

BOOK REVIEWS

P.J. Mundy

HUGHES, N. (2015). *The New World vultures*. Uniformbooks, Axminster (England). 25pp. ISBN 978-1-910010-31-0. Price: £10.

This is a small A5-sized booklet that holds seven paintings of the birds, one for each species of the seven cathartids. The paintings were originally exhibited at the Museum of Natural History, Oxford University, in mid-2015. The author then wrote this booklet around the paintings, one page of taxonomy at the front, eight pages of general notes on the vultures, four pages on the individual species, and finally two pages on “Threats and Hopes”. Altogether it’s a rather delightful and handy compilation, such that I look forward to the author doing something similar on the (16 species of) Old World vultures.

The author has done his homework well on these birds, and I could hardly fault him. He quotes from Buffon (18th century) and Paul G eroudet (mis-spelled G eraudet, 20th century) as to their “foolish and misguided insults” about vultures, whereas for himself he is respectful of them. However I can’t believe that a Lesser Yellow-headed can see a dead “small rodent” from 3000 metres above; the height of a R uppell’s Griffon (here vulture) at 11 300 metres will always be enigmatic; the bills do not have “serrations” along their edges, but perhaps the tongues do; and the suggestion that “perhaps even ebola [virus]” can be destroyed is surely misguided! Aside from these, the texts are written in a lively manner. I was pleased to see that the map of the distribution of the California Condor has three ‘spots’ on it.

All the paintings of the birds place them in a habitat; thus the Andean Condor stands on a rock with snow-capped peaks behind, the Greater Yellow-headed perches on a large tree over-looking forest and river. This is to good effect, though I believe that the King Vulture is wrongly placed. There are several points of detail that are wrong in the paintings (e.g. eye

colour in the Black Vulture), but in particular the heads of the condors are too small, and outspread wings are too narrow. Thus the flying Greater Yellow-headed looks more like an albatross, and the outstretched Lesser looks more like *Archaeopteryx*! Appreciation or otherwise of an artist is of course a matter of opinion, and overall I don't wish to decry what is a laudable and I think successful initiative. (www.nigelhughes.com)

SIMMONS, R.E., BROWN, C.J. & KEMPER, J. (2015). *Birds to watch in Namibia. Red, rare and endemic species*. Ministry of Environment and Tourism, and Namibia Nature Foundation, Windhoek. 320pp. ISBN 978-9-9945-0082-6.

Six species of vulture occur in Namibia, and all are included among the "Red data species" in chapter 2. Thus the Egyptian Vulture is considered "extinct as [a] breeding species" (one to five individuals), Cape [Griffon] is critically endangered (fewer than 20), Hooded and White-backed Vultures are endangered (though the former has a population estimate of "fewer than 50 birds" and the latter is estimated at "about 10 000 birds"), and Lappet-faced (500 pairs) and White-headed (about 400 birds) Vultures are vulnerable. Overall, many threats are listed: poisoning (the worst), disturbance, drowning [in farm reservoirs], traditional medicine trade, powerline electrocution, powerline collision, food shortage, and bush encroachment (for the Cape Griffon only). Altogether, 19 pages are devoted to these six species, between two and five pages each. The book is very attractive and in full colour throughout. Each species has its colour photo and a map of distribution in the country in three densities. The accounts start with a 'fact box' and finish with a list of Actions, with four other sub-heads in between. Altogether a splendid compilation.

TAYLOR, M.R., PEACOCK, F. & WANLESS, R.M. (eds) (2015). *The 2015 Eskom Red Data Book of birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*. BirdLife South Africa, Johannesburg. 464pp. ISBN 978-0-620-68259-6.

This is the 4th edition from South Africa, and a mammoth and marvellous undertaking, all in black-and-white format. The Introduction (pages 9-28) adequately shows the geography, IUCN criteria, threatened species' list,

six threats, and priorities for conservation. Of the 132 species now included in one or other threat category regionally (critically endangered CR, endangered EN, vulnerable VU, and near threatened NT), eight are vultures. Only the Rüppell's Griffon is omitted. Thus, Bearded, Hooded, White-backed and White-headed Vultures are all considered to be CR, Cape [Griffon] and Lappet-faced Vultures are EN, the Egyptian Vulture is "regionally extinct", and the Palm-nut Vulture is "peripheral". In total, just over 25 pages are devoted to the vultures.

A key criterion for endangerment is a decline "over the last 10 years or three generations, whichever is the longer", where the generation length has been given as absurdly long (in my view) for the vultures. For the Hooded Vulture, for example, this has been given as 17.8 years by BLI, and therefore three generations are 53 years in length (in my view a generation length is six years).

Population estimates in the region are given for Bearded Vulture (200 mature individuals), Hooded (100-200 adults), White-backed (7350 adults!), White-headed (c.160 adults), Cape (8800 adults) and Lappet-faced (338 adults).

The accounts for each species start with a Justification and end with a box of Research Priorities and Questions, in bullet-point format, with ten sub-heads in between and a very detailed map of distribution from SABAP data. Censuses, satellite tracking, foraging patterns, electricity infrastructure, 'muti' trade, lead bullets, other NSAIDs, are the favourite topics that need investigation. The accounts have one assessor (Sonja Krüger for the Bearded Vulture, and David Allan for all the others) and several reviewers for each, and are very detailed (the White-backed Vulture is actually the longest account in the whole book at six pages). (www.birdlife.org.za)
