

Vulpro Media Relations

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CRITICAL POISONING INCIDENT IN LEPHALALE: VULPRO AND PARTNERS RESPOND TO SAVE SURVIVING VULTURES

LEPHALALE, SOUTH AFRICA – Vulpro, one of Africa’s leading vulture conservation organisations, responded to a severe vulture poisoning incident in the Lephalale area on 9 April 2026. The incident, linked to an attempt to target a predator, resulted in the confirmed deaths of over ten critically endangered White-backed Vultures. An additional three survivors are currently receiving intensive veterinary care.

The SOS Call and Rapid Response


The incident was first reported by a member of the public after vultures were observed displaying abnormal behaviour and falling from trees. Following receipt of photographs, video footage and a GPS location, the Vulpro team rapidly identified clear signs of acute poisoning.


Recognising the urgency of a toxicological emergency, Vulpro immediately deployed two response teams equipped with specialised poisoning intervention kits. At the same time, Prof Katja Koeppel and her team from the Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital commenced the five-hour journey to the site. A local emergency response network was activated in parallel to assist in securing the area.


The Scene and Legal Outcome

Upon arrival, responders were met with a devastating poisoning scene. A farmer, attempting to target a leopard, laced a carcass with poison and inadvertently attracted vultures to the site, resulting in a mass poisoning of these critically endangered birds.

During the response, evidence indicated that an attempt had been made to destroy the poisoned carcass and the remains of multiple vultures. Photographic evidence also suggests the presence of a Cape Vulture at the site, though its fate remains unconfirmed; it is feared this individual may have been among those lost in the attempt to burn the remains. Sakkie Louwrens was first on the scene and located and confronted the farmer. With the involvement of Jurg van Heerden from the Endangered Species Unit, Johan van Wyk of LEDET, and the Law Enforcement team, a formal case was opened. The farmer has since cooperated with the authorities and pleaded guilty to the charges related to the incident.

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The Survivors and Current Status

Four White-backed Vultures were initially recovered alive from the site. One died shortly after treatment was started. The three remaining vultures survived the initial crisis but remain in a critical condition.

The recovery of every individual is a vital win for a species on the brink. According to the IUCN Red List, the White-backed Vulture has a decreasing population of approximately 270,000 individuals, with a median decline rate of 81% over just three generations. In South Africa, the situation is even more precarious, with only about 7,350 mature individuals left. Every bird saved is essential to keeping the species from going extinct.

One has been transported to Onderstepoort due to its critical state, the other two have been transported to Vulpro's specialised facility in Hartbeespoort.

The Power of Collaboration

This incident demonstrates the importance of rapid reporting and coordinated response. A single call from a member of the public activated an emergency network and directly contributed to the survival of a handful of vultures and may have helped prevent similar events in the future.

In response, Vulpro and the African Pangolin Working Group (APWG) have established a collaborative partnership. The APWG team will assist Vulpro by acting as 'eyes and ears' in the region, strengthening early detection and response to poisoning incidents involving these threatened species.

Acknowledgements

Vulpro extends sincere thanks to all those involved in the response:

- **The member of the public** who made the initial report.
- **The dedicated Vulpro Team** for their swift mobilisation and ongoing rehabilitation efforts.
- **Kathryn (Leshiba Wilderness).**
- **Erinn Straughan and Gareth Thomas (Lapalala Wilderness).**
- **Sakkie Louwrens.**
- **Dr Raman Marais (Ellisras Veterinary Clinic)**
- **Jurg van Heerden** from the Endangered Species Unit.
- **Johan van Wyk** of LEDET, also representing Blouberg Nature Reserve and the Law Enforcement team.
- **Colonel Piet Meyer of the SAPS**, who coordinated the SAPS reaction.



- **Prof Katja Koeppel, Dr Michelle Otto, and the Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital team**, including:
 - **Vet Students:** Jean-luc du Plessis and Werner van der Walt.
 - **Vet Nurse Student:** Boitumelo Ngobeni.
- **The African Pangolin Working Group (APWG)**, particularly **Nicci Wright and Dr Kelsey Skinner**, for offering the Pangolarium facility for the ground team.
- **Glenn Phillips (CEO, Lapalala Wilderness Reserve) and his team** for going the extra mile; their pivotal role included coordinating security and officials, preparing the clinical environment at the Pangolarium, and providing essential logistical support throughout the night, and providing accommodation for the Vulpro and Onderstepoort teams.

This incident highlights the impact that swift reporting and coordinated action can have in conservation emergencies.

About Vulpro

Vulpro is a multidisciplinary non-profit organisation dedicated to the conservation of Africa's vultures. Its work includes rescue and rehabilitation, a captive breeding and reintroduction programme, ecological research and tracking, and community education initiatives aimed at reducing human–wildlife conflict and supporting long-term vulture population survival.

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