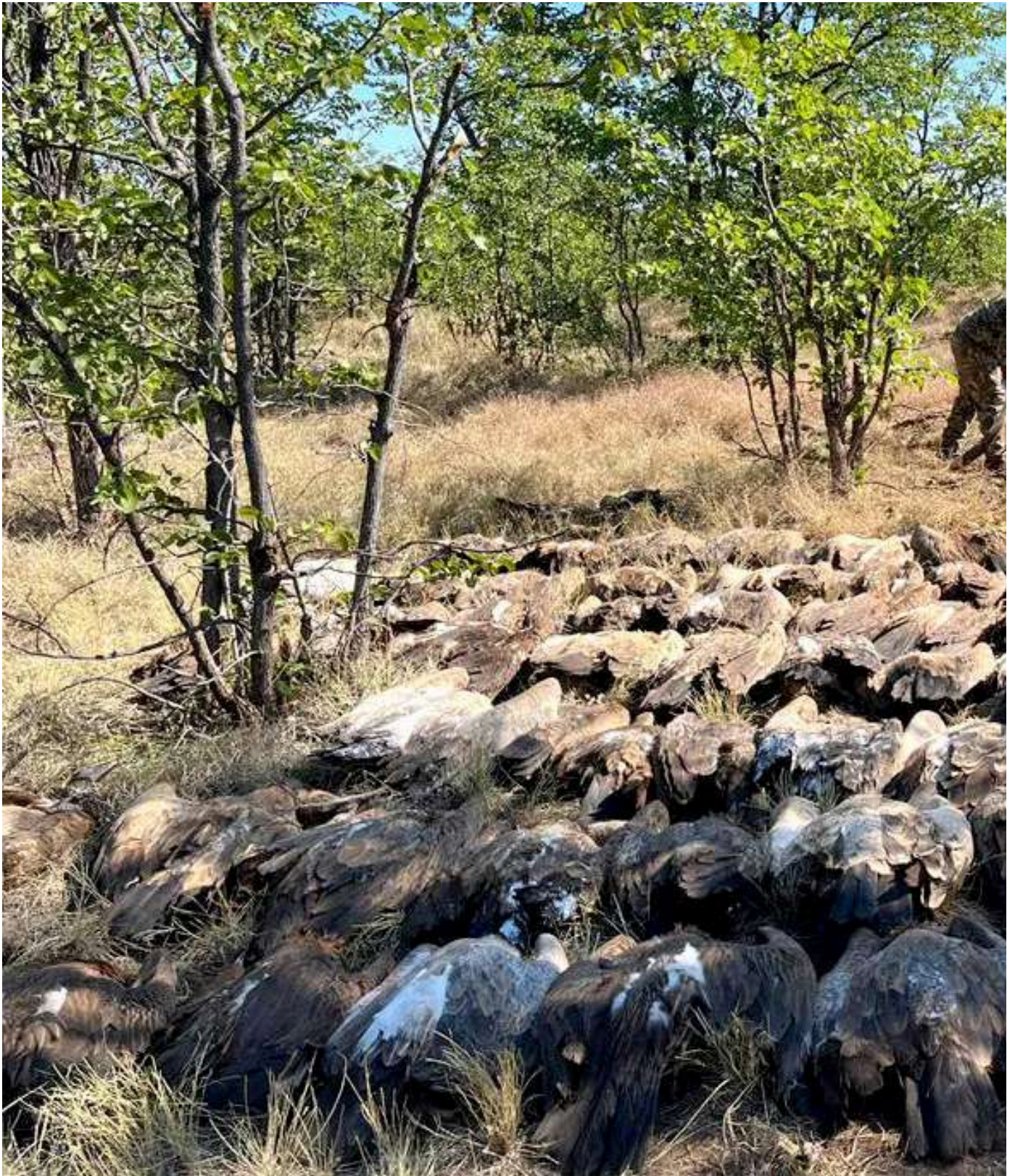


Mass Kruger Park poisoning — 84 vultures saved in ‘shocking, gruesome’ incident



Eighty-four vultures have been rescued after a mass poisoning event in the Kruger National Park, one of the largest incidents of its kind recorded in southern Africa.

An elephant carcass, laced with poison and surrounded by more than 100 dead vultures, marked one of the most devastating wildlife poisoning events yet seen in the Kruger National Park. Remote sensing triggered a scramble to save birds that were still alive.

In a coordinated emergency operation spanning helicopters, ambulances and nearly 24 hours of intensive care, 84 poisoned vultures were pulled back from the brink.

The operation this week was undertaken by a combined team of South African National Parks rangers and Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) officials in the park's Mahlangeni Section, where the elephant carcass was found.

According to Gareth Tate, head of EWT's Birds of Prey Programme, the organisation's wildlife poisoning detection system triggered an alarm, flagging suspicious activity.

"The following morning, SANParks rangers conducted surveillance and uncovered a mass poisoning event involving more than 120 dead birds," Tate said. "It was a shocking, gruesome scene."

By 8.20am the joint team had arrived on site. They discovered 122 dead vultures, including 102 white-backed vultures, 20 Cape vultures and one lappet-faced vulture – all species listed as endangered or critically endangered. Several vultures were found alive but severely affected.

Tate described the rescue as a "world-class operation" involving two ground teams, helicopters, 12 vehicles and the EWT's specialised Vulture Ambulance. Emergency treatment was administered in the field, including atropine to reverse the effects of the poison on the birds' nervous systems, activated charcoal to bind toxins, fluid therapy and a procedure to flush and milk the vultures' crops to remove ingested poison.

"We've developed a strict protocol over the years and we've achieved about a 98% success rate for birds found alive," Tate explained. "Those first 24 hours are critical. If we can get them through that, they have a good chance of survival."

Vultures were being deliberately targeted both to conceal illegal activities and to harvest body parts for the illegal wildlife trade and traditional medicine markets.

A total of 84 vultures were rescued alive. Of these, 45 were transported in the EWT's mobile vulture ambulance and 39 were taken by helicopter to care facilities. Five of the rescued birds died despite treatment, but 83 remained alive as of the following morning, representing a 96% survival rate.



SANParks Pilot Bradford Grafton with one of the rescued vultures. (Photo: SANParks)



Eighty-four vultures have been rescued by a joint team of SANParks rangers and Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) following a devastating poisoning incident in the Kruger National Park. (Photo: EWT)

Reinforcements were swiftly deployed. Support teams from the Moholoholo Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre, Briner Veterinary Services and Wildscapes Veterinary Services were mobilised within hours and worked through the night to stabilise each bird and keep them alive.

Read more: [Kruger Park vultures felled by poachers' highly toxic poison](#)

"This was one of the largest and most coordinated vulture rescues ever conducted in the region," Tate said. "The collaboration between SANParks, vets, NGOs and rangers was remarkable."

This is intentional genocide of vultures. It's absolutely malicious and a silent killer.

The poisoning involved agricultural toxins placed on an elephant carcass, a method increasingly used by poachers to kill vultures that might otherwise alert rangers to poaching sites by circling overhead. Tate said vultures were being deliberately targeted both to conceal illegal activities and to harvest body parts for the illegal wildlife trade and traditional medicine markets.

“Vultures are being systematically removed from the landscape,” Tate warned. “This is intentional genocide of vultures. It’s absolutely malicious and a silent killer.”

He noted that vultures are also being poisoned to supply the [traditional medicine, or muti, trade](#).

“They’re targeting vultures for their brains, heads and feet,” Tate said. “There’s even evidence that poisoned vulture parts are ending up in muti markets, meaning that toxic substances are being sold to unsuspecting users.”

Read more: [When illegal wildlife trade meets muti, vultures teeter on the brink of extinction – conservationists](#)

Broader crisis

This incident forms part of a broader crisis facing vultures across southern Africa. The birds play a key role in ecosystems by consuming carcasses and reducing the spread of disease. Their absence leads to carcasses lingering longer in the environment, increasing the risk of disease transmission to other wildlife and humans.

The decline of vultures has been linked to knock-on effects seen in other regions: in India, the collapse of vulture populations due to veterinary drug poisoning led to a boom in feral dog numbers and a corresponding rise in rabies cases.

Kruger hosts at least five regular vulture species: the white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*), the most common; the Cape vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*), mainly found in the park’s north; the lappet-faced vulture (*Torgos tracheliotos*); the hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) and the rarely seen white-headed vulture (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*). Each species occupies a niche at carcasses, forming an efficient clean-up system.

Each adult vulture killed is not just an immediate loss – it’s a loss of future generations.

However, their numbers are declining due to several pressures. Many species breed slowly, raising only one chick per year. Poisoning events exacerbate these losses, wiping out breeding adults and chicks alike.

Poisoning incidents targeting vultures have increased. Poachers use pesticides like carbofuran, a highly toxic agricultural chemical, to lace carcasses. Vultures that feed on the poisoned remains are removed as natural sentinels from the ecosystem. Other scavengers, including jackals, lions, hyena and ground hornbills, also fall victim.

“Unlike targeted poaching of individual animals, poisoning takes out entire species indiscriminately,” Tate said. “Each adult vulture killed is not just an immediate loss – it’s a loss of future generations.”

Efforts to address the issue include increased patrols, training poison response teams and establishing artificial feeding sites to provide uncontaminated food. Conservationists stress that long-term solutions will require stronger regulation of agricultural poisons, improved enforcement against wildlife crime and engagement with communities living near protected areas.

Community outreach initiatives by the Kruger Park have begun, aiming to reduce demand for vulture parts in belief-based practices and build support for conservation. However, scaling these measures to meet the size of the problem remains a challenge.

Tate emphasised the need for stricter penalties for those responsible. “These individuals need to be caught and the penalties must reflect the seriousness of the crime – they’re killing critically endangered animals.”

Natural waste disposers

The rescued vultures continue to recover under veterinary care and will be released once they are fit to return to the wild. “Some of them are so strong that we’re planning to release them this Saturday,” Tate said.

Conservationists hope the surviving birds will resume their vital ecological role as natural waste disposers, limiting the spread of disease in the ecosystem. The poisoning incident highlights the vulnerability of vultures to deliberate targeting, the ecological consequences of their decline and the urgent need for interventions.

“Without vultures, carcasses take longer to decompose, leading to increased risks of disease,” Tate said. “Their loss disrupts a delicate balance. We need to act now to protect them.”

As the surviving vultures recover, conservationists warn that the battle to save these birds is ongoing. Preventing future poisonings, preserving nesting habitats and raising awareness about their ecological importance will be essential to ensure that vultures remain part of Kruger’s skies. Each circling silhouette is a sign that the clean-up crew is still at work, maintaining the health of the ecosystem for wildlife and humans alike. **DM**



