

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS, NOTES AND REPORTS

Early records of vultures in Zimbabwe

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In August 1967 the author observed a flying White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus* on the Botleti River, Botswana, silhouetted against a cloud. Vultures were spread out at regular intervals in all directions forming a watching network, which in earlier times extended over most of southern Africa. Cape Vultures *Gyps coprotheres* were described as 'abundant' in southern Matabeleland and Mashonaland (Buckley 1974, Marshall 1900). It is difficult to believe that Cape Vultures (if correctly identified) could be so abundant in early Zimbabwe with only one small breeding colony. The historical absence of vultures in the Matobo National Park (20°33'S, 28°30'E) was said to be demonstrated by a horse not being pecked clean by vultures in 1896

(Donnelly 1985). However, this was in the post-rinderpest era (just) when Selous (1896) referred to the "extraordinary absence" of vultures in the area.

There are no reported early breeding records of vultures from Zimbabwe (Priest 1933; Dean and Milton 2004). However there are a number of sites called "Vulture's Hill" in local languages, for example in Chirisa Game Reserve (17°45'S, 28°10'E), which may refer to previous nesting colonies of Cape Vultures (Irwin 1981). Nowadays vulture breeding is confined to Hwange National Park (17°44'S, 26°57'E), south-east Lowveld and the Zambezi Valley apart from the now erratically used Wabai Hill (near Shangani (19°00'S, 29°45'E)

occupied by Cape Vultures (Mundy 1997).

However, one early report of vultures breeding in Zimbabwe was from south of Plumtree (20°30'S, 27°48'E) in October 1908 where Cape Vultures were reported incubating on a tree nest (Mouritz 1910). This clearly refers to White-backed Vultures as Cape Vultures only breed on cliffs. A White-backed Vulture egg was collected at Matetsi (18°05'S, 25°52'E) (James 1970) but no year is given, though the activity dates of the collector (E. Davison) were between 1930 and 1960.

An egg (reported as *Gyps rueppellii!*) was collected from a mimosa thorn tree without locality or date (Buckley 1874). However this expedition only reached present day Zimbabwe in September and October and the laying season of this bird is May-July, so we must conclude this egg was collected further south. The current whereabouts of this egg are unknown but it's not mentioned in Dean and Milton (2004). White-backed and Hooded Vultures *Necrosyrtes monachus* were said to be breeding at Wabai in 1951 (Miles

1951) and a colony of seven White-backed Vulture nests was observed near KweKwe in June 1954 (Harwin 1954). No mention of nest contents is made in any of these accounts but we may presume that birds were seen on the nests. As these birds do not roost on their nests, this is probable breeding at least.

Eggs of three species of vulture in South Africa are reported by Oates (1902) and Wolfe (1938) (including White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis*) but none from Zimbabwe. There was much confusion between *Gyps* spp. in earlier times but a definite difference in nest-sites clarifies breeding records. There are few early instances of breeding for vultures (Dean and Milton 2004) and none for the Zimbabwe plateau. The above is the first record of Hooded Vulture breeding outside its current distribution and the first for White-backed Vulture outside the national parks of Zimbabwe making these records, even if only probable, worth drawing attention to.

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