

Vulnerable Vultures

Thanks to a special 'restaurant' threatened birds in the Magaliesberg mountains have a chance of survival.

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Although it is notoriously known for feeding on carcasses, the vulture is a regal bird which can soar majestically. Cape vultures (also known as Cape griffons) are found throughout Southern Africa but their numbers are in decline and they're classified as vulnerable in the Red Data Book.

Once populous, vultures are now threatened by poisoning, habitat destruction, drowning in farm reservoirs, power line electrocutions, illegal collection for traditional medicine and more recently, the killing and use of them to 'predict' the Lotto.

However, a novel 'restaurant' in the Rhino & Lion Nature Reserve attracts birds from kilometres away in the Magaliesberg. Through the generosity of the public and farmers, who donate carcasses to the reserve on a regular basis, this venture has been highly successful. Often as many as 200 birds can be seen feasting at the restaurant.

But the restaurant is only one of the park's conservation attempts to make more food available for the vultures in an environment where food sources have been slowly declining because of land use changes.

The reserve's latest project looks at solving threats to vultures on the Indian sub-continent, where some species have gone from 'common' to 'critically endangered' within the past 12 years. The contributing factor to these falling numbers is the pharmaceutical drug Valtaren that was recently introduced for livestock use in India. This drug kills vultures who have fed on inoculated carcasses.

In a further breakthrough in vulture research 40 Cape vultures were captured in January and tagged, ringed, sampled, photographed and released at the restaurant.

The Rhino & Lion Nature Reserve's vulture programme is, together with help from the veterinary faculty of the University of Pretoria, and the WBR/National Zoological Gardens, playing a role in investigating drug residue in vultures and vulture foraging ranges in Southern Africa.

Kerri Wolter, who leads the vulture programme, hopes to improve understanding of the risks of veterinary and other chemicals entering the vulture food chain while the foraging range of the birds will be determined using 'safring metal rings, patagial tags and GPS cell devices'.

What makes the reserve's conservation efforts even more noteworthy is that it is privately funded and run on its 1 100 ha.

The vulnerable vulture species aside, other endangered species have also made the reserve their home – lion, rhino, cheetah and the Cape wild dog can be seen. The latter have formed part of a very successful breeding programme which has, in turn, led to breeding programmes for Bengal tigers, Siberian tigers, white tigers and rare white lion (one of which was born at the reserve in 1999). After a long absence from the Highveld, warthog were also recently successfully reintroduced.

These activities have seen the staff at the reserve grow from five to 35 employees.

The reserve is located in the Cradle of Humankind, a World Heritage Site, about 40 km north-west of Johannesburg and 60km west of Pretoria.

For further information on the project contact Kerri Wolter at 011 957 0106.

To arrange a day visit or accommodation at the reserve, contact Tim or Gerhard at 011 957 0106/9.