

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS, NOTES AND REPORTS

Cape Vulture usurps Bearded Vulture nest

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Competition for nests has been described in several cliff-nesting raptor species (Fernández and Donazar 1991, Newton 1998, Margalida and García 1999). This competition usually occurs where suitable nest sites are limited, if there is a population increase of the usurping species or if both the usurper and usurped have similar ecological requirements (Newton 1998). The usurper's breeding success is increased by it using an established and suitable site (Collias and Collias 1984) whereas the breeding success of the usurped pair is lowered by it having to move to another site, or build another nest, probably in a less favourable habitat (Newton 1998). Here we describe the first known case of a Bearded Vulture

Gypaetus barbatus nest usurpation by a Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres* pair in southern Africa.

During the 2011 vulture breeding season, a Cape Vulture pair was observed taking over the nest of a Bearded Vulture pair. The nest site, located at Thaba-Phatsoa (Black Mountain) in the Mokhotlong District of Lesotho, is well known to tourists, bird tour operators and conservation agencies.

The nest site is within a Bearded Vulture breeding territory that has been occupied for at least the past 30 years. Although Bearded Vultures are known to use a number of alternate nest sites within their territory (Brown 1990), the site that was taken over had been used annually for at least the past decade. The pair had

also successfully fledged a chick annually during this time period apart from the 2007 breeding season where a breeding failure was recorded (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife *unpublished data*).

On the 19th of September 2011, a Cape Vulture chick was seen on the original Bearded Vulture nest. A second Cape Vulture pair was recorded breeding in an adjacent pothole. An adult Bearded Vulture was observed flying past the original nest site and landing approximately 200 m away. During a follow-up visit on the 3rd of December 2011, the two Cape Vulture pairs were still occupying the original Bearded Vulture breeding territory. The Bearded Vulture, however, had relocated to the opposite side of the valley where it was seen nesting in a large, deep pothole. A fully grown chick was observed walking towards the edge of the pothole.

Nest site surveys during the 2012 breeding season confirmed that the Cape Vultures were still occupying the original Bearded Vulture nest site. Although the new Bearded Vulture nest site was monitored briefly on a number of visits during June 2012, September 2012 and January 2013, breeding was not confirmed.

It appeared that the Bearded Vulture had relinquished its

traditional nest site to the Cape Vulture and had found another suitable alternate site. The usurpation did not affect breeding success in the year of the take-over. A similar incident was observed during the 2012 breeding season at Gray's Pass in the northern Drakensberg, where a number of Cape Vultures were observed nesting on a cliff originally only used by a Bearded Vulture pair. Although the Bearded Vultures have bred successfully in this territory during 2000-2012, no activity was recorded during 2011 and 2012.

In the Spanish Pyrenees, Margalida and García (1999) noted that 40% of Bearded Vulture nests were usurped by other species, with the Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* accounting for 81% of these. None of the usurped nests were reused by Bearded Vultures during their 12 year study period. Margalida, Canut & García (2003) also recorded the first conspecific usurpation of a neighbouring pair's nest, while Margalida & García (2011) described three cases of intraspecific nest usurpation. Previously recorded take-overs by other species have been attributed to an increase in density of these species and interspecific (Margalida & García 1999) and intraspecific (Margalida & García 2011) competition for nest sites We

do not believe this to be the case at the two sites reported on above, since both Cape and Bearded Vulture numbers are declining and nest sites are not a limiting factor (Krüger *et al.* 2013).

An aerial survey during the 2013 breeding season recorded the Bearded Vultures back in their original

territory at Thaba-Phatsoa. Therefore unlike Margalida and García's (1999) findings, the pair in Lesotho re-used their original nest. There was no sign of the Cape Vulture pair during the survey. Both the original Bearded Vulture nest sites will continue to be monitored for any changes in occupancy.

References

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