

CAPE VULTURE TASK FORCE REPORT **2011**

“To stabilize the global Cape Vulture population”



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Introduction

The Cape Vulture is the most studied vulture species in southern Africa and yet, even after decades of conservation effort and attention placed on this endemic species, the population continues to decline. The Cape Vulture Task Force was therefore initiated in 2006 after reviewing the conservation and monitoring actions for the species (Boshoff, A.F. & Anderson, M.D. 2006.). The Task Force functions under the auspices of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Birds of Prey Programme and its activities are coordinated by Kerri Wolter from the VulPro NPO. It's aim is to co-ordinate all conservation efforts and monitoring for the species, collate the information and drive and implement new and existing conservation strategies for the overall purpose of turning around the existing trend of decline in this species.

Now, after a few years of existence, the benefits/outcomes of the endeavours of the Cape Vulture Task Force are becoming apparent and results below highlight the work undertaken by individuals and organizations dedicated to the conservation and preservation of the Cape Vulture.

Monitoring and Evaluation

I am happy to report for the first time in years, we have a (almost) complete count of all the Cape Vulture breeding colonies. There are still some gaps as can be seen from the table below but also some very positive results for this year's breeding season. I hope to have a complete table for the 2012 breeding season and, with the help of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, we now have some funding towards this target. We have re-drafted the Cape Vulture monitoring protocol to reduce any previous confusion, making the document simpler and easier to understand and follow (Wolter., K et al 2011). We have also taken into account technology since the inception of the first draft.

VulPro developed a vulture restaurant monitoring protocol which was distributed to vulture restaurant managers and owners. We hope that, by following this protocol, standardized reporting will result in increased efficiency of tagged vulture re-sightings and also in other valuable information, such as individual population vulture status for each site, frequency of visits, etc. This is available to anyone who may be interested in obtaining a copy.

As can be seen from the figure 1, on the whole breeding attempts are up from 2010 and where previously we had no data, those gaps are being filled. Unfortunately, one major failure is the Cape Vulture population in Namibia which is now extinct as a breeding species with an estimated 20 individuals remaining in the country. A Recovery Plan for Namibia is underway together with a captive breeding and reintroduction programme. The full Recovery Plan document is available on request.

Table 1

2011 Breeding records

	Breeding Pairs	Nestlings	Fledglings
Potberg	68	66	?
Manoutsa	539	453	347
Blouberg	572	431	432
Kransberg	638	?	455

Magaliesberg			
* Skeerpoort	233	168	180
* Nooitgedacht	94	76	81
* Robert's Farm	5	4	2
Mzimkulu/Oribi	39	?	25
Port St Johns	124	?	?
Colleywobbles	130	?	?
Msikaba	170	?	?
Mount Ayliff	30	?	?
Namibia	0	0	0
Botswana	65 (not conclusive and estimated number by Wendy Borello)	?	?
Kwa-Zulu Natal / Drakensberg	141 (not conclusive and an estimated number)	?	?
Total	2848	Incomplete	Incomplete

Figure 1

Comparison between 2010 and 2011 breeding seasons

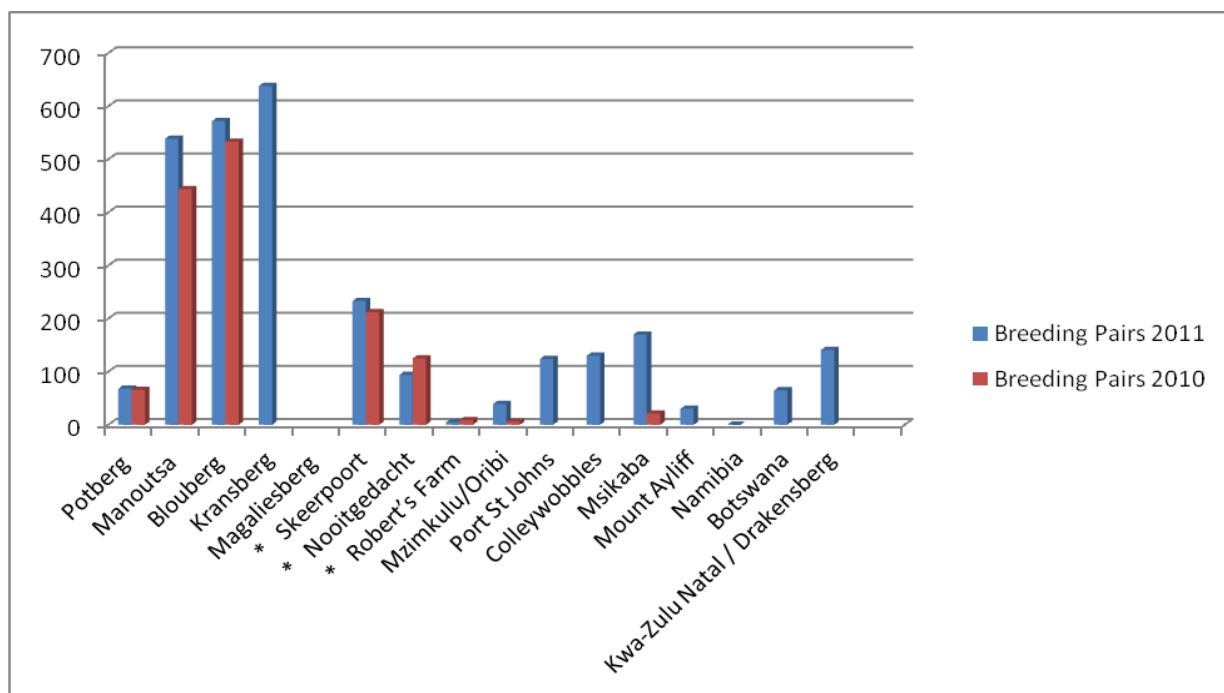


Table 2

Tabled monitoring results:
Kwa-Zulu Natal Drakensberg Region

(The number of adult birds recorded are an indication of the number of breeding pairs found at each site. Unfortunately chick and fledgling counts were not undertaken for the 2011 breeding season but we hope to rectify this for the 2012 season with training and guidance)

AREA	SITE NAME	No. of Active Nests	TOTAL birds seen	Adults	Juveniles	Unknown
Cathedral Peak	Cleft Peak		7	4	3	
Cathedral Peak	Column Pyramid Pass		6	6		
Cathedral Peak	Ganabu		151	101	50	
Cathedral Peak	Ndedema Dome		18	11	7	
Cathedral Peak	Pampering		25	25		
Cathedral Peak	The Sphinx		3	3		
Cathedral Peak	Ndedema Buttress		12	12		
Highmoor	Mount Cleopatra	1	11	11		
Highmoor	Mount lebanon	2	8	8		
Hillside	Ntabamhlope East		26	24	2	
Hillside	Ntabamhlope West		42	40	2	
Injisuthi	Trojan Wall		43	38	7	
Witteberg	Bannermans		3			3
Witteberg	Long Wall		1	1		
Lesotho	Black Mountain	2	4	2	2	
Kranskop	Isiwa Samanqe		40	39	1	

Conservation Actions:

The identification of threats specific to each colony is important for the implementation of appropriate conservation actions and mitigation methods in order to actively conserve the species. It is important to address the threats to these birds not only at their breeding sites but also throughout their foraging and distribution ranges. For this reason, the actions to protect the Cape Vulture should be applied throughout southern Africa and not just in South Africa (Anderson M.D., et al 2006).

Monitoring the population and breeding success at each colony is merely a tool to identify the population trends over a period of time. However, the value of conservation actions will be reflected in the population trends of the species.

Table 3

Conservation

	Identified Threats and Conservation Actions
<p>Potberg (Kevin Shaw)</p>	<p><u>Threats:</u> The birds feed predominantly on the carcasses of sheep despite the proximity of large wild ungulates on the coastal flats to the south and west of the colony. There is an arrangement with the stock farmers to leave the sheep carcasses out in the field as opposed to burying them, which is the normal practice. This preference for sheep on the part of vultures poses problems for the reserve in that vultures do take “live” sheep, especially newborn lambs and for the vultures which are exposed to agri-chemicals used by stock farmers to control ticks and blowfly. There are a number of power lines scattered throughout the foraging range of the species, delivering power to farmhouses, outbuilding and farm labourers cottages. A number of birds have died from colliding with these power lines, but no pattern has emerged as collisions have occurred far apart from one another. Two incidents of drowning have also occurred, but because farm reservoirs are not common in the area – most watering points are either water troughs or earthen dams - this is not a huge threat. In terms of future threats the agricultural economy is a large unknown and could impact on the species, with economics forcing landowners to choose other types of agriculture.</p> <p>Three known Cape Vulture fatalities occurred during the 2011 reporting period. All three birds died due to power line collisions. On site investigation was made, but no incident reports have to date been forwarded onto the EWT Wildlife Energy Interaction Group. This will hopefully be done in the near future.</p> <p><u>Actions:</u> Vulture farmer interactions (educational and farmer’s workshops and meetings. These are done either in workshop formats or on a one-to-one basis)</p>
<p>Manoutsa (Scott Ronaldson, Kerri Wolter & Walter Nesar)</p>	<p><u>Threats:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power-lines (electrocution and collisions) • Indirect poisoning to get rid of problem animals • Direct poisoning to reduce vultures as ‘indicators’ at poaching incidents • Direct poisoning of vultures for the ‘muthi’ trade • Lack of education <p><u>Actions:</u> Rehabilitation and educational drives are undertaken by Brian Jones of Moholoholo. Unfortunately no stats have been given with regards to numbers of vulture either rehabilitated / released or euthanized/died.</p>
<p>Blouberg (Johan van Wyk)</p>	<p><u>Threats:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect poisoning to get rid of problem animals • Power line collisions and electrocutions • Harvesting of vultures for the muti-trade • Bone abnormalities • Lack of education • Lack of available food <p><u>Actions:</u> <i>Vulture restaurant</i> Carcasses are provided at the feeding site when obtained from farmers. Tagged</p>

	<p>vultures are observed and sightings of such bird are recorded in a register which is kept in the hide at the vulture feeding site for this purpose..</p> <p><i>Vulture fatalities and/or rescue</i></p> <p>During the last reporting period, a total of 30 Cape Vultures were collected and underwent rehabilitation. Most of these birds were grounded due to rain and various weather conditions and were released shortly after. However some had suffered from power line collisions and are now permanent residents at VulPro being used for educational purposes.</p> <p>A reward is offered for every fledgling collected by the local community and handed over to the Blouberg Nature Reserve. This is to counteract in with the ‘muti’ trade as there are huge demands for vulture parts which the traditional healers are prepared to pay for. Through the ‘reward’ system, the vultures are collected and brought to a safe point for rehabilitation rather than being killed for the ‘muti’ industry. Sasol provides the funding to finance this initiative.</p>
<p>Kransberg (Kerri Wolter & Walter Neser)</p>	<p><u>Threats:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power line collisions and electrocutions • Poisoning through laced carcasses for problem animal control • Lead fragments in carcasses left over from hunting • Bone abnormalities (this could be from lead exposure or lack of calcium in the birds diet) • Lack of available food <p><u>Actions:</u></p> <p>7 Cape Vulture fledglings came in for rehabilitation during the last season, 5 were later released and 2 euthanised due to their injuries being too severe to treat . This is our first year actively working in the area. As well as leaving our contact details with the local veterinarian dealing with wildlife, we expect to pick up more vultures during this year’s fledgling season which runs from November through to the end of January.</p>
<p>Magaliesberg (Kerri Wolter, Craig Whittington-Jones & Sean West)</p>	<p><u>Threats:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power line collisions and electrocutions • Indirect poisoning through laced carcasses for problem animal control • Incorrect management of vulture restaurants whereby vultures are exposed to toxic drugs via their food • Lack of education <p><u>Actions:</u></p> <p><i>(detailed information on the below will be available in the Vulture Programme’s annual report)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist in the management of vulture restaurants • Vulture tag and re-sighting studies • Monitor the birds movements using tracking devices • Vulture rehabilitation and ongoing research to improve our methods • Vulture educational talks and campaigns together with school visits • Various vulture research projects on the go in collaboration with the University of Pretoria • Ongoing engagements with Eskom regarding the mitigation of power lines surrounding the colonies and feeding sites together with frequently used roosting sites with regards to power lines. <p><i>Vulture fatalities or rescue</i></p> <p>In the period between October 2010 – October 2011, a total of 12 Cape Vultures came in for rehabilitation from the Magaliesberg region. 5 have since been released, one was</p>

	<p>ethanized due to the severity of its injuries and the rest remain in captivity due to power line injuries resulting in the birds being unable to fly again.</p>
<p>Mzimkulu/Oribi (Andrew Pickes & Mike Neethling)</p>	<p>The continued indiscriminate use of agricultural poisons such as Temmick (Aldicarb) has been noted in the greater farming district. There also continues to be a shift from livestock to crop farming. A 600ha game farm has recently been established below one of the nesting sites, but instead of encouraging the vultures through the provision of additional food, the hunting activities on this farm appear to have been the cause of the vultures deserting this site in the last year.</p> <p>No known fatalities have been recorded this year, however seven Cape Vultures were found attempting to open up four dead bushpigs that were suspected of having been poisoned with Temmick at Umtamvuna Nature Reserve in September 2011. The vultures were chased off and the carcasses burnt, however the frequency of such incidents remains unknown.</p> <p><u>Actions:</u> Mr Mike Neethling, whose farm, Minnehaha, lies directly above one of the roosting sites, maintains a vulture restaurant and substitutes the vultures food on a regular basis.</p>
<p>Colleywobbles (David Allan)</p>	<p>A site visit was motivated by concerns raised about road building and the construction of housing and power lines all situated close to the breeding colony.</p> <p><u>Actions:</u> A large group of conservationist from EWT, BirdLife SA, Eastern Cape Nature Conservation and private individuals attended a meeting and undertook a site visit. A proposal is in place to undertake ongoing monitoring of this site and the road has been stopped until further investigations have taken place. A detailed report in this regard is available on request. (Allan, D. et al. 2011)</p>
<p>Ntabethemba (Dean Peinke)</p>	<p><u>Threats:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disturbance and direct persecution: The areas around Ntabethemba are relatively densely populated and a large number of people have access to the mountain area, including the top of the mountain and the area immediately above and below the roost. Although there are no reports of this, the rolling of stones onto roosting birds as well as the harvesting of birds for food and traditional beliefs, are all potential concerns. • Direct poisoning: The deliberate poisoning of birds because they are thought to be predators of domestic livestock could be a problem, although we are not aware of any incidence of this in this area in recent times. • Lead poisoning from the accidental ingestion of lead fragments from bullets is a potential concern as birds do feed on the carcasses and remains of animals that have been wounded during hunting or culling operations on the adjacent Nature Reserve and private game farms. <p><u>Actions:</u> ECPTA has committed to the establishment of a vulture restaurant on the adjacent Tsolwana Nature Reserve. It is envisaged that this will provide a safe and stable food source to supplement the existing diet of these birds. An appropriate site has been identified and feeding is scheduled to begin in early 2012.</p> <p>The danger of birds contracting lead poisoning from feeding on the carcasses of hunted and culled animals was discussed with Reserve Managers at ECPTA's annual game management meeting in October 2011, and ECPTA will in 2012 develop a policy to ensure that only lead free bullets are used in Nature Reserves where vultures are known to occur.</p>

<p>Namibia (Maria Diekman)</p>	<p><u>Threats:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect poisoning for problem animal control. (This is the number one cause for the species decline.) • Habitat change / degradation • Power line impacts • Drowning in farm reservoirs (water tanks) • Veterinary drugs • Disturbance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Low flying aircraft in vicinity of nests ○ Human disturbance in vicinity of nests • Food accessibility • Muti trade • Lack of information and public awareness <p><u>Actions:</u></p> <p>A detailed Recovery Plan has been produced, outlining threats and conservation strategies. Over and above this, a breeding and reintroduction programme has been set up as a collaborative project between Namibia and South Africa. The report is available on request. (Brown, C. et al. 2010)</p>
<p>Kwa-Zulu Natal / Drakensberg region (Sonja Krueger)</p>	<p><u>Threats:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power lines • Open artificial water bodies (reservoirs) • Poisoning • Direct persecution <p><u>Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplementary feeding at a number of feeding sites in the region. • Power line assessment completed for the protected areas in the foraging range of Cape Vultures • Fitted one Cape Vulture with a satellite transmitter (tracked until battery died.) <p><i>Vulture fatalities or rescue:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One adult was collected and rehabilitated and is ready for release. Possible power line collision, wing healed and old foot injury. (Rehabilitated by Ben Hoffman) • One juvenile was found in a water reservoir. It was waterlogged and weak, assumed just fledged. Was released once fattened up. (Rehabilitated by Falcon Ridge) • Another 2 Cape Vultures were picked up, one euthanized and another ready for release. • One (fatal) powerline collision in Underberg area • One bird found dead (The adult female was in good condition but tested negative for poisons by field rangers in Underberg area. The head “disappeared”.. • Skeletal remains of a Cape Vulture found near roost at Ntsikeni Vlei. <p><i>Media/Publicity/Educational campaigns or events:</i></p> <p>Farmers day held at Oribi Gorge – focussed on the importance of vultures, the plight of vultures and vulture restaurant management.</p>

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