This issue of *Lanioturdus* is devoted to the raptor workshop which was held at Waterberg Plateau Park from 18-19 February 2005. The workshop was organized by the Namibian Nature Foundation and was open to all who were interested in raptors.

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Welcome and introduction

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Namibia's vultures, other diurnal raptors and owls are increasingly under threat from factors such as disturbance, particularly at breeding sites; the misuse of poisons and pesticides; electrocution and collisions with overhead lines; habitat degradation; persecution; illegal harvesting; and drowning in reservoirs.

Much work has been done on raptors in Namibia in the past. People have come and gone, however, resulting in a lull in activity which is now picking up again. By collaborating in a close-knit group rather than in isolation we will be able to achieve more, encouraging one another and pooling our resources in effective, coordinated synergies. There is also a need for new actions, which will be incorporated into existing programmes/initiatives where possible, with a focus on increasing public involvement.

This is why the time is right for our workshop on birds of prey at Waterberg Plateau Park on 18-19 February 2005. We are privileged to welcome a healthy mix of "old-time" raptor enthusiasts here who bring years of experience to the table, and a new cohort of young conservationists who will carry the flag into the future. One of our main outcomes will be to develop an action plan for these threatened birds (see the plan below).

Status of vultures in Nambia

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Introduction

Vulture research in Namibia started in the 1960's in the Namib Desert Park, now part of the Namib-Naukluft Park (NNP). Sauer (1973), Jensen (unpublished reports), Clinning (1978) and Brown (1985, 1986) all worked on vultures in the same area over the years. The present project of ringing Lappet-faced Vultures

in the NNP, started in 1991 (Bridgeford 2003). A project to ring White-backed Vultures on commercial farms east of Windhoek commenced in 2003. In Etosha National Park (ENP), ringing and monitoring of White-backed, Lappet-faced and White-headed Vultures has been going on for several years. Research on the Cape Vultures in Waterberg area by REST will be discussed elsewhere.

Species Accounts

LAPPET-FACED VULTURE *Torgos tracheliotos*
Lappet-faced Vultures are found over most of Namibia, but no reliable figures are available on the number of breeding pairs or individuals in the country. The only reliable figures are for breeding birds in the NNP, 78 pairs, (Simmons & Brown 2005 in prep.) in a total population in Namibia of approximately 500 pairs (Mundy et al.1992), who also estimates the African population at 8,000 individuals.

WHITE-BACKED VULTURE *Gyps africanus*
The most common vulture in Namibia, even found in small numbers in the Namib, although they do not breed there as a rule. However, there is one record of a breeding bird in the Tsondab area of the NNP (Vinjevold 1987). There are no reliable figures on the population size, but Simmons & Bridgeford (1997) state that the population is secure for the present. Simmons & Brown (in press) state that they estimate between 7,800 and 15,000 individual birds, but closer to 10,000 in Namibia. However, Anderson (2000) and Anderson (in press) give a figure of 9,500 birds for the whole of southern Africa.

CAPE VULTURE *Gyps coprotheres*
This endemic to southern Africa has not fared well in Namibia. It is Critically Endangered in Namibia, with only 11 adults, two immatures, one juvenile and one breeding pair left according to Simmons & Brown (in press). In 1969, Sauer (1973) recorded 25 birds in the Namib Desert Park. Brown (1985) estimated that there were 300 birds in the country in 1970. In 1994, the total southern African population was 12,000 birds (Piper 1994), but declined to about 8,000 mature individuals in 2000 (Anderson 2000).

WHITE-HEADED VULTURE *Trigonoceps occipitalis*
This species occurs in the ENP, Waterberg Plateau Park, Mahango and Kaudom Game Reserves and Caprivi (Mundy 1997). It breeds in the ENP, where one chick has been ringed annually since 1999, except in 2001. The maximum of two breeding pairs were found in 2002. Only single birds were seen at carcasses (W. Versfeld, pers. comm.). Versfeld states that there may be more breeding birds, but finding the nests is not easy and some areas are so dense and thorny, that a vehicle cannot get there. It is seen seasonally, during the rainy months, in Kaudom, Mahango and Waterberg (M. Paxton, pers. comm.). Paxton has found breeding birds in the east, in Bushmanland. Simmons and Bridgeford (1997) had no population estimates. In 2005 the estimate is less than 1,000 birds (Simmons & Brown in press).

HOODED VULTURE *Necrosyrtes monachus*
Not much is known about this species in Namibia. It occurs in the Caprivi, Bushmanland and ENP (Simmons & Bridgeford 1997). One of the reasons it is seldom reported may be because it is small and easily overlooked at carcasses (Mundy 1997). It has been seen and photographed in Waterberg (M. Paxton pers. comm.), although it is not shown to occur there in the Atlas of southern African Birds. A single bird was seen in November 2003 at the vulture restaurant of the Rare and Endangered Species Trust on the farm Uitsig, just north of the Waterberg. Paxton reports that single birds are usually seen in the rainy season in Mahango and Kaudom Game Reserves. It is estimated that there are a maximum of 500 birds in Namibia (Simmons & Brown in press). There are no known breeding records for this species in Namibia.

EGYPTIAN VULTURE *Neophron percnopterus*
In the opinion of Simmons (Simmons & Bridgeford 1997), this rare vulture is not extinct in Namibia. In the past 24 years, there have been 20-recorded sightings, the majority in ENP. Although there are no new sightings on record, Versfeld (pers. comm.) states that tourists have reported seeing Egyptian Vultures in ENP, but no dates are available. They are now considered extinct as a breeding species, with possibly 1 to 5 individuals in the country (Simmons & Brown in press).

PALMNUT VULTURE *Gypohierax angolensis*
Simmons & Bridgeford (1997) classed it as a vagrant. In Angola, south of Luanda on the coast, Steve Braine (pers. comm.), reports that Palmnut Vultures are common and that they were breeding there in 2003 in large numbers. This vagrant to Namibia has been reported in ENP (Mundy & Allan 1997) and one record from the Namib, at 25°S on NamibRand Nature Reserve in May 2000 (Bridgeford & Harley 2000). It is not in the Red Data Book for Namibia (Simmons & Brown in press) as it is considered a vagrant.

Mortalities
Poisoning remains the biggest killer of vultures in the country (Simmons 1995, Simmons & Bridgeford 1997, Brown 2002). Mortalities from 1995 to August 2000 have been published (Bridgeford 2001). Since then, 36 known cases of poisoning have been recorded, usually as a result of poison put out for problem animals such as lions Panthera leo, spotted hyaena Crocuta crocuta and Black-backed jackals Canis mesomelas (Bridgeford 2002).

In 2001, six Lappet-faced and 18 White-backed Vultures were poisoned on a farm bordering the ENP. In Karasburg, 14 White-backed Vultures drowned in a reservoir and another in the ENP.

In the Maltahöhe district, four Lappet-faced Vultures were poisoned in 2002.

In 2003, six White-backed Vultures and two Lappet-faced Vultures were poisoned on the eastern boundary of the ENP. Another one Lappet-faced Vulture was poisoned in the Maltahöhe area and one drowned in a reservoir.

In 2004, no poisonings were recorded but one White-backed and one Lappet-faced Vulture drowned.

Current research and conservation initiatives
To date, 423 Lappet-faced Vulture chicks have been ringed in the N-NP and another four on NamibRand Nature Reserve. Of the 27 recoveries/resightings, 22 were of dead birds, four resightings at a vulture restaurant and one caught in a gin trap and released, unharmed according to the farmer.

The White-backed Vulture ringing project started in 2003. This is a co-operative project between the VSG and farm owners, through conservancies and farmers' unions. The farmers know exactly where the vultures breed on their properties and they, their families and farm workers help with the ringing process and manhandling the long extension ladder. In this way, they are all involved in the project. For most of them, it is the first contact with a live vulture and the feedback is very positive. Each farmer involved received an attractive certificate from the VSG Namibia. The response has been phenomenal and more information has been received from other farmers who want to be involved. In the two seasons of the project, 65 chicks were ringed. In addition, in 2004, two Lappet-faced Vulture chicks were ringed in the Windhoek district.

In Etosha, Wilferd Versfeld and Tim Osborne have ringed 171 White-backed and 92 Lappet-faced Vulture chicks since 1998. In addition, four White-headed vulture chicks were also ringed. (W. Versfeld pers comm).

The collection of data on vulture mortalities continues, but as always, the information received, is only the tip of the iceberg.

Proposed research and conservation initiatives
We should monitor power-lines, as one of the big question marks that remains is the effect of power lines on Namibian vulture populations. There is very little information on this perceived problem and it is well known, that it is a big killer of vultures in South Africa (van Rooyen 2000) and many of the conditions in Namibia are similar.

Poison is still the biggest killer in Namibia and extension work among the farmers remains a priority.

Continue our ringing of Lappet-faced Vultures in the NNP.

Expand the White-backed Vulture ringing project to cover a larger area and use two ringing teams if possible.

Do extension work south of Keetmanshoop through the various Farmers' Unions.

We should monitor ringed birds at waterholes in the Ganab vicinity of the NNP.

Publicity

The vultures and their plight have received good coverage in the English, German and Afrikaans newspapers during the past three years. In 2003, in conjunction with Nedbank, the press was taken for a day's outing to ring Lappet-faced Vulture chicks. It was very successful and generated a lot of publicity.

The White-backed Vulture project was well publicised by Dirk Heinrich, who was one of the organisers and ringers.

There have been articles on vulture conservation and the activities of the VSG in AgriForum, the official magazine of the Namibia Agricultural Union.

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Taxonomy of African raptors with emphasis on Namibian species

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The taxonomy of African raptors has been under review since the advent of advanced techniques using mitochondrial cytochrome b sequences to determine the relationships of various raptors. The mitochondrial cytochrome b is obtained by drawing a small sample of blood from the bird and by using comparative techniques it is possible to test the molecular phylogeny when various related raptors diverged from parent stock.

The Falconiformes order is based on phylogenetic characters like hooked bill, binocular vision, and raptorial talons (claws). They are diurnal and all but one (Palmnut Vulture) are carnivorous. There are 290 species and 93 are found in Africa. The order is often placed between Ciconiiformes (storks) and Anserformes (ducks) because of similar characters. Voous (1973), prior to any DNA research, had suggested that the order is actually three with new world vultures in one, hawks, eagles, old world vultures and secretarybird in another and falcons and caracaras in a third. Subsequent studies have shown that the new world vultures are indeed closely related to the storks and resemble old world vultures due to convergent evolution. Falcons are also closer to owls than the rest of the raptors.