

Fears of a syndicate plot to wipe out all Lowveld vultures after 100 more poisoned



Yet another mass poisoning of vultures has occurred in Mpumalanga. More than 100 critically endangered raptors have been found dead, their carcasses strewn around a poisoned warthog in Lionspruit Game Reserve near Kruger Park.

The poisoning is the latest in a string of deliberate killings and has triggered alarm among conservationists, who now believe these attacks are part of a coordinated effort by criminal poaching syndicates to wipe out vultures – nature’s watchmen – before launching a wave of poaching activity.

“We are genuinely terrified of what’s next,” said Kerri Wolter, CEO of VulPro, a vulture conservation organisation. “This is no longer isolated. This is ecological warfare.”

The death toll was 92 white-backed vultures (90% of them breeding adults), nine hooded vultures and a single adult white-headed vulture. There were no survivors. This represents a devastating blow to populations already listed as critically endangered.

Read more: [Mass Kruger Park poisoning — 84 vultures saved in ‘shocking, gruesome’ incident](#)

These deaths come just weeks after [another](#) major poisoning incident in Kruger National Park, where about 100 vultures were killed and 84 rescued from near death. Now, with Lionspruit added to the list, experts are sounding the alarm that this is not merely about muti or opportunistic poisonings, but a deliberate, calculated attempt to blind anti-poaching patrols.





The dead warthog in which the poison was placed. (Photo: VulPro / M.W.J de Beer)

Killing the sentinels

Vultures perform a critical function throughout the world. They are often the first to spot carcasses from the air, spiralling in thermals to alert their kin – and so alerting rangers and anti-poaching units to possible illegal kills. Their presence is a natural surveillance system. Take them out and poachers can kill undetected.

“It appears there’s a syndicate targeting vultures to eliminate these biological indicators,” agreed toxicologist Dr Gerhard Verdoorn, director of the Griffon Poison Information Centre. “We’re losing hundreds of birds in coordinated strikes. This isn’t random – it’s strategic.”

We’re now at the point where we must stop releasing birds. It’s not a matter of if they’ll be poisoned – it’s when.

“We’re seeing incidents timed closely together across regions,” says Wolter. “Officials can’t be everywhere at once. This is an attempt to overwhelm the system – poachers know the rangers are stretched thin.”

In the Lionspruit incident, there were no signs of body parts removed for traditional medicine, suggesting that muti was not the motive. The poisoned carcass had clearly been placed as a trap. Within days, it had turned into a mass grave.

The scene was discovered thanks to GPS trackers fitted to vultures previously rehabilitated by VulPro and its partner, the Wild and Free Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre.



Some of the 100 vultures poisoned in the Lionspruit Game Reserve. (Photo: VulPro)





Some of the 100 poisoned vultures. (Photo: VulPro / M.W.J de Beer)

Escalating crisis

According to Wolter, the poisoned birds in Lionspruit had been released only months earlier in the same region. “This is breeding season,” she said. “To lose this many adults at this time is catastrophic. We’re now at the point where we must stop releasing birds. It’s not a matter of if they’ll be poisoned – it’s when.”

Verdoorn, who has been analysing wildlife poisoning cases for decades, believes two banned substances are likely responsible: aldicarb and terbufos. These highly toxic compounds are smuggled into South Africa from Zimbabwe. Aldicarb was banned for possession in South Africa and Terbufos can only be obtained by farmers under extremely strict conditions. Both are used to control bugs on, particularly, potato farms. Sold openly on street corners and in informal markets, Terbufos is often repackaged as rat poison.

“Street-sold poisons don’t even resemble the old regulated formulations,” he said. “They’re black granules – cheap, deadly and untraceable. And they’re coming from China via Zimbabwe in alarming volumes.”

Worse, aldicarb and terbufos don’t degrade quickly. If placed in meat and left to dry, they can remain deadly for months, posing long-term threats to scavengers, predators and even humans.

It’s a war zone in the Lowveld and NGOs are being left to fight it without backup.

Verdoorn has documented similar poisons used in the deaths of jackals, lions and other non-target species. “We’ve basically lost all jackals in Mapungubwe National Park. There’s almost no scavenger population left there. Now the Lowveld is next.”

Terbufos was the poison that [killed](#) six children in Soweto in 2024. The children reportedly consumed snacks from a local spaza shop, leading to their untimely deaths. At the time, the incident raised serious concerns about the availability and regulation of hazardous organophosphates in South Africa. A [report](#) at the time found that informal traders routinely sell illegal chemicals for domestic use.







Incidents are being timed closely together across regions. (Photo: VulPro / M.W.J de Beer)

Patterns of poison

The Lionspruit poisoning is not an isolated case. In early May, more than 300 vultures were killed or affected in Kruger National Park in two separate incidents just days apart, one of them reported [here](#). The vultures, attracted to old elephant carcasses laced with poison, descended en masse – only to die en masse.

Wolter suspects the timing is no accident. “When you have multiple poisonings occurring in close succession across vast regions, you have to ask: what’s being covered up? Is this the precursor to a major poaching wave? Because once you remove the vultures, you remove the early warning system.”

Their sudden absence may allow syndicates to kill rhinos or lions for the Asian market without detection at a time when rangers are already underresourced, overworked and fighting an uphill battle.

State failure?

While nonprofits like VulPro and Wild and Free respond quickly with field teams and veterinary aid, they lack enforcement power. “We can rehabilitate. We can respond. But we can’t make arrests. We can’t close borders,” said Wolter. “It’s a war zone in the Lowveld and NGOs are being left to fight it without backup.”

Both Verdoorn and Wolter point to South Africa’s porous borders as a critical weakness. With fences between Mozambique and the Kruger National Park in disrepair, smugglers and poachers cross almost unimpeded. Many of the poisons being used originate in unregulated markets across the border, particularly Zimbabwe.

What we’re looking at is regional extinction within a decade – perhaps even sooner.

“The first thing the government must do is fix the fences,” Wolter insists. “Then they must go into the communities and rebuild trust. Many of these communities were promised things by the government and abandoned. That resentment feeds into this crisis.”

A vanishing species

The consequences of these poisonings are an ecological disaster. The White-headed vulture, for example, is already considered near extinct as a breeding species in South Africa. Kruger holds one of the last viable populations – estimated at fewer than 80 breeding pairs. The death of even one breeding adult is a critical blow.

“What we’re looking at is regional extinction within a decade – perhaps even sooner,” said Wolter.

It’s not just an environmental loss. Vultures provide vital ecosystem services, including the rapid disposal of carcasses, which helps limit the spread of diseases like anthrax, rabies and botulism.

Call to action

In response to the disaster, VulPro has activated its newly formalised Vulture Emergency Response Unit in Mpumalanga in partnership with Wild and Free. This rapid-response initiative aims to deliver:

- Immediate field deployment to poisoning sites;
- Expert veterinary care at a local clinic; and
- Long-term rehabilitation and GPS-monitored release.

But even with these efforts, Wolter warns that without systemic government support, the fight is being lost. “This is not about saving one bird. This is about saving an entire species and an entire system. We’re running out of time.”

Conservationists are calling for:

- Stricter border enforcement to stop the influx of illegal poisons;
- Criminal prosecutions for those found selling or using banned substances;

- Community engagement to rebuild trust and promote wildlife stewardship;
- Increased government funding and coordination for anti-poaching units and toxicology labs; and
- Suspension of all vulture releases in the region until the crisis is under control.

It is no longer enough to treat each poisoning as a tragic accident, said Verdoorn. The patterns are clear. The methods are coordinated. And the stakes are existential. If South Africa allows its vultures to vanish, it won't just be losing birds – it will be losing one of its most effective allies in the war against poaching.

“We are fighting for every egg, every nest and every vulture’s future,” said Wolter. “Through science, integrity and collaboration, we will hold the line. But we need the country behind us.” **DM**

To report vulture or other wildlife poisonings

- Griffon Poison Information Centre: Emergency hotline (24/7): +27 82 446 8946 or +27 82 808 5113; email: gerhard@croplife.co.za
- VulPro (Vulture conservation organisation): email: admin@vulpro.com or kerri.wolter@gmail.com

