

"Ver in die ou Kalahari"

Peter and Marilyn Bridgeford, Mike and Ann Scott

The words of the well-known Afrikaans song, "Ver in die ou Kalahari" (Faraway in the old Kalahari), are appropriate if you live on the coast. It's a long drive through the Namib, past the village of Stampriet, along the *Prosopis* tree choked Auob River to the Kalahari Game Lodge, adjoining Mata Mata on the South African border.

On Sunday afternoon, 15 October, we (Ann and Mike Scott, Marilyn and I) left Walvis in the vulture-mobile, the Hi-lux bakkie used by Vultures Namibia. We spent the night at the Maltahöhe Hotel and arrived at the Kalahari Game Lodge the next afternoon. Here we were welcomed by Michelle and Verdus Smith and accommodated in a comfortable self-catering unit. The next morning Verdus led us across the dunes to the area where the White-backed Vultures were breeding. What a relief to find that the trees were not the giant Camel-thorns seen along the Auob River, many of them containing breeding vultures. All the nests investigated were in thornless *Albizia anthelmintica* (worm cure albizia or aru) trees, and we soon had the first chick ringed, tagged, photographed and back in the nest. Ringed nine chicks, but the smaller ones were not fitted with patagial tags. That evening we presented a slide show to the Smiths and some of their farm workers about the breeding biology and threats to vultures.



Clockwise from top: Dirk Kotze, Linus Brandt, Verdus Smith, all with White-backed Vultures and Fred Jacobs with a Lappet-faced Vulture.

The next morning we drove to the farm of Dirk and Janine Kotze. They run a hunting concession named Torgos Safaris and have a beautiful Lappet-faced Vulture as their logo. They had invited Ann and Mike to ring the vultures on the farm. The whole family and Linus Brandt, a farm worker, accompanied us while we ringed four White-backed Vultures. Last year a

breeding Lappet-face was seen, but although we looked for the nest, we only found an old nest. Many of the people living along the road to Mata Mata are waiting in keen anticipation for the border post to open, as they will benefit by the increased tourist traffic. We wish them well.

The next morning we left and spent the night in Mariental before driving to Bagatelle Kalahari Game Lodge. Never had scruffy vulture ringers being accommodated in such luxury. We had a lovely game drive across the grass-covered Kalahari dunes with Duane, Corné and Sebastian. The cherry on the nest was a Lappet-face chick, waiting to be ringed. We had to put that off as it started to rain. After a few drinks and a browse through Fred and Onie Jacobs' extensive library of wildlife books, we ate like the proverbial vultures. After dinner, we presented our slide show to Fred, his staff and several guests. A lively discussion followed. The next morning, Fred ringed and tagged his vulture.

It was with regret that we left Bagatelle for the long, hot road home. Many thanks to all the friendly Kalahari people who are protecting their vultures and made our visit possible. *Raptors Namibia* sponsored our transport costs, while Kalahari Game Lodge, Bagatelle and Nedbank assisted with accommodation costs and food.

Windhoek shoppers support vulture conservation

Peter Bridgeford

Customers at Academia Friendly Supermarket have supported vulture conservation during the past year by putting money into a collection box. Christine and Ben have four posters about vultures, mounted on the wall of their supermarket. A collection-box asking for donations yielded N\$750. Luckily, Ben did not present Vultures Namibia with the small change found in the box. **Thank you Academia Friendly Supermarket customers, and Ben and Christine.**



Was the chick's "hairstyle" the result of surprise or horror when Albert peered into the nest?

Vulture Ringers - a breed of their own

Holger Kolberg

From 18 September to 7 October 2006, I was privileged to accompany some of Namibia's top vulture ringers on a ringing mission. Every year in September and October this group of dedicated individuals sets out to ring as many vulture chicks as possible in an effort to learn more about the ecology and behaviour of these fascinating birds. This year, Andre Botha from the Birds of Prey Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust was coming to show us how to fit the chicks with patagial tags. These are plastic tags very similar to the ear tags used on cattle and they are fitted to the wing of the bird. Extensive tests on birds in South Africa showed that there are no apparent ill effects to the birds, but that re-sightings increased dramatically.

On the first leg of the trip, Peter Bridgeford and I visited Farms Okanjesu and Okatjosenjiva near Steinhausen. In just over two days we managed to ring twenty White-backed chicks, ten on each farm. Unfortunately Peter had to be back in Windhoek by Thursday so we returned, but buoyed by our success, I visited farm Frauenstein near Windhoek on Friday, accompanied by Albert Voigts von Schütz. We found lots of vultures, but here they nest in very high *Acacia karroo* trees and our ladder was way too short for all but one of the nests. On Saturday I accompanied Dirk Heinrich to Farm Erdwolf near Seeis. Here we managed to ring another eight White-backed chicks.

The second week started off disappointingly when I visited Farm Gras. We saw lots of vultures and found about 15 nests but all the nests were empty. On Thursday I visited Farm Springbokvley and yet again was frustrated by the high trees. Nevertheless, we managed to ring six chicks, one of them being a Lappet-faced Vulture.

On Sunday I travelled to Ganab to join Peter and others in the Namib. Andre joined us there to show us how to fit the wing tags. Over the next six days we managed to ring/tag 22 Lappet-faced Vulture chicks. An interesting phenomenon here was the range in size of chicks that we found - from newly hatched to almost ready to fledge. There were also several birds still incubating eggs. A return visit in December is on the cards...

For me, this was the first time ever that I had time to accompany the vulture ringers and I learnt several valuable lessons. If you have a weak stomach and can't handle the gut-wrenching smell of half-digested, regurgitated carrion, then this is not for you. If you have a fear of heights and can't handle scaling a ladder that is supported by spindly little twigs, then this is not for you. If you are psychologically vulnerable and cannot handle the chirps hurled at you by your fellow ringers while you are balancing on the last rung of the ladder 12m above the ground, then this is not for you.

All in all I came to the conclusion that vulture ringers are a special breed indeed!



The precarious balancing act, performed by Peter and Holger

Academia Friendly Supermarket to the rescue

Peter Bridgeford

Vultures Namibia would like to thank Christine and Ben Slabbert of Academia Friendly Supermarket in Academia, Windhoek, for their unstinting support. Not only has Ben been appointed chief ladder minder, he organised the vital food supplies to a bunch of vulture-like ringers. Thank you Christine for putting up with the rabble.

Sponsorship from Academia Friendly Supermarket also enabled the vulture-mobile to get a set of new tyres. As Ben said, "Don't drive over a dubbeltjie with those tyres, you are likely to get a puncture".

Thank you, although that seems so inadequate.



African-hawk Eagle chick from nest top right in photo.

Daring ringer risks life and limb Part 2

Theo Klatter

I thought it appropriate to send you the follow-up to the saga of a certain fast learner. After Herr Heinrich and Mr Kolberg had been risking their lives and limbs to ring a Fish Eagle chick, there was a sequel.

A couple of weekends ago Herr Heinrich and I were carrying on with the essential repairs of the hornbill nest boxes in the Daan Viljoen Game Park study area. Once again, a lot of cursing was done because of the ever-present baboons. Close on 60% of the boxes were damaged by baboons, many of them irreparably. New inhabitants of the nest boxes were thousands of bees. Some so full that they were accumulating on the outside of the box. At least 90% of the boxes were occupied. This phenomenon can be attributed to the good rains in the first half of 2006. Trees in full blossom are abundant, taking care of the bees' need for nectar.

Returning to Herr Heinrich. We located a tree with a larger nest on our way home. Said Sir ascended the opposite hill, armed with binoculars. From atop came the signal. The nest was occupied and there was no going home yet! Since the rather corpulent Sir H. had learned very quickly about the climbing of high trees, he obviously made it quite clear that the said branches at 16m height were for yours truly's skinny figure. Since I had twice done my part of the reproductive cycle, I obviously did not hold a good hand of cards. (Although I might add, Sir H had better hurry up in that respect, as some time or other, the learner's licence should be converted into a driver's licence). Without further ado, out came the 12m ladder that was soon strategically placed. Armed with a rope, bag and much adrenaline, the nest at 16m was reached with much lovemaking to the trunk of a good ol' camel-thorn. This time the visage was not such a hairy encounter and the African Hawk-Eagle chick was quite amused by the up and down for the ringing in a specially "made by Ulla" bag on a rope.

By sunset, all had been replaced: chick; ladder and tools. I can tell you, a bottle of Coca-Cola never tasted better. Moreover, Sir Heinrich was as pleased as ever that he had no punctures or lost limbs.

I reckon he can proudly say he still has his nine lives.

WANTED

Marked Vultures



Colour ring



Wing tag

Vultures are an endangered species in Namibia and as part of on-going research into the biology and ecology of vultures, several vultures have been fitted with coloured rings and wing-tags. All rings and tags have a unique number written on them. If you should see one of the marked birds please report it to the address below giving the number on the ring/tag, the date and the place where you saw it (GPS position will be good!). Your observation will contribute significantly to the knowledge on vulture ecology and movements.

Here's your chance to contribute to vulture conservation!!

Send your observations to:
Holger Kolberg
holgerk@mweb.com.na
tel. +264-61-2842554
Private bag 13306
Windhoek

N.B
WE ASK EVERYBODY TO PLEASE REPORT
ALL SIGHTINGS OF TAGGED VULTURES
TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS

MET gives green light to vulture tagging

Peter Bridgeford

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Dr. Malan Lindeque, has given permission to use patagial tags on vultures in Etosha National Park and Namib-Naukluft Park.

The yellow patagial tag is very visible on the wing of a tagged bird. It is hoped that this new marking method will produce more sightings from vulture researchers, birders and the public. Trials in South Africa have shown very positive results, as previously reported in the *Raptors Namibia* newsletter.

Holger Kolberg of MET has made a poster informing the public of the marking project and it will be distributed to the above and other conservation areas. Conservancies, game farms, lodges, guest houses and other interested parties will be supplied with the posters. There has been a report and a photo of the tags in the *Republikein* of 28 September 2006. Other newspapers and relevant publications will also be targeted.

If you would like the poster for your farm, lodge or guest house, please contact Holger or *Raptors Namibia* for a copy.

News Flashes

- ❖ I have put the road count statistics (distance, number of species, number of birds, number of counters) since the project was relaunched on the roadcounts page of the *Raptors Namibia* website.
Alice Jarvis
- ❖ After the mind-blowing success of last week, this week was somewhat of a let-down. I visited Farm Gras on Tuesday and found lots of vultures and plenty of nests but the nests were all empty (I don't know why). Yesterday I went to Farm Springbokvley and managed to get six chicks, five Af WBVs and one LfV (only my second one ☺). This is another farm where the birds nest in @#**% high Acacia karroo trees and the ladder was just too short (it was like a little kid in the sweet shop where all the nice sweets are on the top shelf that you cannot reach ☺). On a 25km stretch of river there are probably about 30 plus nests and we really need to make a plan here. Anybody know of a cherry-picker going for free?
Vögli Heil! Holger
- ❖ We wish to thank Mr Ingo Goethje from I & H Motor Repairs for converting/welding the pliers used to open the new plastic rings.
Vultures Namibia

Replies to Christian Boix re: Gabar Goshawk's cere colour

I would think that the dark-morph Gabar in your photo is a juvenile, as they have yellow ceres for a while. See the photo in Allen on page 96 that shows a dark Gabar with a yellow cere. I hope that this is helpful.
Bill Clark

Unfortunately I cannot see the colour of the legs! I would suggest this bird is an aberrant form (like yellow breasted "Crimson" shrikes and Yellow headed "Black-collared" Barbets). I would recommend a chat with a good genetic fundy to find out why red often becomes yellow in aberrant birds. I wouldn't mind knowing about this myself (the reasons that is) I have caught about four Melanistic Gabars and all have red ceres and legs. The many others I have observed through the years have never had yellow ceres like the picture depicts.
Steve Braine

I showed your photo to Simon Thomsett and to some Tanzanian birders. Simon and Mark Anderson said that some young Gabars do show a distinct yellowish cere (not like the one in your photo but close). Simon also said that he had seen colour flushing in these birds and it is possible that a young bird next to an adult (its parent?) had flushed to a deeper yellow.

I think Simon also said that in captivity some birds that damage their ceres also go through a colour change but this does not apply in this case...

So there it is - take it or leave it!! I haven't seen this but there are more in-tune folks out there.
Rob Simmons

Where have all the young vultures gone?

With apologies to the composer of the sixties protest song: "Where have all the young men gone, gone to graveyards everyone!"

Peter, Marilyn, Mike, Ann and Marc

Luckily, not all the vultures have gone. We hope those missing ones from Sossusvlei have moved to less disturbed areas. However, if they have moved to the Ganab area, I have bad news for them. Beware! The mining prospectors are coming.

Another October has come and gone. This year, a number of new vulture enthusiasts have entered the scene and climbed the ladder to be puked on, bitten and clawed. Welcome! On Sunday, 1 October, we all met at the Ganab campsite in the Namib-Naukluft Park. Andre Botha, manager of Birds of Prey Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, came to Namibia to instruct the ringers on fitting patagial tags. Sunday and Monday night, it was very cold, but we all survived with hot tea/coffee and generous helpings of 'medicine' supplied by Ben. Andre spent the two days training ten Namibians and everyone had a chance to fit the patagial tags. The Ganab area is covered in grass and there are large herds of gemsbok, springbok and mountain zebra. We saw many warthogs and hundreds of ostriches. After Andre left, we continued ringing. Marc had ample opportunity to perform his "We got a bird" routine.

On Thursday, the group broke up and seven of us moved south to NamibRand and enjoyed the comfort of the Keerweder guesthouse and our first hot shower. The next day, accompanied by the NRNR staff, we ringed three Lappet-faced chicks on the Reserve. That afternoon we headed to Namibwater in the NNP and set up camp. Friends and sponsors from Swart, Grant and Angula (formerly KPMG) joined us there.

The first nest inspected the next morning contained a Secretary Bird on three eggs. The first vulture enabled us to use the special ladder clamp mounted on the railings of the vehicle to give us an extra two metres of height. After lunch, Holger returned to the bosom of his loved one (literally or figuratively?) in Windhoek. Ben and Christine's annual leave was at an end and they also departed. After lunch, we left Gerhard and company and raced to the capital of the south, Solitaire, to give a slide presentation on vultures to the members of the Solitaire Farmers Union. Then after a quick beer, we returned to our campsite and a welcome meal prepared by our friends. Simone Swarts from Solitaire, another keen vultureophile, joined us.

On Sunday, we travelled to Escourt but only found two birds that were still on eggs. The nests in the Tsondeb River did not produce any chicks. For the first time in 14 years of ringing, no Lappet-faced Vulture chicks were found in this previously vulture-rich area (21 ringed in 1991). Where have all the young birds gone? On Monday, Gerhard, Willem, Willie and Robert took leave of us and returned to slave away in Windhoek. Our efforts were rewarded when we scored three out of four on the Tsondeb Plains. That afternoon the tired crew arrived at Solitaire Guest Farm and stayed in the well-appointed campsite. The mother of all east winds finished the ringing session off that night. I don't think any of us campers got much sleep. The

next afternoon the vulture-mobile arrived back in Walvis after 10 days in the field.

Statistics: Ringed 25 chicks and found three too small to ring, plus 13 eggs, with eight birds still incubating.

Comments: In the past 15 years, we have generally found that most of the chicks are big enough to ring during October. We also found the occasional egg, but these were often abandoned and addled. Thirteen eggs, with eight still being brooded, is something else. Are environmental factors responsible for the birds still incubating this late in the season? Namibia had excellent rains throughout the country in 2006. In 1997, 1998, 2000 we found three eggs each year and four in 2003.

We would like to thank everybody who helped with the ringing and made it an enjoyable experience. Without the support of our sponsors, we could not have done it. Nedbank provided the fuel for the vulture-mobile. Academia Friendly Supermarket donated funds for other expenses and organised the food and 'medicinal' whisky and last but not least SGA. The EWT sent Andre Botha to train the Namibian ringers.



Ringing in the dunes on NamibRand Nature Reserve



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Raptors Namibia co-ordinators

Ann & Mike Scott
Swakopmund
Tel. / fax (064) 40 4866
Cell 081 284 5130
E-mail ecoserve@iway.na

Marilyn & Peter Bridgeford
Walvis Bay
Tel. (064) 22 0443
Cell 081 260 7375
E-mail pmbridge@iway.na

Raptor road counts and road count queries:

P.O. Box 90645
Klein Windhoek
Windhoek
E-mail raptors@mweb.com.na

