

Cultured vultures take to the skies

Lisa Thomas

Throughout southern Africa, vulture numbers are dwindling.

The Cape, white-backed, lappet-faced and white-headed vultures have all been rated vulnerable. The Egyptian vulture is now regionally extinct and the bearded vulture is endangered.

Kerri Wolter, manager of the vulture programme at the Rhino and Lion Nature Reserve, outlined what is being done to alleviate the situation.

"Vultures in general are misunderstood. People dismiss them as smelly, dirty birds, when in actual fact vultures bath after every meal and groom themselves to an impeccable cleanliness. They do not stink at all, are monogamous, lay one egg per year and are incredible parents," she enthused.

Wolter said her vital research was focused primarily on the endemic Cape vulture, "In Namibia, the Cape vultures are considered critically endangered, with only 11 vultures in the wild.

"In Swaziland, the Cape vulture has become extinct, and in Zimbabwe they no longer breed. The largest Cape vulture colony we have in South Africa is the Magaliesburg colony, which makes up 12 percent of the population."

"At present, the Magaliesburg colony is stable, but under huge pressure from development. It's estimated there are around

10 000 individuals in the colony, of which 2 900 are breeding pairs," said Wolter. The Cape vulture is the most studied vulture in Africa, yet no one can pin-point a simple aspect such as their foraging range. Wolter is set on gathering firm scientific research by tagging vultures at the vulture restaurant in the nature reserve, one of 279 vulture restaurants in South Africa. In some cases, tagging involves attaching a cellphone-like device to these avian scavengers. "Around 100 - 150 Cape vultures visit the restaurant each day. From that number, around 10 percent of the tagged birds come back. It sounds like a small percentage but it's still a very new project," said Wolter.

"The physical wing tagging is the cheaper option, but the cellular device is fantastic. It costs around R14 000 per device, and contains an international roaming feature so once the vulture leaves it can be plotted on a map when within range of cellphone reception. I once had a juvenile, cellular-tagged Cape vulture fly from Magaliesberg to Namibia. The cellular device stays on the bird for approximately 14 months. We made up a harness that falls off after 18 months.

"So far, only six birds have been cellular tagged, and we are constantly looking for funds to continue the research. At the moment, we rely entirely on

sponsorship from the Rand Merchant Bank, Computer Facilities, Ernest Oppenheimer and Son and our project partners," she explained.

An example of the details received by Wolter from the cellular device from a Cape vulture tagged at the Moholoholo Rehabilitation Centre includes: date (16-02-07), time (10.01am), position (Long: 30:56" 13.84, Lat: -24:15" 56.70) R40, Phalaborwa NU going 82 km/h S.

Yet vultures are under a variety of threats, some of which Wolter highlighted:

- ❑ Electrocutions and powerline incidents.
- ❑ Direct poisonings when people put poison in an animal carcass to deliberately poison vultures, and secondary poisonings when people poison an animal carcass for jackals and not for vultures.
- ❑ Drowning in farm reservoirs when they try to drink but can't get back out.
- ❑ The illegal trade of vultures. Some traditional beliefs are such that if you eat vulture brains or place a vulture's head under your pillow you will dream the correct winning lotto numbers.

❑ Vulture restaurants can be problematic if not managed correctly. If the animal carcasses in the restaurant are where animals have died of natural causes there is no problem, but if the animal was treated by any form of



medication this can kill adult vultures and in turn cause vulture chicks to starve to death. Wolter concluded, "We are grateful for people to come to the vulture restaurant and for the community to help with any re-sightings of the yellow-ring

tag on the vultures' wings." Details: Phone Kerri Wolter at 082-808-5113 or e-mail kerri.wolter@gmail.com or phone the Lion and Rhino Nature Reserve at 084-689-4241 or 011-957-0106/9.