Dragon Rider on the Waterberg cliffs in 2007.

Christa Diekmann then visited the cliff on the 5th of August, when she saw three birds. She saw two birds on the 6th, but then none on the 7th or on any subsequent days over the next week. Her observations tallied with records from Dragon Rider's transmitter which showed that he left the cliffs on the 7th for good. Unfortunately, the transmitter did not provide consistent hourly locations on the 31st of July, or on the 1st and 2nd of August, but more reliable locations later showed that he went off foraging each day on the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th.

Our transmitter records from breeding birds at several nests indicate that they seldom leave their nests to go foraging for more than a day, and then normally spend one, two or three days at the nest before again venturing out for food. Dragon Rider's four days' of consecutive foraging was therefore most peculiar, and suggests that he was short of food.

That idea was reinforced by another bout of odd behaviour after the 7th. In the two and a half years that Dragon Rider had been tracked, all his movements had been restricted to an area within a radius of about 100 kilometers of the Waterberg. He had never been to

Etosha or north of Tsumeb or Grootfontein, for example. And so we were again surprised when he took off on an errant excursion through Etosha and up to the Angolan border between the 11th and 13th of August. He then returned south to his usual range around Waterberg.

On the 27th of August he again set off north, beginning this journey east of Grootfontein, from where he flew west to Etosha, then north of the Mangetti farms and later eastwards to the Mangetti Game Reserve. From here, he retraced his northerly arc over the Mangetti farms to return south of Namutoni and back to the Waterberg area on the 3rd of September. I would assume that these wide-ranging trips were undertaken because he failed to find food in his normal range. As of the time of writing in mid-October, Dragon Rider has remained in the Waterberg area, hopefully having regained a regular supply of food.

A last anecdote about this male. This is that he is the only bird we have tracked to regularly roost on electricity pylons. Dragon Rider is therefore an apt name for a bird that possibly ran so short of food that he abandoned his nest, and then made wild trips out of his normal range. And the Dragon spends many nights recharging his batteries close to high voltages.

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