



## Whitebacked Vulture

### Witruugaasvoël

#### *Gyps africanus*

The Whitebacked Vulture is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. In southern Africa, while not quite the most widespread vulture, it is certainly the most numerous. In the Transvaal alone its population has been estimated at 2500 pairs (Tarboton & Allan 1984), and its total population in the region could exceed 15 000 pairs, or 40 000 individuals.

It is a conspicuous species, especially because of its gregarious nature, and is unlikely to be overlooked. The great variations in plumage pattern associated with different age classes cause severe problems in identification; this species and the Cape Vulture *G. coprotheres* are frequently confused. The atlas data were corrected in this regard, as far as was possible.

The atlas data indicate conspicuous 'holes' in the distribution: in several parts of Zimbabwe, especially in the northeast, in the northern Cape Province northwest of Kimberley (2824DB), and in southern Namibia. In Zimbabwe these holes may be due to poor coverage, but in the other two areas it is likely to be genuinely absent.

**Habitat:** The vegetation analysis shows that it was recorded in a wide variety of vegetation types, but its main preference lies with the drier woodlands, particularly mopane, arid and Kalahari woodland types, including the Okavango woodlands which showed the highest reporting rates. While it prefers tall trees for roosting and breeding, such as certain acacias, figs *Ficus* spp. and Baobabs *Adansonia digitata*, it will use trees such as the shorter Camelthorn *A. erioloba* and Purple-pod Terminalia *Terminalia prunioides*. Its absence from Karoo and grassland areas is probably due to the paucity of trees in these regions.

**Movements:** It is considered to be resident and the models, although showing some variation, do not suggest any large-scale migratory movements. However, marked individuals are known to have made long journeys, the

record to date being 980 km (Mundy *et al.* 1992). The majority of birds on the Zimbabwe highveld are immatures (pers. obs) and, as adults do not breed in this zone, some movements must occur, at least over distances of 250 km or so.

**Breeding:** Throughout most of its range, breeding starts in April and is usually well in progress by May. The atlas data, however, suggest that breeding starts later in the southernmost parts of its range (Zone 7). This latitudinal effect has been noticed before (Mundy 1982) and is also evident from egg-laying data (Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning in press; N.J. Skinner *in litt.*).

**Interspecific relationships:** It is widely sympatric with the Cape Vulture, and completely so with the Lappetfaced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*. Its range also encompasses those of the Hooded *Necrosyrtes monachus* and White-headed *Trigonoceps occipitalis* Vultures. Its main competitor at carcasses is the larger Cape Vulture to which it is submissive, and it is likely that young birds suffer from such competitive interactions.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** Although its overall distributional limits do not appear to have changed significantly in recent times (e.g. Boshoff *et al.* 1983 for the Cape Province), there is evidence that it has decreased markedly within some parts of its range (e.g. Tarboton & Allan 1984 for the Transvaal). The distribution map shows the highest reporting rates in sparsely inhabited (e.g. parts of the Kalahari) and conserved areas (e.g. Etosha, Kalahari Gemsbok Park, Kruger National Park and northern KwaZulu-Natal conservation areas). It has possibly become more common on the highveld of Zimbabwe in recent times (pers. obs). The Whitebacked is the only vulture in the region that is not listed in the South African Red Data book (Brooke 1984b). It is highly vulnerable to poisoned carcasses, and hundreds are known to have been poisoned; one of the worst recent incidents involved 126 birds in May 1992 at Wedza (1831DA). Publicity directed at farmers and traditional healers is essential to deal with the problem of poisoning.

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Recorded in 1742 grid cells, 38.4%  
Total number of records: 12 455  
Mean reporting rate for range: 25.7%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



