

# Handling of Vultures

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## **Introduction:**

For the average biologist or bird ringer, handling a vulture may be quite an intimidating or even dangerous undertaking. Even ringers who are experienced and comfortable handling large eagles may find their hands full trying to process a vulture. There are also several important differences in the best practices involved in processing vultures.

The techniques detailed below were refined over years of experience working almost exclusively on vultures around southern Africa. But really, the best way to learn how to handle vultures is to work with more experienced/qualified persons, under whose supervision you can gain valuable experience.

Although vultures appear to be very intimidating based on their size and their 'so-called' aggressive nature, it is important to handle these vultures with care and understanding. Your primary concern when handling these threatened species should be to avoid injury and stress to the vulture, with the secondary goal being to minimise risk of injury to the handler and only thereafter collecting your data.

There is no need to use excessive force or to be rough. Vultures are sensitive and are more responsive to a measured calm approach than to forceful and aggressive handling methods.

Any vulture, when cornered, will try to run or fly away and may, as a last resort, even dominate the situation and attempt to scare you away by coming toward you. In their view they are simply trying to defend themselves from the danger that approaches them.

### **Equipment:**

Always wear suitable eye/face protection as well as gloves, a long sleeved shirt, trousers and closed shoes when working with vultures.

One of the best tables for processing vultures is a vulture crate. Alternatively, a sturdy folding table measuring 1.5 x 0.7m will also suffice. This size surface allows easy access from all sides for the team to work on the vulture.

Catching and handling vultures may result in serious and sometimes permanent injuries if carried out without the proper equipment, care and training.



*Figure 1: Equipment used when handling and processing a vulture.*

### **Catching vultures in an enclosure:**

Always approach vultures quietly, confidently and sympathetically, there is no need to tackle them.

The recommended number of people who should be involved in the capturing process should only be two. If there are too many people it may cause commotion as the vultures will run or fly away from the 'present danger' and possibly cause injury to themselves trying to escape.

Once you have identified which vulture you want to catch, approach slowly and quietly so as to avoid scaring it away, causing the selected vulture and its enclosure mates to fly or run away into the enclosure sides.

Once you have the chosen vulture within close reach, grab the neck first, just below the jaw bone from behind.



*Figure 2: Correct method of holding a vulture's head*

Use your thumb and forefinger around the back of the neck from behind the vulture's head, with fingers reaching around to be against but below the jaw bone with the pressure on the sides of the neck to avoid suffocating the vulture by constricting the oesophagus.

**Do not grab lower as the vulture can turn its head around and bite you. Do not grab higher as you will lose your grip and may cause injury to the head, especially the ears or eyes of the vulture.**

If you do have your hand around the front of the vulture's neck, remember the oesophagus is incredibly fragile and can easily be crushed if a vulture struggles and the handler grips too hard. You can be firm but not rough and not grip too tight as you do not want to hurt the vulture.

Once you have the head secured, quickly 'hug' the vulture with the upper part of your arms keeping the wings against the vulture's body. At the same time, with the arm that is not holding the head, you can take hold of the feet or simply hold the vulture with the feet and legs pressed downward and stretched out below your arm, with your arm covering the thighs.

Make sure that your arm is covering the vulture's legs just below the tarsus and not above, as the vulture will be able to lift its legs and feet high enough to grab your arm in order to try and free itself, often causing injury to you.

The vulture should be held upright in-front and in the centre of your body with both elbows 'hugging' the vulture's wings from the sides to keep the wings closed and under control, with the vulture's back against your chest. If the vulture struggles, simply 'hug' the vulture tighter and use your elbows to prevent the wings from escaping your grip.

One person should be capable of doing this alone, however, have a second person to back you up should a wing escape and to open and close enclosure gates. The wings are powerful so if they do break free, it is extremely difficult to keep holding the vulture and this will require a second person to help get the wings back to position. It is important to bring escaped or open wings into the appropriate position as soon as possible as extensive flapping may also lead to injuries to the vulture.



*Figure 3: Hugging the wings and legs of the vulture to avoid injury to both handler and vulture.*

Great care should be taken with the hand holding the head. The head should always be held far enough away from your face and other body parts, as well as other people in your proximity, they are extremely strong, and can lunge and bite in defence quite suddenly, even when appearing calm, which can result in serious injury to you or others.

### **Processing vultures on a table:**

When working with a vulture on a table, you can either place the vulture on its sternum or back depending on what you are doing but usually the vulture is placed on its back to start with.

For this type of vulture processing, you need 3-4 people to work on the vulture and **under no circumstances should the vulture be tied, taped or bound in any way**. This is unnecessary and can cause injury or worse to the vulture.

One person holds the head, another person holds both legs and the third person secures the wings against the vulture's body. In the case that you want to stretch out the vulture's wing the fourth person can do this and the third person will keep the other wing secure.

In our experience, it is not advisable to cover the vultures' eyes as they prefer to observe what is happening and they sometimes panic if their eyesight is taken away from them. However this varies from species to species and even some individuals may prefer their head covered.

Vultures thermo-regulate through the bare skin on their head and neck, therefore, if you do decide to cover their head, it is important to monitor the vulture's temperature and heart rate as it may over-heat, especially if stressed or on hot days.

**Never tape or tie the beak closed under any circumstances.** Vultures often regurgitate in defence or due to stress and they need to be able to rid themselves of this. If their beak is taped closed, they can choke on their own regurgitation.



*Figure 4: Correct processing of a vulture.  
Note the person handling the head is able to turn the birds head to the side during*

During regurgitation, the person holding the head should simply tilt the head to the side and allow the vulture to regurgitate freely. Never close the beak when it tries to regurgitate as this will lead to choking and the vulture can die.

Placement of the vulture on the table / crate should ideally be with the head over one side of the table so that the head can be tilted to one side and slightly below the level of the table, allowing regurgitation to land on the floor rather than on the workspace. It is a good idea to place a plastic sheet or tarpaulin on the ground below the area where the head extends over the crate or table and to remove any regurgitated material before another vulture is processed.



*Figure 5: Vulture placed on its sternum for processing*

If you need to turn the vulture around onto its sternum, you communicate this with the team members and you all turn the same way. Allow the person who is holding the head to dictate the direction of the turn.

The person holding the legs must make sure not to cross the legs around each other and keep the vulture comfortable at all times.

The person securing the wings will assist with the actual turning and lifting process but keeping the wings together on either side of the vulture.

Always make sure the vulture is as comfortable as possible. A vulture that struggles a lot is likely to be uncomfortable in some way and a change in position should be considered.

The person holding the head must make sure at all times to keep the head away from the person processing the vulture to avoid any bites, especially during the tagging process. He/she should also make sure that they don't let go of the head during the entire time until the vulture is released or somebody else takes over.

Now with the vulture on the table, with 3-4 people securing the vulture and with no bounding whatsoever, you can begin processing. The faster you work and process the vulture the better, but take care to avoid fast movements, especially near the vulture's head.

**Speed in processing comes from being well organized, with each team member knowing their job, not from physically moving fast or trying to be hasty.**

The vulture being handled will be exposed to stress and often there is a risk of heat exhaustion, this can lead to blood pressure loss, which will make it harder to draw blood, and will, if unchecked, eventually compromise the condition of the vulture.

**The maximum amount of time you can restrain a vulture is 45 minutes.**

However this time will reduce in high temperatures, high humidity and also depends on the individual vulture being processed.

Some vultures simply cannot be restrained for that long. Stress is usually exponential with time, and the longer the process takes, the higher the toll will be on the vulture, it is imperative that processing time is kept to a minimum. Exceeding the maximum time is unacceptable, and could result in permanent injury or death.

### **Releasing:**

When releasing a vulture, go down on your haunches and slowly allow the vulture to stand, then release your grip on his entire body and neck at the same time, stepping away and giving the vulture some space. Be careful not to drop or throw the vulture down, nor allow the vulture to fall before placing it down gently to the ground.

When releasing the vulture or placing it back inside the enclosure, do not flush the vulture once on the ground. Allow the vulture time to recover but monitor it for any unusual behaviour that could be a sign of heat exhaustion or injury from handling.

The vulture will decide for itself what to do next; it might fly off, run or drink water. Never force the vulture to move or fly after the handling, simply monitor and interfere only as a last resort if the vulture appears not to be fit for release.



*Figure 6: Releasing a vulture after processing*

Vultures, when given the opportunity, will time their take-off to coincide with a thermal or an increase in wind strength, making the take-off easier. Vultures in general prefer to take-off against the wind, and this should be considered when choosing the release site and direction.

Releasing a vulture from a crate should be done on ground level, and not from an elevated site such as the back of a vehicle. Pulling a vulture out by a wing or the tail is unacceptable, as is tilting a crate to encourage a vulture to exit a crate. Instead, giving the vulture time to leave the crate of its own accord is crucial.

### **Processing nestlings on a cliff:**

Working on cliffs should only be carried out by suitably trained and qualified persons, with proper equipment to ensure their safety. This will also ensure minimum disturbance to nests and vultures. The team should be comprised of only two people for handling and processing. Once again, no binding in any form of the vulture is needed as nestlings are fairly easy to handle. Make sure the vulture is restrained by holding his neck and keeping the vulture between your legs, using your legs to keep the wings together. Chicks are usually submissive and allow you to process them easily. The second person will help with the tagging, ringing, etc, of the vulture.



### Processing nestlings from a tree:

Tree work should only be carried out by suitably trained and experienced arborists and climbers with correct vulture handling training and experience acquired prior to handling nestlings in trees. A cherry picker or extension ladder can also be used should the location of the nest allow.

When using a cherry-picker, due consideration should be given to minimising damage to vegetation when approaching and working at the nest tree.

During the processing of a nestling from a tree, the first thing to do is to collect the bird inside a specifically designed bag. You can then carefully lower the bag with the nestling down and the team at the bottom will process it. Once complete, hoist the vulture back up to the nest in



the bag, carefully placing it back in the nest.

When using a cherry-picker, it is important to approach the nest with due care and to agree on appropriate hand-signals with the crane-operator before you ascend to a nest. The bucket should be maneuvered close enough to the nest to enable the handler to reach the chick and safely place it in a bag. Be careful not to damage the nest extensively or to push too hard against it as this may result in damage to the nest. Once the chick has been placed in a bag, it can be lifted and held gently.

The bucket of the cherry-picker can then be lowered to the ground while the chick is being held in the bag by the handler. Once the bucket reaches the ground, another person should be on hand to take the vulture from the handler in the bucket.

*Figure 8: Vulture nestling being hoisted from a tree in a specially designed carrier*

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**Under no circumstances should the person in the bucket attempt to climb out of it with the vulture still in their hands.**

The chick can then be processed on a table or crate on the ground before it is returned to the bag and hoisted back to the nest where it needs to be carefully taken out of the bag and returned to the nest by the handler.

**Do not pull the nestling backwards out of the bag as this will damage the blood feathers, which may result in a vulture that cannot fly properly due to poorly formed feathers as the chick matures after this type of handling.**

Instead, place the bag in the nest, open the bag to the point where the chick is completely exposed and then slowly manoeuvre the bag out from under the chick.

Give it space as soon as possible to avoid urging the nestling to try to get away and potentially jumping from the nest which may result in injury or death. The handler should already be set up and ready to descend below nest level before releasing the chick from the bag, resulting in minimum post release disturbance. This applies for both climbers or individuals making use of a cherry-picker.

### **Taking blood samples:**



*Figure 9: Drawing blood from a vulture*

Drawing blood from vultures should only be done after proper training, and practice in a controlled environment under veterinary supervision, and always with the proper ethics clearance and required permits.

Use the tarsus vein in the leg as this is the easiest and can be done with just two people. The tarsus vein is also preferred as it is less likely to blow or collapse as wing veins often do.

Make sure your needle is the correct diameter for the species, and shorter needles are easier than long ones (a 23 gauge 1' needle works well for most species).

Make sure you are slightly angling your needle before drawing blood. This is to prevent you from going directly through the vein as the veins are right against the surface.

One person will hold the vulture as per the above sections while the other person will hold the one leg and draw from the vein.

### **Weighing vultures:**

When weighing vultures of any age, there are three methods.

The first and easiest way is by using a stand-on scale where the handler will weigh him/herself with the vulture in hand and subtract his/her weight from the total. This is not 100% accurate but is easier to do, especially with adults.



*Figure 10: Handler being weighed while holding a vulture*

The other two options are to weigh the vulture on its own, first on a scale large enough to have the vulture lying on the scale and hopefully long enough to get an accurate weight, or by using a hanging scale which is the most accurate.

To use the hanging scale you will need to place the vulture into a sack that is large enough and strong enough to handle a vulture with its powerful feet and beak.

When placing the vulture inside the sack, place its feet and tail first so the head almost sticks out. This way, you are placing the vulture and still holding the neck/head which is the dangerous part. Once the vulture is secure inside the bag, let go of the head and completely close the bag, then place the loops of the sack into the hook of the hanging scale. A well designed bag, used correctly, should reduce injuries and minimise stress to the vulture and handlers.

When it's time to remove the vulture from the bag, the experienced handler will take the bag and find the head of the vulture. He/she will then grasp the head/neck through the fabric of the sack, then open the bag and take the head inside the sack with the free hand. The experienced handler will now ask somebody else to pull the sack down and as they do this, the handler's body and arms start covering and hugging the vulture to restrain it and making sure the feet are secure and are against its body preventing them from grabbing his/her arms or anything else.



*Figure 4: Vulture nestling being hoisted from a tree in a specially designed carrier bag.*

Remember to subtract the weight of the bag from the total weight.

**Do not tilt the bag upside down and allow the vulture to 'fall out', injuries will occur if the release is done this way.**

**Do not place the bag on the ground and expect the vulture to escape on its own without panicking.**

**Do not pull the vulture out by its tail feathers as that is harmful and hurtful to the vulture and unacceptable handling practice.**

**The handler needs to assist the vulture out the bag gently to avoid further stress and unnecessary injuries.**

Note, only experienced handlers will be able to do this without getting bitten. Weighing the vulture using the bag method should be the last step in the process before release. Poor bagging/handling may result in serious flight feather damage, rendering the vulture un-releasable. This method should only be used if absolutely necessary.

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