

OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2023

Vulpro 

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VulPro NPC- Vulture Programme for the  
conservation of vulture species in Southern Africa  
Registration no. 2011/127419/08 (The Companies Act 2008, Sec.14)

OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2023

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## A WORD FROM OUR CEO

Where does one end the type of year we have experienced and begin the growth we are embarking on? It all seems a little surreal as I attempt to put my thoughts down on paper, to share with all of you. The partnerships and the ability to grow our conservation efforts, hand in hand with the Shamwari Private Game Reserve, after a year of negotiations is something, I still find hard to grasp and believe. Yet, it is VERY real and actually happening!

In addition, VulPro has had to unfortunately say goodbye to some of our staff members. However, where one door closes, another one opens and we are so excited to see what the future holds. We have three new staff members, including our first ever General Manager, who has taken over the reins in managing the VulPro Harties Facility, as our CEO, Kerri Wolter, takes on the challenge of establishing VulPro at Shamwari. I am retaining my position as CEO of VulPro. With all of these changes comes further growth plus challenges and VulPro has managed to flourish and cultivate our conservation reach not only in South Africa, but further afield in other parts of Africa too.

Our educational work has shown tremendous strides globally, but most importantly, the change and support we have witnessed within the Vivo Community adjacent to the largest breeding colony of Cape Vultures in the Blouberg Nature Reserve of Limpopo Province, has been remarkable. After more than three years with not one vulture having to be taken in for rehabilitation due to the sale of vultures into the muti markets, the channels of communication have now been opened and we begin to receive calls for help for injured, grounded and illegally-held vultures from this area.

The community appears to have taken on the challenge of being our eyes and ears and although this is just the beginning, it is a start which has motivated us to continue advocating for much needed change. Watch this space as we embark on additional partnerships with the South African Wildlife College in collaboration with PACE.

Lastly, as you will see from the sections below, the four focal areas of our conservation efforts continue to grow, excel and succeed in all that we do. You will read about each one in detail and we are proud of our work and all we have managed to conquer with just nine full time staff members.

We continue to lobby for change, create awareness and influence support through a collective effort with our partners, supporters, collaborators, students, volunteers, donors and more.



Simply put, we cannot do this alone and there is not one organisation that can spearhead change single-handedly. It takes a community of like-minded individuals and organisations to spearhead change and success in preventing species extinction. We will continue to fight for the plight of African vultures hand in hand with you on the frontlines, holding us in strength and unity.

And finally, it gives me great pleasure to wish you all a happy and prosperous new year. May 2024 be filled with many more achievements, more releases and greater advancements in preventing the ongoing declines of Africa's vultures, together!

# VULTURE RESCUE AND REHABILITATION

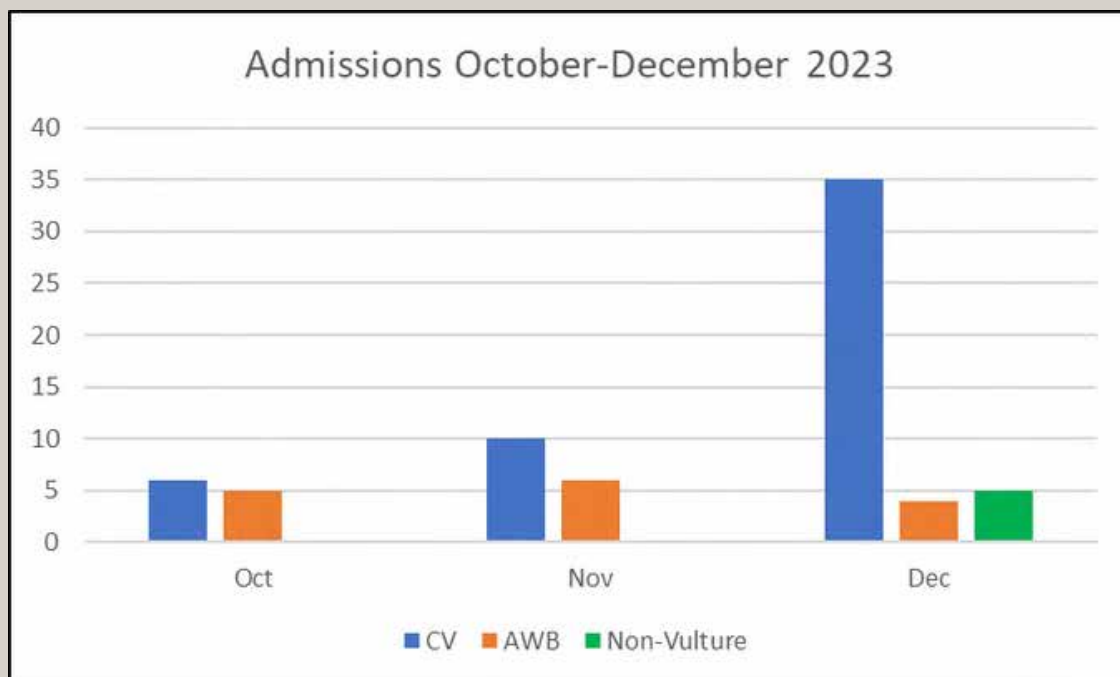
The last three months has kept us busy with rescues and rehab cases on top of our busiest breeding season yet with a whopping 71 patients at our rehabilitation facility. This number comprises of 51 Cape Vultures, 15 White-Backed Vultures, and five non-vulture species, a Brown Snake Eagle, Common buzzard and three Spotted Eagle Owls.

From these admissions 28 vultures are being monitored for possible release after rehabilitation which would account to 42% release rate. 19 cases were reported of different collisions with either powerlines or wind turbines. 12 birds were affected by powerline electrocutions. Seven vultures were being illegally held of which two were tied up with a string.

As in previous reports, most of our non-releasable cases are from powerline related injuries. But what concerns us the most, ending off the 2023 year, are the number of individuals we have received from the sting operations in retrieving and saving vultures from the trade in vultures for belief based purposes.

This threat appears to be on the increase and we are now being exposed to this almost on a daily basis which invariably places staff at risk during these operations.

## Species admitted to VulPro 1 October - 31 December 2023



Cape Vulture, White Backed Vulture,  
Non-vulture species

## A RESCUE STORY

On the 15th of December 2023 we were alerted to two vultures being kept in bags in a rural area near Louis Trichardt. Authorities were alerted and the culprits arrested. The two birds were rescued on the same day.

They were dehydrated and emaciated with swollen legs due to the feet being tied together with string. These two are now taken care of at Vulpro for rehabilitation. When ready they will be released.

### **Vulture tied with string and kept in a bag**



Vultures are often victims to the religious belief trade, and being sold and slaughtered. It is really saddening to see how these birds are suffering in the hands of people who don't care or understand the harm they are doing. Unfortunately this remains a problem that needs attention from authorities all over the country as well as awareness campaigns implemented by all parties involved in vulture conservation.

In the past few months, we have been fortunate in not having to come to the rescue of any vulture poisoning cases. We do however remain vigilant and continue our engagement with the local communities and landowners in regions we know to be at high risk for these types of events.

Unfortunately, even these incidents are generally instigated by cultural beliefs, where the parts of many species are harvested for use in traditional medicine and belief systems.





## Release Highlights

Although some of the vultures that are admitted to our centre are unable to be released back into the wild due to the nature of their injuries, we take great joy in those that do get to soar again.

Over the last three months, we have released 23 rehabilitated Cape vultures and four African White backed vultures.

One such successful rehabilitation is the case of a juvenile African White backed Vulture that was illegally held captive in the Northwest Province. The bird was dehydrated when it was found after we were notified by a farmer in the area.



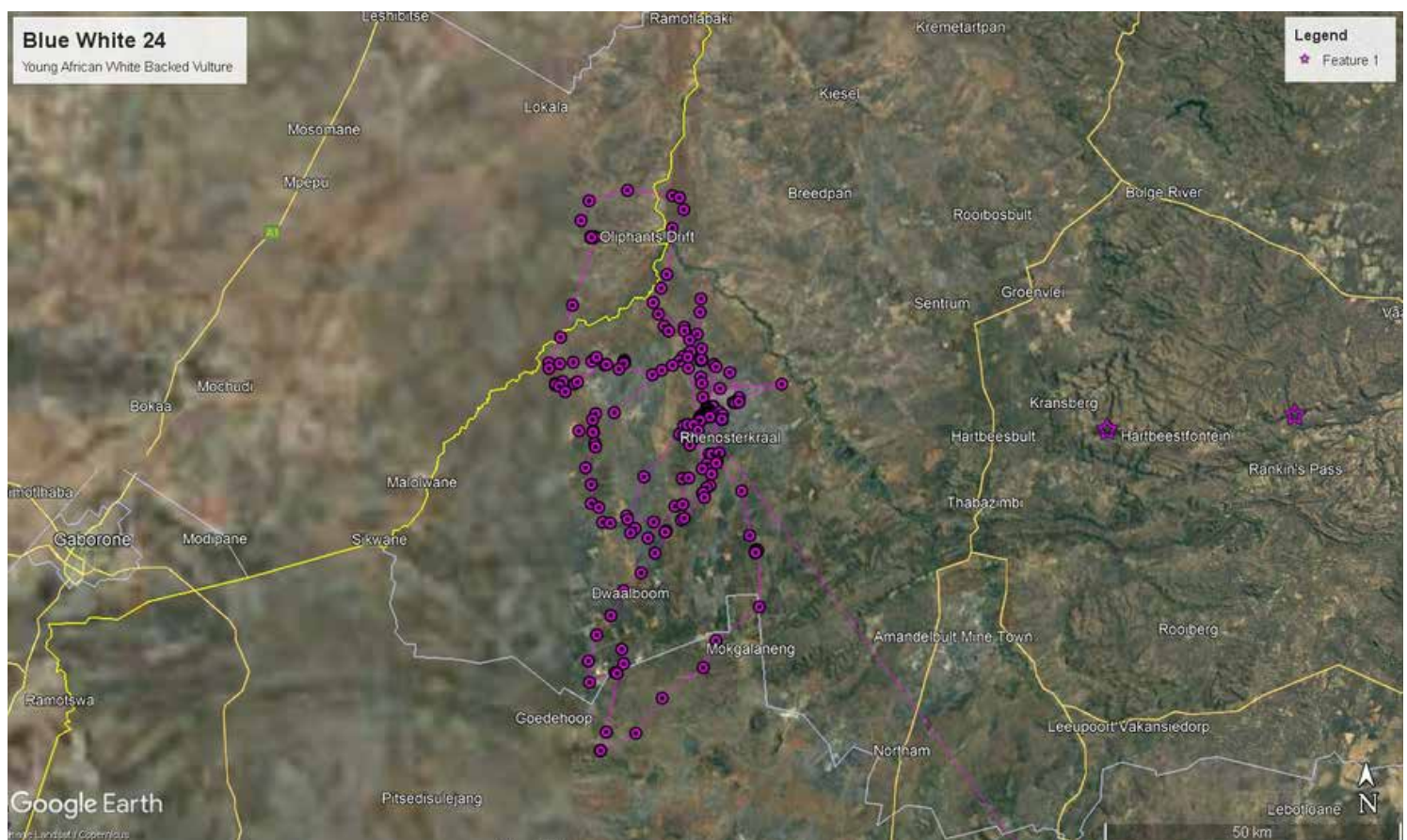




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Since her rescue on the 15th of November 2023, recovery and release on the 22nd of December 2023, she has spent time exploring the area so far as Botswana for a few days. It is amazing how these birds can recover and go back to their area of origin and given new lease on life to multiply in their natural habitat.



**The flight path of Blue White 24 since its release in December 2023**



# DR SARAH WOODHOUSE



The first time I came to VulPro was in January 2019. I was a wide-eyed Zoo veterinarian with plenty of bird experience but minimal direct field conservation experience, and I was thrilled. My mission was to perform annual health checks on each of the resident vultures.

Although Kerri and the VulPro staff had done health checks in the past, they had never before had a veterinarian directly involved, and our goals were to document a veterinary examination and perform basic blood tests for every vulture. I had two pieces of lab equipment: a small centrifuge to separate red blood cells and a refractometer to measure total protein.

The centrifuge could only handle samples from 4 vultures at a time—we collected 161 samples — and the electric cord could only be plugged into the socket in the VulPro bakkie. When I wasn't sitting in the bakkie, sweating and waiting for the blood to finish spinning, I was working with blood tubes in Kerri's brooder room. Out in the enclosures, I made the physical exam notes of the condition with pen and paper on a clipboard (which PJ tried to run off with more than once) and transcribed them into a Word document for Kerri's records.



When we took in injured or dehydrated birds, the 'clinic' was the driveway, the garage, or the back of the bakkie. I remember starting an IV drip on a vulture who was likely minutes from death in the grass in the front yard. Our intensive care unit for birds on IV drip was the shower in Kerri's bathroom: Kerri frequently brushed her teeth with a vulture looking on.

The vulture medications were stored in a cabinet in Kerri's kitchen. Our diagnostic capabilities were what we could see with our eyes, feel with our hands, or hear with a stethoscope. If we needed an x-ray, we had to crate the vulture and drive to the nearest vet clinic that was willing to help us. That was January 2019. It is now December 2023: how far we've come in just four years! VulPro now has a fully-equipped veterinary clinic on site, complete with a treatment room, a surgery suite with anesthesia, a radiography room for x-rays, and a laboratory.



There are intensive care units for vultures on IV drips, which we can regulate precisely using fluid pumps. Not only can I get immediate x-rays on vultures, but I can also anesthetize them and perform surgery. I can take photos of blood slides with our microscope camera and consult with international specialists. I can run blood tests on each newly arrived vulture and have results within an hour to help guide our treatment.

This year during health checks, we had a team of 3 wildlife specialist veterinarians working together. If we identified anything abnormal, one of us would break away and do radiographs for further assessment. All of our physical exam notes and bloodwork results were immediately entered into each individual vulture's medical record in RaptorMed, our specialized online records system. Yes: each of the 280+ vultures has an individual medical record, and some now have multiple years of physical exam and bloodwork history.

Thanks to our generous donors, we have come so very far in just a few years, and we can now state with confidence that we provide the highest quality health care for every vulture entrusted to us.



# ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

The health of our vultures, both resident and those in for rehabilitation is of primary importance to us here at VulPro. As with humans, it is advisable to undergo annual health checks with your GP and indeed, the same goes for our vultures. Although daily checks are done throughout the facility, more intensive screenings need to be undertaken by our veterinarians annually.

This year especially, is of critical importance because most of our non-releasable vultures and even some releasable vultures will be going to Shamwari Private Reserve to start their new lives. All species of vultures need to be fit for travelling such a long distance and they should not be carrying any diseases which could have the potential to infect any wild populations. So what does it entail? Birds are taken care of in the best possible way ready for the long trip.

Each and every vulture in the facility is physically caught and restrained. Before commencing the health checks, the individual's identification bands and rings are recorded.

The vulture is then assessed as to its body condition on a score of 1 to 5 - with 5 being excellent (or maybe even a little too fat). Dietary requirements can then be adjusted to increase or perhaps reduce food provision.



**A Cape vulture being examined under anaesthetic**

This score is further recorded on each bird's personal electronic file. Next, the veterinarian will flex all of the birds' feet and wing joints to determine if the bird perhaps has restricted movement in an appendage, crepitation, stiffening and even calcification of a joint. If the vet feels it is appropriate, the vulture will be sent up to our clinic for x-rays and if required, receive treatment. All amputations would already be on their electronic file, but are confirmed as a matter of course.

After this, a close up and personal eye examination is carried out. This is extremely important for birds which are due for release. Once again any anomalies are recorded. The feet are again checked, not only to check for any weaknesses or fractures, but also to check for bumble foot. This is fairly common in birds kept in captivity, but can become crippling if allowed to go unchecked.

Again any problems found that need veterinary intervention are sent to our clinic for treatment and assessment. Feathers are also checked for those about to be released. Nails are also clipped whilst the vulture is restrained. To ascertain that the vultures are indeed in good health, blood is drawn from a vein in the leg and either assessed in the laboratory by the vet on site or sent to Onderstepoort to check for any infections or illnesses such as kidney problems.



Only when all of these tests are completed and only after the veterinarians in charge give the go ahead, can the vultures be released or be transferred to the new breeding facility at Shamwari Private Reserve.

**Why do we do all of this?**

**Because we really care!**







Cape Vultures  
chick being fed

A Cape Vulture  
chick (below)

## CAPTIVE BREEDING

The cohort of fledglings in 2023 comprises of 14 Cape Vultures and one African White-Backed Vulture. Following on from our previous update on our captive breeding programme for population supplementation.

As you will notice from the previous newsletter update, we have had some further losses which have been heartbreaking for our team, who have dedicated months in undertaking, managing and supporting the birds for maximum success. Captive breeding can be soul destroying and with the ever-changing weather patterns, there are constantly changing parameters to deal with.

The 14 Cape Vulture fledglings will all be moved to the Eastern Cape on the 21st January 2024, in preparation for their release using a soft release method. In addition, as part of the breeding programme expansion, we are proud to announce our partnership with the Shamwari Private Game Reserve, which will soon be home to VulPro's breeding birds and the largest captive breeding programme for African vultures.



Our single captive bred White-Backed vulture, together with 3 other rehabilitated individuals, all of whom are the same age, were released in the Dwaalboom region within Limpopo province on the 22nd December 2023.

We look forward to keeping you up to date on their movements and the success and survival rates of these 4 birds with special emphasis on our captive bred offspring.



Three chicks that were artificially incubated getting their daily 30 mins of sun

Lastly, we are proud to announce that the National Vulture Breeding Steering Committee, chaired by Kerri Wolter, has been endorsed and written up as part of the Vulture Biodiversity Management Plan for South Africa. This is truly a great achievement plus recognition in support of our work to bolster the dwindling wild populations, preventing their extinction.



A chick hatching after artificial incubation



A Cape Vulture chick only a couple days old in its nest



## Release highlights

In summary, we have released a total of:

11 African White-Backed Vultures and 77 Cape Vultures.

Survival rates for all these individuals released is around 65% and some of our oldest released Cape Vultures have started breeding in the wild, a true testament to the success of this programme. We are excited to start with the full analysis of our releases and this will be published and widely distributed as soon as it becomes available.





# VULPRO AT SHAMWARI

BY KERRI WOLTER

Africa's Largest Vulture Relocation Project Gets The Green Light. The largest relocation of vultures ever undertaken reached a critical milestone, when approval was granted to move the first tranche of 158 birds to a new home in the Eastern Cape.

Now that the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment has given the green light, work is underway on a bespoke facility at Shamwari Private Game Reserve, adjacent to its existing Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre.

VulPro at Shamwari will be the new home for the Cape Vultures and African White-Backed Vultures, which will be transported from their current home at VulPro's Hartebeespoort Dam facility in late January 2024, during the first phase of a two-year relocation programme. VulPro is the only vulture conservation facility of its kind on the continent, which is spearheading population restocking and supplementation to address the severe decline of our African vulture species.

VulPro CEO, Kerri Wolter, says that "the partnership with Shamwari Private Reserve will create a safe area for the in-situ and ex-situ conservation programmes. Vultures with their important and efficient ecosystem services are a significant addition to the ethos Shamwari has created in restoring a natural and well-balanced ecosystem. In addition, the stability and financial support that Shamwari brings, will provide sustainability to Vulpro's breeding programmes and the future of vultures in South Africa."

Kerri Wolter explained that "the vultures being moved to the VulPro facility at Shamwari are all non-releasable breeding birds. After the Cape Vultures and African White-Backed Vultures move in January 2024, a second phase will see non-releasable breeding pairs of Lappet-Faced Vultures, White-Headed Vultures, Hooded Vultures and some additional White-Backed Vultures being relocated."



The Cape Vulture offspring will be released on Shamwari and will all be fitted with tracking devices. The remaining species' offspring will be transported back to VulPro's Hartebeespoort facility from where they will be sent to release sites that the National Vulture Breeding Steering Committee has identified as areas where the species' populations need bolstering and support.

Joe Cloete, Shamwari CEO, says that in conservation terms the project is as significant as anything that has been done on the reserve over the past 30 years. The Shamwari Conservation Project began in 1992, when it started trying to reverse nearly 300 years of human impact by reintroducing elephants, white rhinos and hippos. Black rhinos and buffaloes followed in 1993-1994.

Cheetahs, lions and brown hyenas were brought back in 2000 and servals and leopards the following year, making Shamwari the first big-five game reserve in the Eastern Cape. "Vultures play a vital role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem, are part of our natural heritage and are severely threatened. I cannot overstate how reintroducing Cape Vultures is a critical step in the continuing evolution of our conservation journey and enhancement of the ecological importance of the reserve."

#### About

VulPro's mission is to protect vultures through collaboration and innovation. Shamwari Private Game Reserve is the embodiment of a bold, ambitious conservation project that has turned back the clock, restoring a piece of Africa's natural heritage to what it once was.

#### Contacts

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# UPDATE FROM THE EASTERN CAPE

by Kate Webster

Strangely enough the latter half of 2023 for me became quite a busy rehab period which is rather unusual. From the first week in October, I started receiving calls for birds that had been injured. The following are the birds collected;

Fortunately, the CV immature found in Klein Mostertshoek area early in October burns were not too severe, recovered sufficiently enough to be fitted with a device and has just been released at Rookwood this month of December.

The two adult birds from the Waqu and Rooiberg areas will not be releaseable and will have to join the captive bred program when ready, however, the bird with the wire wrapped around its' wing is fine and will be released in the Eastern Cape next year when it returns to this province with the group coming down to Shamwari.

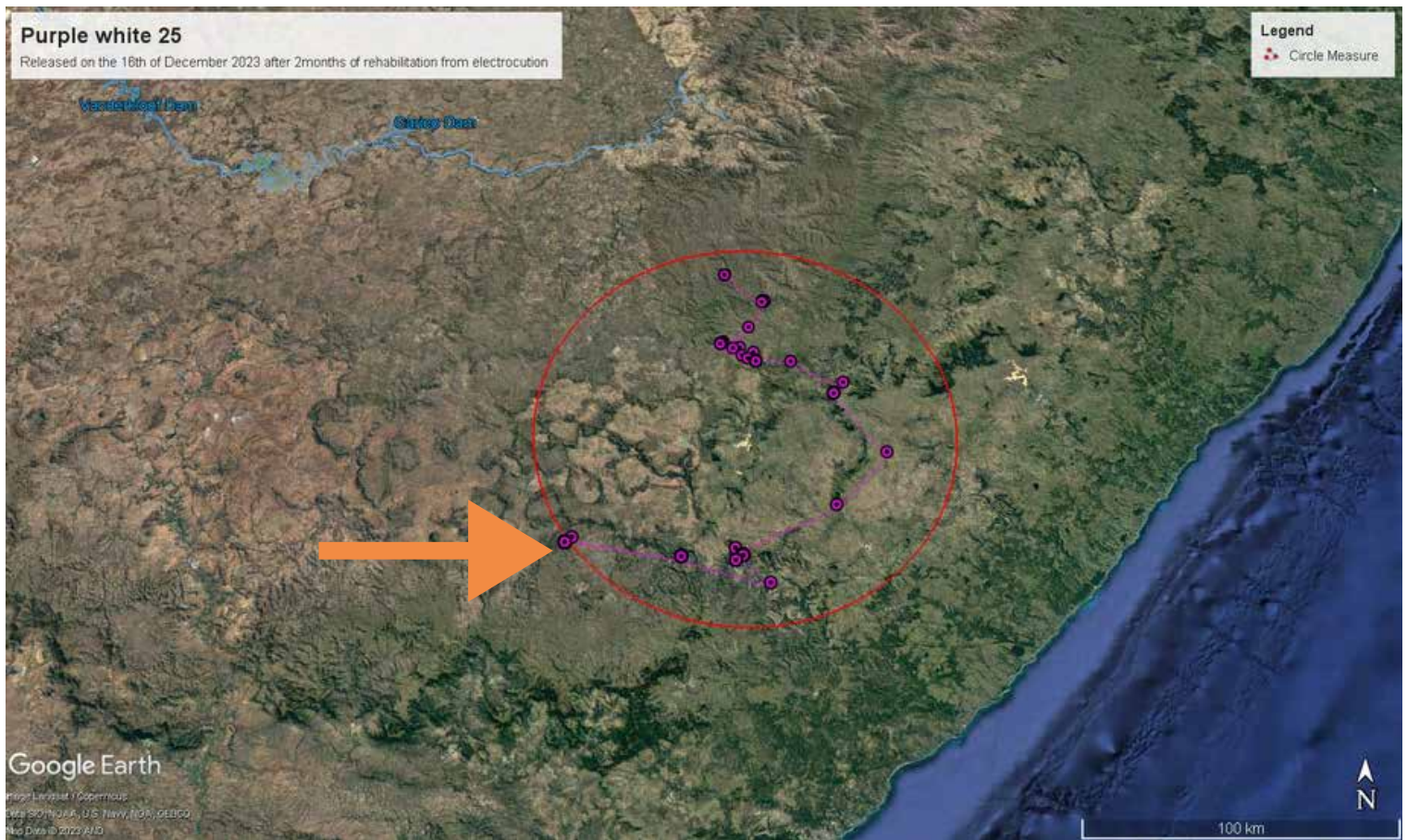
During the last three months, tracking movements of released birds has remained fascinating and adds further insight into our work and how best to protect the species and/or mitigate threats that each bird encounters.

As seen on the map below, for the purposes of this quarterly report, one particular Cape vulture flew roughly 258km since its release earlier this month. This vulture is exploring the mountainous area around Eliot in the Eastern cape. It is doing very well.

Purple white 25 just before release







**Map of the movements of Purple White 25, a Cape Vulture. Since its release in December 2023 in the Eastern Cape, it has covered about 258km in just a few days. The arrow indicates the point of release.**

My last rehab case broke my heart and after careful consideration and a long discussion with Kerri, we decided the kindest thing was to let her go despite having survived for as long as she did on her one leg. These birds continue to blow my mind when I come face to face with cases like this.

We did a relay for two birds that were transported up to Vulpro, sadly the one bird is a captive bred 2022 fledgling that developed cataracts in the eyes and requires specialist treatment, and the second the bird is the one found with the wire wrapped around its' wing. Thank you to Magda and her husband for travelling down to Bloemfontein to meet me there. This is much appreciated.

During this time, five cases were reported ranging from collisions with powerlines to electrocutions. Of these, three Cape Vultures survived electrocution, but two died as well as one Pied crow and one Martial Eagle.

Powerline collisions are also still one of the biggest threats in the Eastern Cape. Some survive but are grounded forever while others will never see another day.



The following farmers and persons, need to be mentioned as they have been the eyes and ears on the ground for these birds in this province. Messrs Lourens van Heerden, Dean Ferreira, Michael le Grange, Marthinus Jordaan, Ray Kemp, Dale and Norman Emslie, Drix White, Bren Farrell and Mrs Anna Venter (who sent me the message after seeing the bird sitting next to the N6 highway, knowing she could not ignore it!).

This network of people (my vulture heroes) play such an important role in this huge province with many kilometers to travel and I am able to call upon them to secure/capture the birds before I even leave home.

Some of these people kindly go out and look for a possibly downed captive bred/ tracked bird that has not downloaded. Lastly, the persons in this network not named, that give me sightings feedback on a group of birds or a tagged bird they have seen: Thank you, you are true vulture heroes.

We are all extremely excited with the imminent move of the breeding birds from VulPro to Shamwari early in the new year. Mariska Spoormaker did an interview with me for the program 360 on RSG not long after the press release. I visited Shamwari late October to meet up with Dr Johan Joubert (who I have worked with over the years) and Joe Cloete to chat about the big move and see the site. Exciting times await the new captive bred releases and even though I have directly released the earlier captive bred birds in this province, this is a huge step in the right direction.

The breeding birds are moving to superb accommodation/enclosures with continuity and professionalism of a high standard. I want to congratulate Kerri in achieving this milestone, as not only is this for the birds and to secure and safeguard the future of the species, but it has been a mammoth task with many hours of negotiating, travelling let alone the emotional ups and downs. Well done, Kerri, and welcome to my province. We continue to monitor and work on all potential wind farm developments.

We are aware of a number of birds that are being killed on turbines, particularly in the Cookhouse area and need to safeguard any potential new areas where we know the birds fly and will be negatively affected by this type of development.

My happy ending for this quarter has been the release of 3 birds early December. The birds released involved one rehab bird (always nice to be able to re-release a bird) and two wild caught birds that we were hoping to fit devices too. Sadly, the devices were not functioning so I decided best to give them their freedom only with leg bands and rings and removed the devices. Fly safe guys and enjoy your freedom.

Once again, I must thank my daughter Joy, and my farm staff, who so willingly assist whenever I need those hands. To Vivian and also Lindy who assist me with the food for my birds and to the local Queenstown Vets, who when asked are willing to give me a hand.

To Kerri, her staff and volunteers, a huge thank you for your support as well.



Stand up for  
**VULTURE CONSERVATION**  
and show your support with our  
**EXCLUSIVE BRACELETS!**



Every purchase directly contributes to the protection and rehabilitation of African vultures, ensuring their survival for generations to come.

# CONSERVATION



Over the past 3 months, we have had our hands full with a multitude of tasks, including completion of the breeding surveys at our Cape Vulture colonies and tree nesting breeding sites. We are keeping up to date with current and new research projects, maintaining our research databases and more recently attending to incidents involving energy infrastructure.

Some exciting researchers have recently come on board and will be using some of VulPro's data along with data from other collaborators, investigating some interesting topics involving different African vulture species.

Mattie Purinton (a PhD Candidate) is utilising some of VulPro's tracking data of the African White-Backed Vultures (*Gyps Africanus*), to assess the effects of food predictability on their foraging ecology. She recently attended a European Vulture Conference in Spain, where she presented some of her work and she has kindly shared an update with us. You can read all about it and her experience at the conference in our Conservation section.

Saffiya Ginel (an MSc Candidate) will also be utilising VulPro's tracking data, with a focus on all the vulture species in our database. Saffiya will be exploring flight heights and assessing how this relates to collision risks across Africa.

We are excited to see how these two projects progress and look forward to the results they will yield, as both will be important in our efforts to conserve and protect vultures across Africa.



# Cape Vulture Monitoring



In 2023 we successfully monitored 6 Cape Vulture colonies across northern parts of South Africa. A total of 2,268 breeding pairs were observed in our initial surveys and a total of 2,295 active nests for the year were recorded. The 6 Cape Vulture colonies surveyed comprise approximately 50 – 60% of the entire breeding population, with Kransberg and Manutsa being two of the largest colonies.

Breeding success across the colonies varied between 25% and over 100%. (Figure 5) The colony at Moletjie showed the largest decline in numbers, whilst Kransberg and Skeerpoort were the only colonies to show an increase in breeding success this year. The overall breeding success for the year across all 6 of the colonies was 83%.

In addition to the 6 monitored colonies, a site survey was carried out on a property near the Zastron Colony in Free State Province. This area, once a breeding ground for Cape Vultures suffered declines in numbers and reports of the birds not returning to the colony to breed. Last records of breeding at the colony were over 20 years ago. Reports of vultures returning to the colony in 2020 led Dawie de Swardt from the National Museum to carry out a survey. He surveyed approximately 60 birds leaving the colony and counted 200 birds in the area. Since 2020, no new records have been published.

Our team visited the site near breeding season this year, as local farmers reported seeing vultures returning to the colony to roost. Although no evidence of breeding was observed during the site survey, we will return to the area to monitor the birds' behaviour in the hope that they begin to breed there again.

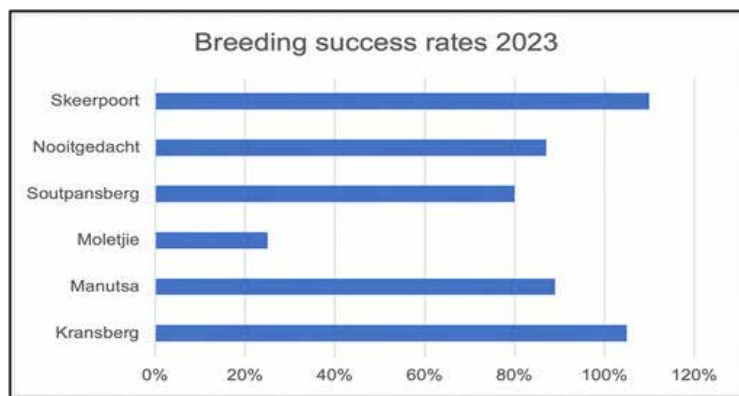


Figure 5: Average breeding success rates for 2023 for the 6 Cape Vulture colonies monitored by VulPro.

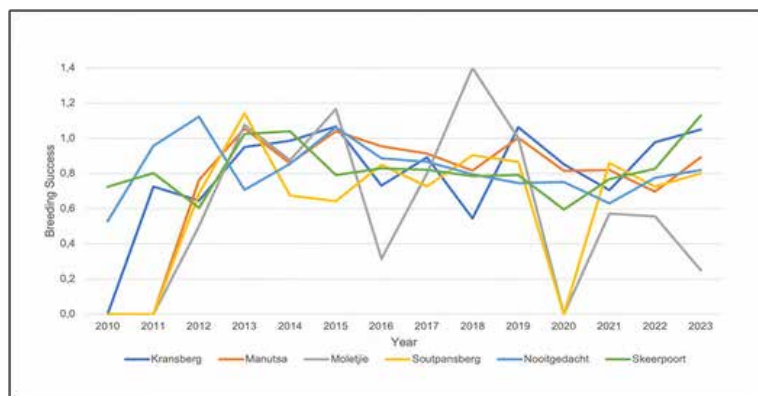
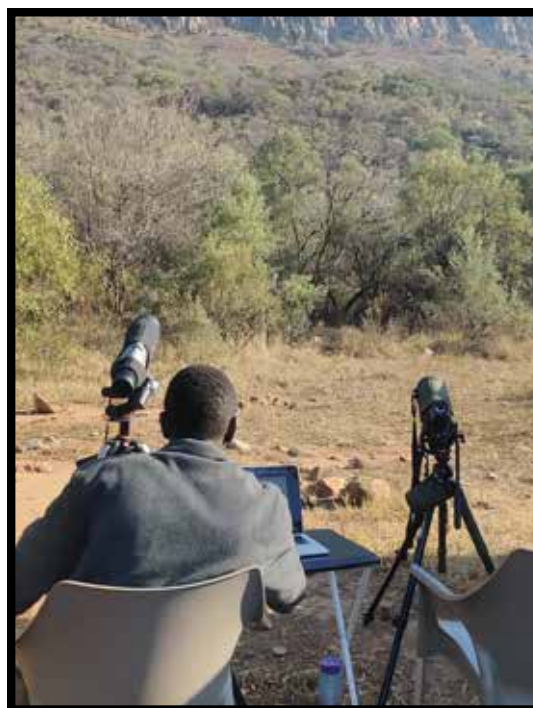
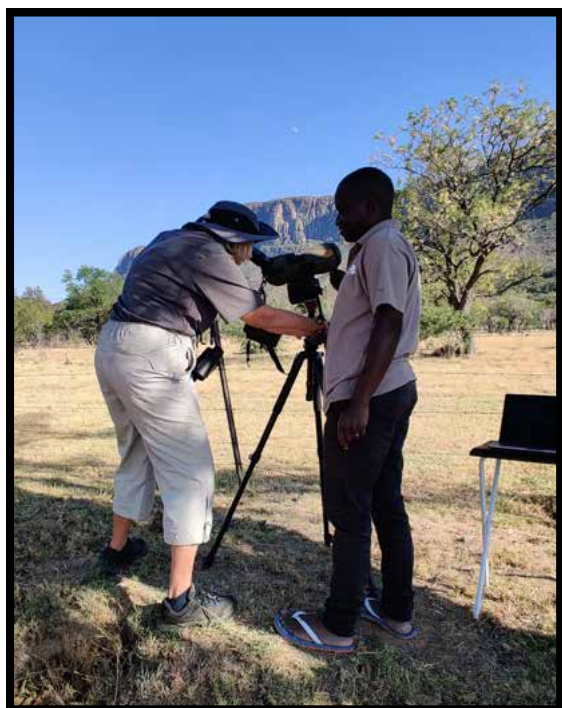


Figure 6 : Annual breeding success at each of the 6 Cape Vulture colonies monitored by VulPro throughout northern parts of South Africa

Monitoring these areas and colonies over many years (Figure 6) , has provided us with valuable data and enabled us to see how variations in active nests, breeding pairs and fledgling numbers change. Changes can easily be compared year on year and when numbers at colonies drastically alter between years, we can investigate why these changes may have occurred.

This year we noticed steep declines in one colony, the Moletjie colony. Upon further investigation and through engagement with rangers in the area, we discovered the declines could be linked to the local community not knowing enough about vultures or why they are so valuable to our ecosystem. Our education team has since jumped into action and invested time providing education to the community, which we hope will improve the breeding success of the colony during our 2024 surveys.



**Cape Vulture colonies are monitored from nearby sites using spotting scopes and reference photos of the cliffs.**  
**Volunteer Sue Fox being trained by VulPro staff on how to use a spotting scope (left) and VulPro staff monitoring the colony (right).**

Continued engagement with the communities living alongside vultures and in particular near their colonies can go a long way to ensure these magnificent birds are protected at ground level.



# African White-backed Vulture Monitoring



**Dwaalboom African White-Backed Vulture tree nesting sites. Robin Ryan (Dallas Zoo) assists in our final surveys for 2023.**

In 2023, we surveyed 3 areas for the African White-Backed Vultures comprising of 21 properties with 144 active nests (Figure 7) observed during the initial survey period. Our final surveys in October, yielded an average breeding success rate of 88% - this is an increase on last year's figures, likely due to additional nests being observed at the Dwaalboom sites during our final surveys.

Although an increase in nests was observed, active nests across the 3 sites showed a reduction in numbers during the year. All 3 sites showed a decrease in active nests in our initial surveys with the Dwaalboom site being the only one to have an increase at the end of our survey period.

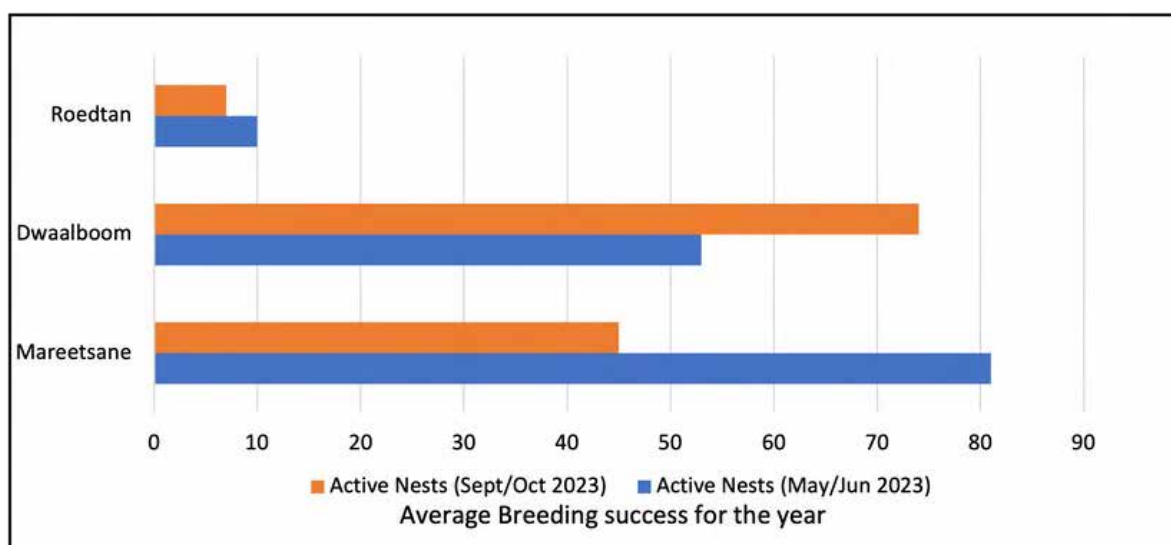


Fig 7 Active tree nests across 3 monitored sites

During our final surveys carried out in 2023, we were able to make use of a drone. The drone was invaluable to us and helped locate nests we had not had access to in previous years due to bush encroachment or alterations in landowners and property access. By using a drone, we were also able to identify several nests in the Mareetsane area with dead chicks. This discovery highlighted the need for further engagement with landowners and the community in the region.

The drone also assisted us in locating an orphaned chick at a nest in Dwaalboom. The chick was found sitting in its nest with a dead adult bird below. It was recovered from the nest and taken to VulPro to be raised by foster parents until such a time when it can be released back into the wild.

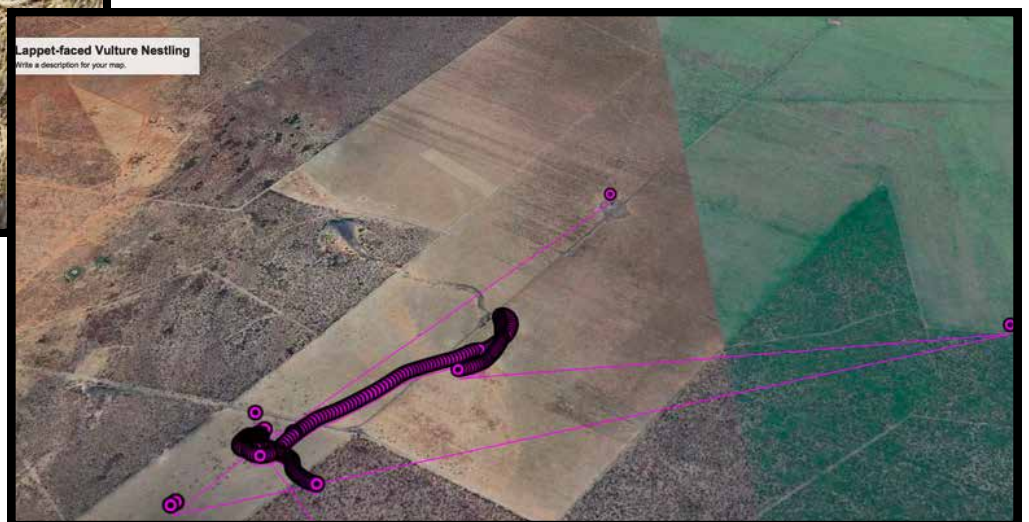
Apart from finding the orphaned chick and the unfortunate discovery of dead chicks, we had one exciting find. In Dwaalboom, a Lappet-Faced Vulture chick was found sitting on a nest, parents thankfully still around and taking care of it.

As we know little about the movement ecology of these vultures outside of protected areas within South Africa, we took the opportunity to return to the area, safely removed the chick from the nest and fitted a GPS tracking device, SAFRING and a coloured leg band to it before carefully returning it to the nest. We are now closely monitoring the nestling via the GPS tracking device, eagerly awaiting to see it fledge the nest and venture out into the world. It currently flying a few kilometres away from the nest, testing out its wings and flight techniques before returning to the nest site.



**Kerri Wolter (VulPro CEO), fitting the GPS tracking device and leg bands to the Lappet-faced Vulture nestling**

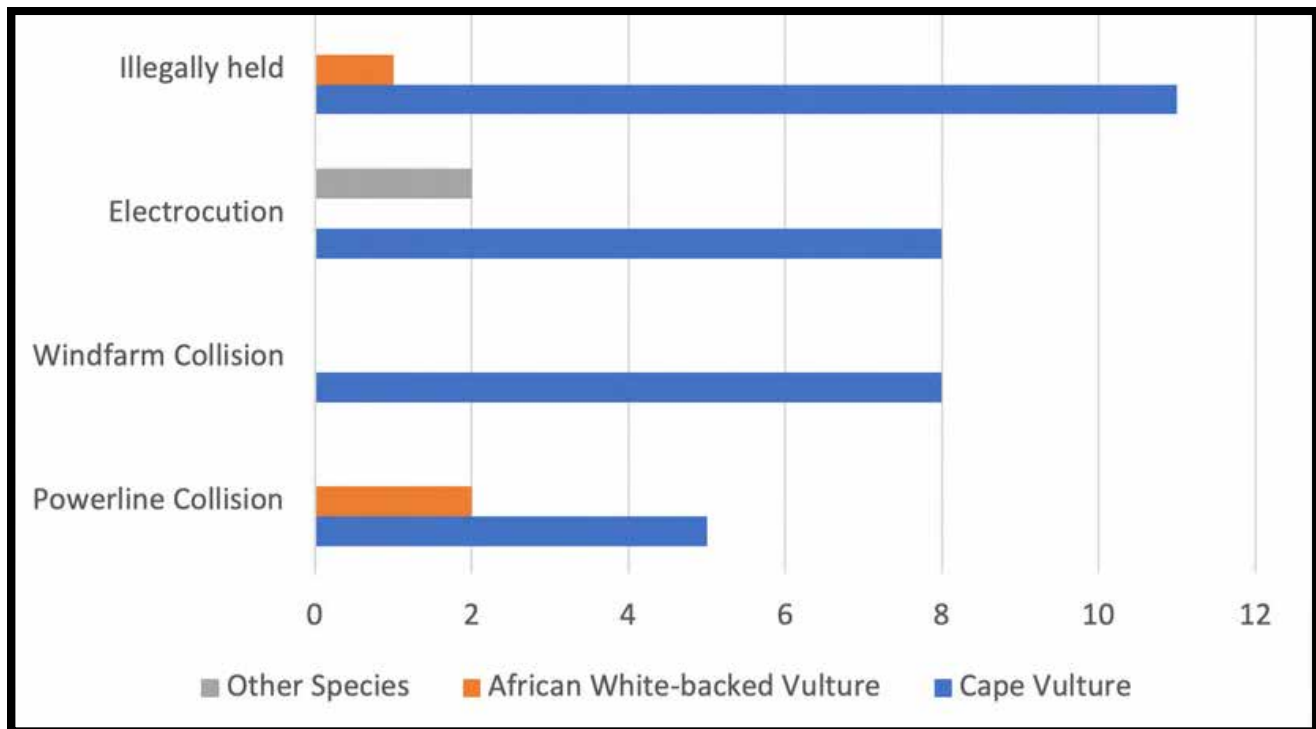
**Click here for the full monitoring report**  
[https://www.vulpro.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/VulPro-Monitoring-Report-2023\\_final.pdf](https://www.vulpro.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/VulPro-Monitoring-Report-2023_final.pdf)



**Lappet-faced nestling doing its first practise flights.**



# THREAT RADAR



**Figure 1: Number of incidences per species reported or admitted to VulPro October-December 2023.**

Collision incidents (powerline, wind turbine and electrocution events), occur when vultures forage widely and have to navigate many obstacles in their way to find food and roosting spots. Roosting birds may cause a short circuit on the powerlines, when they defecate.

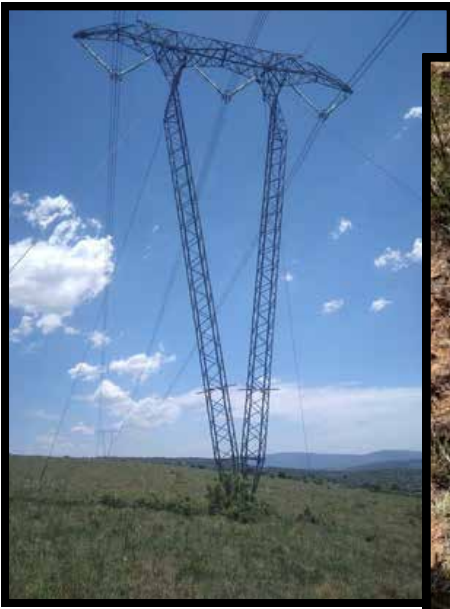
During severe storms they may be blown off their pylon perches into the cables by strong winds. They sometimes will also fly into the cables as it is relatively difficult to see in the air. All these can lead to broken wings or legs, or even electrocution. Wind turbines move very fast and a vulture thermalling nearby may be carried into the blade's path

Here at VulPro, we do all we can to mitigate and reduce some of the risks they face by ensuring all incidences are recorded and reported to the relevant authorities, such as Eskom.

The reports generated require Eskom and other authorities to investigate and find ways to implement mitigation measures at structures such as powerlines in the hope they will reduce future collisions. 19 cases has been reported in the last three months and only one have been investigated. Likewise, any wind turbine collisions reported to us by wind farms companies, require the companies to investigate and implement mitigation measures.

**Please contact us on  
+27 82 808 5113 or 082 254 4162  
for emergencies only.**

We would like to remind the public to keep an eye out for vultures and other raptors in distress. Should you have any other wildlife rehabilitation cases and are unsure whom to contact, call us to put you in contact with the right organisation or make an emergency plan.



### **A vulture killed after a collision with a powerline in Rustenburg area**

The measures taken can include such things as increasing ground level observers and the removal of carcasses from the grounds of wind farms, to deter vultures from coming down to feed in the vicinity. Measures can also include shut down on demand systems.

These are led by experienced avian surveyors, who monitor bird activity from vantage points within the wind farm and when priority bird species, such as vultures are observed flying within a few kilometres of the wind farm, the observers instruct wind turbine operators to shut down the turbines until the birds have left the vicinity.

All of these and other measures can reduce the number of collisions - if implemented well.

Prior to many such developments, VulPro is sent Environmental Impact Assessments, which provide insight into the potential impacts new developments can have within an area. We take every opportunity to comment and provide advice about vultures within these areas, in the hope it will guide future developments, to either look at building in lower risk areas or to implement as many mitigation measures as possible.

Threats can only be reduced by working together and ensuring vultures are protected wherever possible.





# INTERESTING FACTS

Globally, there are 23 vulture species: 16 species in the Old World (Africa, Europe and Asia) and seven in the New World (North and South America). New World vultures were previously considered closer to storks and are occasionally called buzzards. Of the Old World vultures, nine species are found in Africa, whilst three species – White-Headed Vulture, Hooded Vulture and Cape Vulture – are found solely in Africa.

**Large Wingspan:** The Lappet-Faced Vulture is Africa's largest vulture with the widest wingspan of three meters. This great wingspan helps them to soar high in the sky as they search for carrion. Vultures are considered to be the highest flying birds on earth reaching higher than 11 000 meters. They are good at utilising thermals to glide gracefully through the sky. Thermals are columns of warm rising air that can lift birds to great heights without using much energy. Vultures have evolved to take full advantage of these natural updrafts.

**Unique Appearance:** Vultures have distinct features, such as long necks and bald heads which help prevent blood and meat from sticking to them. They also have a powerful hooked beak that helps them to tear at carcasses. But there are distinct differences in facial details.



**Clean-up Crew:** Vultures play a crucial role in the ecosystems as scavengers. They are highly efficient at cleaning up carrion, which helps prevent the spread of diseases and keeps the environment clean. They are almost exclusively feeding on dead meat. Their beaks differ between species depending on which parts of animal carcasses they feed on as well as the ability to break bone.

**Socialites:** Vultures are social creatures and often gather in large groups when feeding known as "wakes." Some species, like Cape Vultures, also engage in communal roosting and nesting.

**Behavioral traits:** Vulture vomit when they feel threatened so they can escape and fly away easier.



**Long-Distance Travellers:** Vultures are known for their expansive ranges. They can travel hundreds of kilometres in search of food and suitable nesting sites. African White-Backed Vultures can travel more than 220 km in a single day and can fly up to 88km/h in the right conditions.

**Strong Stomachs:** Vultures have powerful stomach acids with the lowest pH, that can digest bacteria, toxins, and pathogens commonly found in carrion. This adaptation helps protect them from diseases associated with their diet.

Vultures are fascinating and often misunderstood birds, with unique adaptations that make them essential components of many ecosystems.



# EDUCATION AND MEDIA

Over the past three months, VulPro has spread vulture conservation awareness through many platforms including presentations, tours and the media as follows:

- VulPro's team has presented talks at six schools in Limpopo province.
- We provided educational tours of our facility to 139 visitors, including 64 adults and 75 children.
- VulPro's website has been visited 93 times in the past three months.
- We currently have 18,393 followers on Facebook, 2,058 followers on Twitter, 1,432 followers on Instagram, 503 subscribers on YouTube and 661 followers on LinkedIn.
- In the last three months VulPro was featured in 52 articles ranging from Seven radio features, 16 news paper articles, four magazines, and 22 online publications, of Weg/GO magazine, RSG radio, You tube, six online articles by The Daily Maverick, Komorant, Huisgenoot, Netwerk24, Goodthingsguy, Times Live and Hartbeesfontein Newsletter.
- External tours reached 52 829 individuals.

A group tour at VulPro





## THE MAJESTIC VULTURES

Who do they call you from the skies above?  
Where the aura of your beauty is seen?  
Oh majestic bird you are such an amusing creature!!

The symbol of protection and the circle of life.  
The aura to our motherland, laboring upon carcasses with no fear.  
An angel in disguise  
O motshireletsi wa rona!!  
Mo tsamaisa bolwetsi, ntle le wena re bo mang?

Fly high above the mountain clouds  
Where your beauty will always be seen.  
Be free from the pain and moaning of your fellow ones

Subelela lerumo la dinaga.  
Be free majestic one.  
Sithi phakama mtase!!  
This is your time to fly.

-Maphakela Boitumelo

After launching our new school-based educational programme, VulCha (Vulture Champions), in mid-March 2023, it has taken on new ground. Our team revisited Marumafase Secondary School and Biokotso Primary School near the Blouberg Nature Reserve, Limpopo. To show the students commitment, our team gave them the opportunity to use their creativity and love of writing to write a poem about vultures. We are proud to add the winning poem by Maphakela Boitumelo. Congratulations on describing this majestic birds so beautifully.

Vulpro remain committed to add to participating schools in 2024. It is the young generation that will attribute to the survival of all animal species. They are the future champions that can ensure vulture conservation continues.

We are extremely proud of this project and are looking forward to continue the opportunity to help foster awareness and care for vultures.







We visited a total of six schools, three Primary and three High schools this year. We also visited four communities and two at Moletsisi where the poems were collected and the winner chosen.

The most positive results came from Moletsisi. This community have donated from their own stock animals to the Blouberg Nature Reserve vulture restaurant and this collaboration resulted in more than 6 reports of injured vultures, which was not observed in 2022.

In the last three months our staff took 16 kids with teachers to the Blouberg Nature Reserve to experience nature in a whole different way.

A Primary school in Kameeldrift were visited where a lecture on vultures were presented by Clarence.



**Our team member Clarence, showing the children how to hold a vulture correctly. We are reaching hundreds of students through this programme**



## Project update: Assessing the effects of thermal factors on the spatial ecology of a Critically Endangered African vulture



African White-backed vulture nestling in tree



African White-backed vulture adult with nestling on the nest

The final months of 2023 have brought about the last of the field work for this project. The final tree nesting surveys were conducted in Mareetsane in the North West Province and Roedtan in the Limpopo Province, bringing together the final set of data collection for this project. Unfortunately, the Mareetsane site had a lower success rate when compared to last year's success rate, with only 55% compared to last year's 73%. Whilst we cannot be entirely sure what caused the reduced success rate, we have reason to believe that poison may have played a role in this.

As such, VulPro has been working on intensifying engagement with landowners and community members in this area to help reduce any indirect poisoning that may be taking place and to help nurture healthy relationships with these birds.

This final data collection has gone hand in hand with the beginning of the analysis of this project and we are pleased to see the data beginning to take shape. The first part of this has been the comparison of maximum temperature to the success rates of nesting sites over the years. While we have some exciting breeding data from over the years, it has been an interesting exercise in tracking down accurate and fine scale data for our weather variables.



Through assistance and guidance from our colleagues at the Max Planck Institute in Germany, we have been able to access some excellent temperature data as well as other climatic variables that should help us to unpack our questions on how our changing world climates will influence the breeding and movement of African White-Backed Vultures in southern Africa. 2023 has been a really great year for this project and we have been able to take some amazing steps forward. We are looking forward to 2024 and what it will bring for the project and most excitingly, we hope to have the first publication finalised early next year.

This project would not be possible without the support and effort that has been put into it by the team of supervisors and advisors and I would like to thank them for all that we have been able to achieve thus far. I look forward to what is to come next!

As always, we would also like to thank our collaborators and partners who have made this project possible up until this point - including Dronfield Nature Reserve, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the Leibniz Institute, the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe, the Max Planck Institute, the North Carolina Zoo, Raptors Botswana, the University of Eswatini, the University of Pretoria, the Victoria Falls Wildlife Trust and Wildlife ACT.



**VulPro staff member Clarence conducting tree nesting surveys**

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## RESEARCH PROJECT UPDATE BY MATTIE PURINTON

My research is assessing the effects of regional food predictability on the foraging behaviour of African White-Backed Vultures (*Gyps Africanus*) throughout sub-Saharan Africa. I am comparing the movement and feeding patterns from individuals in Tanzania, South Africa and Ethiopia, each of which has different prominent food types for a foraging vulture. Tanzania primarily has large wild ungulate herds and elephants, which are generally unpredictable in both where and when their carcasses may occur. South Africa, in contrast, has more human activity and many vulture restaurants, which are more predictable in where they occur and tend to be more frequent sources of food for vultures. The final site, Ethiopia, has much higher human presence than the other two and vultures residing in this country have access to many abattoirs and other incidental, human-mediated food types that are regular spatially and temporally.

With the GPS telemetry data I have been given access to by the North Carolina Zoo, the Peregrine Fund, HawkWatch and VulPro, I have calculated several metrics for large and small-scale foraging behaviours of 74 African White-Backed Vultures. I am currently wrapping up my analysis of these behaviours and the differences between sites and plan to publish my findings early in the New Year.



Cáceres, Spain location of the 2023 European Vulture Conference attending by student, Mattie Purinton



Mattie Purinton presenting her research at the European Vulture Conference in Spain.

I presented this research and some preliminary findings this past November at the 2023 European Vulture Conference in Cáceres, Spain. There were over 400 people attending the conference from all over the world, more information on the presentation and the conference can be found in a summary [here](https://4vultures.org/blog/day-2-insights-european-vulture-conference/).

<https://4vultures.org/blog/day-2-insights-european-vulture-conference/>



## Vulture Research Consortium and Drylands Project: JOIN US!

We are two postdoctoral researchers, Dr. Anne Scharf and Dr. Martina Scacco, at the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior in Konstanz, Germany. With this message, we would like to invite the readers of this newsletter to join two related but independent initiatives. Both these initiatives, in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Martin Wikelski and Dr. Kamran Safi, are aimed at bringing together the global community of vulture researchers and facilitate conservation efforts on these species.

Participation in either of these initiatives (or both) is completely independent.

### 1. Vulture Research Consortium (VRC)

The VRC is basically a simple mailing list that can be used to reach out to other people active in vulture research globally, and to initiate collaborative projects. Its purpose is to build a central place to suggest collaborative projects and submit calls for participation. Participation in the VRC mailing list is completely independent from any commitment to join any specific project. Any member of the VRC mailing list can use it to share information and/or ask other members to share their data or expertise for future collaborative projects regarding vultures.

You can join the VRC mailing list by signing up at this link <https://listserv.gwdg.de/mailman/listinfo/VRC>, or simply by sending an email to [vrc-join@ab.mpg.de](mailto:vrc-join@ab.mpg.de).

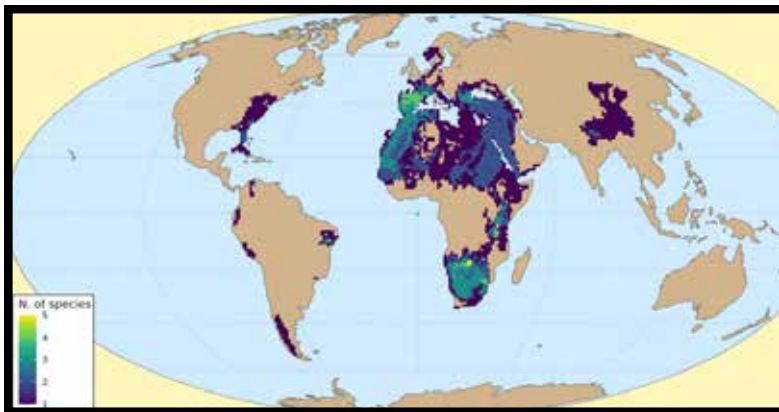


Image legend: Contributed data to the “Drylands project” (status November 2023).

### 2. Drylands project

The “Drylands project” is a first collaborative research project of the VRC. With this project we aim at bringing together a large amount of tracking data of multiple vultures species, at global scale, to study the relationships between vulture communities and drylands.

In particular we are interested in how vulture movement patterns are affected by, and change with, different dryland indicators, such as change in water availability and other biotic and abiotic desertification-associated processes. Vultures occupy the top of the trophic pyramid and are prime candidates to show and observe changes in ecological and environmental dynamics.

We thus hope that the results of this project will bring us closer to understand how changes in vultures’ movement patterns could be used as an early warning system to track environmental changes at the landscape level.

Thanks to the contribution of 30 data owners, we already gathered GPS data from over 1600 birds from 16 vulture species (out of 23 extant species) across all continents, tracked between 2006 and 2023. But the call for joining this project is still open.

You can join the Drylands project and find more detailed information via this link: <https://www.ab.mpg.de/500689/Drylands>.



## MEET OUR VOLUNTEER

# CHRIS ELEY

Hi everyone, I'm Chris Eley, Education Lead and Bird Keeper at Paradise Wildlife Park (soon to be rebranded as Hertfordshire Zoo) in the UK. I lead on all the conservation education programmes across our zoo - from school visits through to interpretation creation. I sit as the Chair of the BIAZA Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Working Group.

I am also extremely fortunate to work with some incredible birds in my hybrid role including Asian Black Hornbills, Spotted Eagle Owls, and a colony of over 20 African Penguins. However, my passion has always been vultures! I came into the zoo world after a big career change at the age of 38. Having spent the majority of my working life as a teacher and working with education charities, I decided that I wanted to follow a boyhood dream and work with birds, as well as educating the public about how incredible and amazing they are.

Although we don't have vulture species at our zoo, I hope one day that we will, so I can fully articulate to our visitors their importance on the planet and how we can best support them. When I made my career change, I was also keen that I wanted to experience frontline conservation work, to fully understand the threats and challenges faced by species across the globe and the incredible work being done to save them. It seemed fitting then, that I should come out to experience the incredible work being done by VulPro. My first trip in 2022, was filled with rescues and releases and I was amazed by the incredible work being undertaken by all the staff.



Following some marital negotiations with my wife, involving taking on another rescue, I am now committed to coming out every year to help wherever I can. That is what led me to head out again in December 2023. It has opened my eyes to the challenging situation for the long-term survival of these incredible birds, with multiple rescues over the short period of time.

I have been volunteering. Witnessing a powerline collision is something that will stay embedded in my mind forever, but it only fuels my desire to support vultures even further. I can't wait until I am sitting again at Heathrow Airport, waiting to board the plane to Johannesburg and heading back to VulPro, which now feels like my second home! I am also committed to continuing to be an advocate for vultures back here in the UK.



# SPONSOR SHOUTOUT

To show our appreciation for our sponsors in each newsletter edition we highlight a few of our sponsors and how their contribution has supported VulPro's vulture conservation efforts.



TUSK TRUST cares about the environment and believes in advancing conservation all over Africa with African-driven solutions. TUSK has so generously assisted us with our Operational expenses around rehab, captive breeding, research, monitoring/surveys and education. They have reached Platinum status for sponsorship as an International contributor for Vulture conservation at Vulpro.

WILHELMA Zoological garden in Stuttgart assured that our rehabilitation efforts could continue this year. Efforts to save every bird rescued, was our main focus during the last three months. Some birds needed surgery and others just some TLC before release. All donations help to ensure the survival of these magnificent birds.



**Wilhelma**  
Zoologisch-Botanischer Garten Stuttgart





TULSA ZOO supported us in our Cape Vulture monitoring efforts. They are all about connecting people to nature, they are an advocate for wildlife, people and wild places. We'll continue to monitor our captive and released Cape Vultures in years to come!

In October 2023 Riverleigh International Equestrian centre held a fancy dress event in support of the work Vulpro does for all the vulture in their care and in the field.

Through this event they have raised a massive R82 000 toward saving our beautiful vultures in southern-Africa. We are forever grateful for this selfless act in support of vultures and their survival.



RIVERLEIGH  
INTERNATIONAL  
EQUESTRIAN CENTRE

We would like to express our sincerest gratitude to our generous funders. Your support enables us to continue our vital mission of protecting these important and often misunderstood animals. Thank you for your support, and we look forward to continuing to work together to safeguard the future of these birds.

# MEET NEW TEAM MEMBERS

## GENERAL MANAGER ALISTAIR SINCLAIR



I was born and raised in Durban in the early 1960's into a very conservation-minded family. Family holidays were always spent in game reserves or on a farm in the Underberg District. This naturally instilled in me a huge passion for animals and the environment.

On completing my National Service, I joined the Natal Parks Board where I had really great in-service training and mentorship. I have been fortunate to have been able to work on various reserves and resorts under their control and spent five years at the St Lucia Crocodile Sanctuary, where my skills of captive animal husbandry were honed.

The work there was pretty similar to the work that VulPro is doing - in that research, breeding, rehabilitation and education were the main focuses. A crocodile's closest relative is a bird, so with that in mind, I am hoping that those years spent there will assist me in being successful in managing the VulPro Harties.

In the years that followed, I developed a private crocodile sanctuary, ran a private game farm for many years and even did stints in animal welfare and wildlife rehabilitation. About six years ago, I headed for Zimbabwe where I was employed as the Conservator for a large conservancy in the Lowveld Plateau area. My youngest daughter had a baby last year and it was the right time to return and be nearer to her and her family.

Normally mobile connectivity there was very poor, but for some strange reason one afternoon I switched on my phone and there was a signal! Being by nature inquisitive, I opened up Facebook and there was an advert for a position based at VulPro. On a more personal level, I have three amazing daughters, one my own and two from my ex- wife's, whom I classify as my own too.

My eldest lives in Wales, UK with her husband and two sons, my middle daughter lives in and has her own company in Dubai and my youngest daughter lives in Bedfordview with her husband and young daughter.



I am sure you would have noticed by now, my life and my passion has always been environmental conservation and I love imparting all the knowledge that I have gained over the past 40 odd years to others. In Zimbabwe, I was honoured to have mentored students from three of their top universities.

I am a firm believer in the need for environmental education and nurturing the young and not so young minds into taking the initiative to protect our and their children's children's natural heritage. We are losing way too many species of plants and animals and at such a tremendous rate that if we do not start acting now, it will be far too late! If one link of the food chain breaks, the result to the rest of the food chain and thereby the ecosystem will be devastating and indeed catastrophic.

On that sombre note, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Kerri Wolter for taking the initiative and having the foresight to create and nurture VulPro to where it is today. Soon, it is hoped, that many many more vultures will be released back into the wild to supplement the ever decreasing numbers out there.





## GENERAL ASSISTANT ANITA ENGELBRECHT

I've always had a passion for animals and having animals were just part of growing up. Yearly visits to Kruger National Park fuelled this fire inside of me to learn whatever I can about nature and was almost always the first to identify an animal or bird. When I was 14 years old, I did a mammal course at Pretoria Zoo. Following a career that had anything to do with animals was the natural thing to do, hence becoming a Veterinary Technologist sounded like a good choice.

I qualified in 1993, started out working in vaccine manufacturing and many years later added another 2 years to complete the B-Tech degree at TUT.

In between jobs I took on farming and enjoyed working with cattle, sheep, ostriches, and a range of exotic birds.

I felt that a career in conservation always eluded me, but life has a way of getting you where you need to be at the right time. Working in animal welfare, provided me the opportunity to grow in so many ways, to help people with their animals and to help research facilities create better ways of caring for animals in their care.

My interest in wildlife and birds of prey will be developed further, learning all there is about vultures and how they serve the world we live in. I believe in living a balanced life, so enjoy spending time in nature, with animals, walking, photography, and time with family and friends.





# WITH THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS



## Platinum

Tusk Trust

## Blue

Chessington World of Adventures

Little Rock Zoo

Thea Erasmus

Wan4U

Zoological Society of Hertfordshire

Paradise Wildlife Park

## Silver

AE Solutions

Cheyenne Mountain Zoo

Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden

Detroit Zoo

Different.org

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Lomas Wildlife Protection Trust

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Natural Encounters Conservation

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## Gold

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Tulsa Zoo

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Zoo Miami Wildlife Conservation Fund



# ADOPT A VULTURE AND JOIN OUR VULPRO EXTENDED FAMILY!

FOR JUST **R4,500** YOU CAN SPONSOR  
THE CARE OF A VULTURE FOR A YEAR

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and receive  
an adoption certificate,  
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unlimited visits to VulPro  
(by appointment only)

HELP US PROVIDE THE BEST  
QUALITY CARE TO OVER  
260 RESIDENT VULTURES

Find out more by emailing **[admin@vulpro.com](mailto:admin@vulpro.com)**



# WITH THANKS TO OUR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

We want to thank our adoptive parents for their continued support of their adopted birds:

Alexander H - African White-backed Vulture, Kira-Mathilda;  
and Cape Vulture, Bacchus Carlo

Andrea Schreier - Lappet-faced Vulture, Johnny

Annemieke de Wit - White-headed Vulture, Isabis

Clive Vardakis - Cape Vulture, Brizzle

Dawn Griffard - Cape Vulture, Bubba

Frank Schöppner - Lappet-faced Vulture, Fenja

Virbac - Cape Vulture, Cura

Hans and Ute Schute - Cape Vulture, Lucky

Jonathan Chaplin - Cape Vultures, Conan and Sherry

Katey Parson - Cape Vulture, Resilience

Kim Caldwell - Cape Vulture, Percy

Mariza Hamman - Cape Vulture, Isolde; White-headed  
Vulture, Orpheus; Lappet-faced Vultures, Abigaille and  
Ismaele; and Hooded Vulture Athanael

Mike and Amy Latimer - Lappet-faced Vulture, John  
Travulture

Nicole Schöppner - Cape Vultures, Elani and Chuma;  
African White-backed Vultures, Bahati and Vuyo

Rod Rankine - Cape Vulture, Phoenix

Sandy Murray - African White-backed Vulture, Alfred

Julie Edgley - Cape Vulture, Amala

Sjobbe Voet - Hooded Vulture, Mrs Nasty

Tracey Robinson - Cape Vulture, Delilah

Cristina Elena Hanga - Cape Vulture, Amahle Darar Vikrant

If you would like to support the stay  
of one of VulPro's resident vultures  
please email [admin@vulpro.com](mailto:admin@vulpro.com) to  
find out who is open for adoption



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[www.myschool.co.za](http://www.myschool.co.za)