

This issue of *Lanioturdus* is devoted to the raptor workshop which was held at Waterberg Plateau Park from 18-19 February 2005. The workshop was organized by the Namibian Nature Foundation and was open to all who were interested in raptors.

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## Welcome and introduction

Dr Chris Brown

Namibia Nature Foundation, PO Box245, Windhoek

Namibia's vultures, other diurnal raptors and owls are increasingly under threat from factors such as disturbance, particularly at breeding sites; the misuse of poisons and pesticides; electrocution and collisions with overhead lines; habitat degradation; persecution; illegal harvesting; and drowning in reservoirs.

Much work has been done on raptors in Namibia in the past. People have come and gone, however, resulting in a lull in activity which is now picking up again. By collaborating in a close-knit group rather than in isolation we will be able to achieve more, encouraging one another and pooling our resources in effective, coordinated synergies. There is also a need for new actions, which will be incorporated into existing programmes/initiatives where possible, with a focus on increasing public involvement.

This is why the time is right for our workshop on birds of prey at Waterberg Plateau Park on 18-19 February 2005. We are privileged to welcome a healthy mix of "old-time" raptor enthusiasts here who bring years of experience to the table, and a new cohort of young conservationists who will carry the flag into the future. One of our main outcomes will be to develop an action plan for these threatened birds (see the plan below).

## Status of vultures in Namibia

Peter & Marilyn Bridgeford

Vulture Study Group Coordinator Namibia  
pmbridge@iway.na

## Introduction

Vulture research in Namibia started in the 1960's in the Namib Desert Park, now part of the Namib-Naukluft Park (NNP). Sauer (1973), Jensen (unpublished reports), Clinning (1978) and Brown (1985, 1986) all worked on vultures in the same area over the years. The present project of ringing Lappet-faced Vultures

## The use of vultures by traditional healers in Namibia

G. M. Hengari, P. L. Cunningham & W. Adank

Department of Nature Conservation, Polytechnic of Namibia, P/Bag 13388,

Windhoek, Namibia.

pcunningham@polytechnic.edu.na

### Abstract

The use of vultures by 17 traditional healers in the Okakarara and Windhoek areas of Namibia was investigated. Nesting material, brain and feathers are the most sought after items and used for a variety of purposes – mainly for magic and clairvoyance – in the traditional healing process. Vultures deliberately killed are favoured by traditional healers. No specific vulture species is targeted and/or favoured. Determining actual numbers killed was not possible, but at least 11 vultures were killed by seven healers in one year. This suggests that traditional healers may have a greater impact on vulture numbers that was previously thought, and the issue deserves further attention.

### Introduction

Vulture numbers have steadily declined throughout Namibia for a variety of reasons with the irresponsible use of poison viewed as the most serious thereof (Bridgeford 2001, C.J. Brown pers. comm.). The Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres* is now almost extinct, certainly as a viable breeding population, mainly due to poisoning (Simmons & Bridgeford 1997) and possibly also bush thickening (encroachment) (Brown 1985, R.E. Simmons pers. comm.). According to Steyn (1982) there is widespread evidence that populations of Cape Vultures are declining in most areas of southern Africa.

Cape Vultures have been documented as rare in Namibia (Maclean 1985) although at least 7 different colonies used to exist during the mid 1950's (Brown 1985). A checklist of the Naukluft Mountains (western Namibia) during the late 1980's by Boyer & Bridgeford (1988) listed them as extinct for this area. The last remaining colony at the Waterberg (now Waterberg Plateau Park) had an estimated 500 free-flying birds in 1939 which declined to 13 adults by 1985 (Brown 1985), 25 in 1991 (Berry 1995) and not more than 11 adults in 2001

(Simmons 2002). A feeding scheme (Brown & Jones 1989) established in 1984 has not been able to rectify this unfortunate situation. The status of the species is viewed as extremely critically endangered in Namibia (R.E. Simmons pers. comm.).

The Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* is documented as uncommon in southern Africa except in the Namib Desert (Maclean 1985, Steyn 1982). According to Steyn (1982) it is very sensitive to disturbance, for example through, mining/prospecting activities in the Namib Desert, and has declined to 16% of its theoretical population potential in southern Namibia (Mundy et al. 1992). Brown (1988) blames poison for their decline in southern Namibia. This species is described as threatened in southern Africa (Pickford et al. 1994) while Simmons & Bridgeford (1997) and Brown (1997) describe it as vulnerable in Namibia. R.E. Simmons (pers. comm.) states that it suffers regional and sporadic declines in Namibia mainly due to poisoning events.

The status of the White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus* is documented as common and the most abundant vulture in southern Africa (Maclean 1985, Mundy et al. 1992, Steyn 1982) and commonest in Namibia (Simmons & Bridgeford 1997). However, C.J. Brown (pers. comm.), M. Diekmann (pers. comm.) and R.E. Simmons (pers. comm.) view all vulture species – including the White-backed – as declining in Namibia. According to Simmons & Bridgeford (1997) it has suffered more than any other vulture from indiscriminate poisoning possibly due to it being so numerous at larger carcasses.

Reasons other than poisoning and bush thickening for the decline of vultures include direct persecution, electrocution on powerlines, drowning in farm reservoirs, air traffic disturbance, food shortages due to a lack of large game herds and fewer predators to break bones as well as the killing of vultures by witchdoctors (Steyn 1982, Mundy et al. 1992, Pickford et al. 1994, C.J. Brown pers. comm., R.E. Simmons pers. comm.). According to C.J. Brown (pers. comm.) the use of vultures by traditional healers has never been considered to be a significant factor in the decline of vultures in Namibia although no formal assessment had yet been conducted in this regard. M. Diekmann (pers. comm.) also suggests that the trade in vulture parts may be small in Namibia, but acknowledges the lack of research into this aspect.

In this paper we attempt to determine the effect that traditional healers (“witchdoctors”) have on vultures in Namibia. As far as we could determine this is the first such study for Namibia.

## Methods

A questionnaire survey was conducted targeting traditional healers (located by word of mouth) in Okakarara, a town situated approximately 80 km east of Otjiwarongo in the Otjizondjupa Region in central-eastern Namibia, and in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. Okakarara was chosen because of its close proximity (26 km) to the Waterberg Plateau Park, home of the last population of Cape Vultures in Namibia. A total of 17 traditional healers were approached, 10 in Okakarara and 7 in Windhoek, and clandestinely questioned by the senior author (fluent in Herero) – regarding their use of vulture parts for healing and/or other purposes.

## Results

Traditional healers use a variety of vulture parts and nesting material in traditional medicines. Nine of the respondents indicated nesting material as the most sought after item followed by the brain (8 respondents) and feathers (7 respondents) (Figure 1).

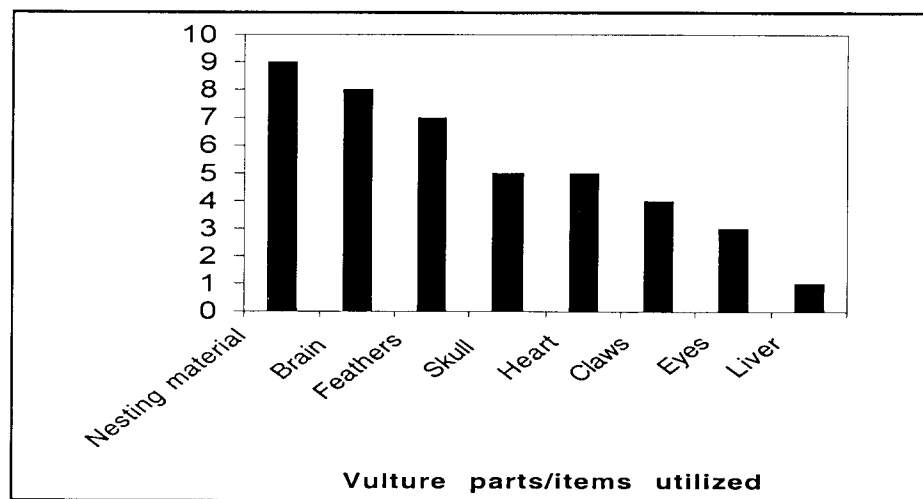


Figure 1. Vulture parts utilized according to answers by 17 respondents. Traditional healers usually indicated more than one item being used.

Most vulture parts are used to increase magical powers and for purposes of good luck (Table 1). Only the feathers, heart and liver were deemed to have medicinal properties.

Table 1. Uses of vulture parts as indicated by 10 traditional healers in Okakarara, Namibia.

Vulture parts/items	Traditional medicinal use
Nesting material	Magical power & luck
Brain	Ability to make predictions & magical power
Feathers	Magical power, luck & medicinal properties
Skull	Magical power & luck
Heart	Magical power & medicinal properties
Claws	Luck
Eyes	Ability to make predictions
Liver	Medicinal properties

Of the 17 respondents, 8 deliberately killed vultures to obtain the parts required, 9 indicating that they collected the required parts in the veld – 5 without killing the vultures (Figure 2). This would be true for nesting material, but the interviewees were hesitant to disclose how exactly they obtained the body parts. Four indicated that they bought the parts they required from pharmacies, relatives and friends living in the rural areas, mainly from the Caprivi, but also from around Rundu and Windhoek. A number of healers obtained vulture parts by both killing and collecting (3), and collecting and buying (1)

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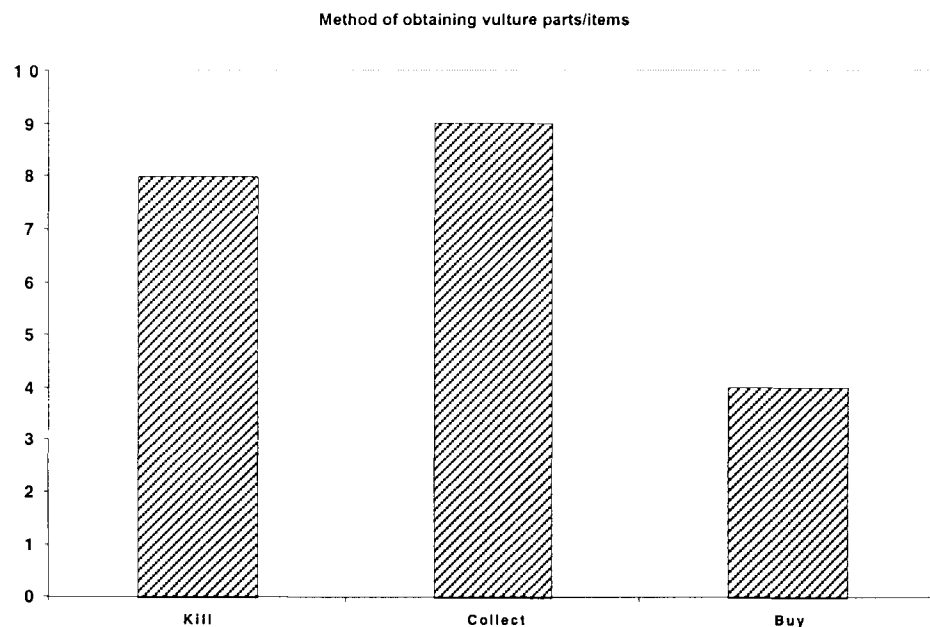


Figure 2. Methods employed by traditional healers to obtain vulture parts/items in Namibia. Some traditional healers use more than one method to obtain vulture parts.

Seven traditional healers admitted to killing, between them, a total of at least 11 vultures over a period of 1 year to obtain the necessary parts as indicated during this survey. Five did not know (or want to indicate) how many vultures they had killed while another five indicated that no vultures were killed.

Most(15) of the traditional healers showed no preference for a specific vulture species. One traditional healer preferred the White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis* and another the Cape Vulture. One traditional healer mentioned that any vulture would suffice except the Lappet-faced Vulture while another preferred vulture chicks.

Nesting material is used to improve luck. The nesting material is favoured when it contains the remains of egg shells (the material is ground to a powder and added to bath water. The egg shell remains evidently look like a “handful of diamonds” – thereby predicting good fortune).

Vulture brains are mixed with the ash of the Sweet Thorn Acacia karroo and left for two days before being consumed. This is used to enhance the clairvoyance ability of the traditional healer. The eyes are also used by the healers to enhance clairvoyance. Cunningham (1990) states that vulture parts are mainly used for clairvoyance purposes throughout Africa.

Burnt vulture feathers are inhaled as a relief for headaches and chest colds while the liver and heart are used to cure blood related disorders. The latter belief arises from vultures being meat eaters.

Vulture chicks are used for a rather bizarre purpose in the Caprivi Region of Namibia where they are tied to a stake in a clearing with the expectation that the adult vulture will “untie” the nestling using a stick, stone or piece of metal. This “tool” is then considered extremely potent and a source of good fortune (M. Saisai pers. comm.).

Vulture products obtained by deliberately killing them in their natural environment are preferred by traditional healers. Fourteen of the traditional healers interviewed indicated that they killed, collected (unspecified) and collected/killed vultures while only three indicated that they rather bought the required products. This trend could be viewed as alarming especially if one takes into consideration the scepticism and caution with which the traditional healers viewed the interviewer (This possibly resulted from the fact that killing vultures is illegal in Namibia). This could imply that the actual number of vultures killed is a gross underestimate.

## Discussion

According to E. Barlow (pers. comm.) 1 500 traditional healers have applied to register as traditional healers with the Ministry of Health and Social Services in Namibia. It was not determined how many traditional healers are currently active throughout Namibia, but if almost half admitted to killing vultures during this survey it could ultimately have a severe impact on vulture numbers. Beilis (1999) indicated the threat that traditional healers pose to the Cape Vulture in Lesotho. Govender (2002) states that vultures used as “muti” to predict Lotto numbers in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa has resulted in the decline of vultures in the Mkuze Game Reserve area.

Cape Vultures don't seem to be specifically targeted by traditional healers close to the Waterberg Plateau Park although the traditional healers were not fussy about which vulture was used. Cunningham (1990) also mentions that traditional healers are not fussy about which species of vulture is used. According to Beilis (1999) the Cape Vulture is the preferred species in Lesotho. The fact that they are rare in Namibia coupled with the problem of distinguishing them from the White-backed Vulture could impact on the last few remaining birds. Although other factors are generally accepted as responsible for the decline of the Cape Vulture in Namibia, it is important not to exclude the role that traditional healers may have had, and may continue to have, on this as well as other vulture species.

During the early 1990's a vulture was "stolen" from a raptor rehabilitation centre north of Windhoek and probably used in the traditional healing industry although this was never confirmed (E. Komen pers. comm.).

The possibility that traditional healers (and/or other people supplying the products) use poison to acquire vulture parts in Namibia should be urgently investigated. Poisons are used to kill vultures for traditional healing in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Govender 2002). Alternative substitutes for vulture parts should be investigated and timely further research into the effect that traditional healers may have on vulture numbers in Namibia, especially the Cape Vulture, is strongly recommended.

### Acknowledgements

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## Raptor awareness and poison-use, a perspective from NARREC

Liz Komen

NARREC, Namibian representative,

Poison Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

[liz@narrec.schoolnet.na](mailto:liz@narrec.schoolnet.na)

Cooperation and advocacy from civil society can reduce the environmental risks associated with hazardous chemicals. Safety for people and biodiversity must consider importation, transport, sales, handling and end-use of chemicals. Legislation and policies concerning pests and lethal control must be popularised through ongoing networking and relevant information dissemination campaigns.

### Raptors as non-target victims of poison use

In Namibia no reliable data is available to determine: the number of poisoned birds of prey, whether poisoning is deliberate or accidental, or whether the rescued birds or carcasses found are primary or secondary victims of poison. The