RED ALERT Focus on South Africa's threatened birds

Cape Vulture

The Cape Vulture (or Cape Griffon) *Gyps coprotheres* may be the most comprehensively studied bird in South Africa – it is certainly one of the most threatened. Because the species is all but restricted to South Africa (with only a couple of small, peripheral cross-border breeding colonies), a concerted research effort was launched by conservationists in the early 1980s to determine the real extent and causes of what was then perceived to be its precipitous decline. Since then, numerous surveys and extensive awareness campaigns have been embarked upon, and it has been clearly established and documented that there has been a marked reduction in both the number and the distribution of the species over the past 100 years.

In the interim, the Cape Vulture has continued its slide towards extinction. This is not to say that all the hard conservation work done over three decades to save the species has been in vain: the current situation would undoubtedly have been far worse had this work not been done. Many contributing factors have been identified, and the net result of mitigation efforts must surely have helped stem the receding tide. But we have yet to devise an effective conservation strategy for this vulture and time is running out to do so with any meaningful outcome.

The Cape Vulture is a cliff-dwelling bird and typically occurs in breeding colonies that range in size from tens to thousands of birds on large, vertical rock faces. A smaller segment of the population is found on less crowded satellite roosts, where non-breeders and travelling birds reside or overnight but don't actually breed. From these central places, colony members forage over hundreds of kilometres in search of large animal carcasses on which to scavenge. Because this vulture is a large, heavy bird, to stay aloft during these long-distance forays it probably relies substantially on the updraughts created by wind passing over areas of high relief. This is in contrast to the relatively lighter White-backed Vulture *G. africanus*, which is better able to soar on pockets of rising air, or thermals, over flat ground.

While many colonies were once present on cliffs in lower-lying river gorges and on isolated inselbergs in the Karoo, most of these birds have now disappeared and the latter-day Cape Vulture is essentially a montane species. The current population is contained in a handful of large colonies on towering cliffs of the Mpumalanga and Limpopo escarpment, and a scattering of smaller sites in the Lesotho Highlands and the mountains and gorges of the Eastern Cape. A couple of outlying colonies occur as far north as southern Botswana and as far south as the south-western Cape. Former colonies in Nambia and Zimbabwe have now been reduced to only small numbers of non-breeding birds.

The greatest negative impact on the ancestral Cape Vulture population has probably been the replacement of free-ranging herds of wild ungulates by the structured commercial ranching of domestic stock. This must have drastically reduced the availability of food for all the region's scavenging birds, and probably still does. The spread of human development has also brought these birds into increasing contact with a host of more direct threats, such as poisoning by chemicals to control farm pests or treat ailing livestock, persecution by traditional medicine hunters, and electrocution on power installations. All of these threats are exacerbated by the gregarious nature of *Gyps* vultures, which often results in multiple casualties from single exposures.

ANDREW JENKINS

WARWICK TARBOTON (2)

Above *Cape Vultures in typical montane habitat.*

Opposite, below *Cape Vultures have a love/hate relationship with electricity infrastructure. Pylons and poles make convenient roosting sites, but the risk of collision or electrocution is significant. Here, bird guards have been fitted to a high-voltage structure to prevent vultures from fouling the conductors suspended below.*

CHRIS VAN ROOYEN

What can be done?

The Cape Vulture remains a high priority for conservation authorities in southern Africa. The Vulture Study Group was the founding component of the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and is now contained within the EWT's Birds of Prey Working Group, which oversees the activities of the Cape Griffon Task Force. This latest initiative to save the Cape Vulture, which is sponsored by Sasol and managed by Kerri Wolter, aims to develop customised, locally relevant management plans for each of the main breeding colonies, identifying and addressing threats at colony level rather than trying to impose a generic cure-all as has been done in the past. In principle, if we can decrease mortality and improve breeding success at each of these critical sites, we can stabilise the whole population.

If you would like to know more about the Cape Vulture or are able to contribute in some way to the valuable work of the Cape Griffon Task Force (for example, by reporting mortality incidents, sightings of marked birds or the location of roosting or breeding cliffs, or if you wish to open a vulture feeding site or can provide practical assistance in the field), please contact Kerri on *kerri.wolter@gmail.com* or André Botha, manager of the Birds of Prey Working Group, on *andreb@ewt.org.za*