

Reviews

Boshoff, A.F., Anderson, M.D. & Borello, W.D. (eds) 1997. **Vultures in the 21st century**. Vulture Study Group, Johannesburg. 170 pp. (Review reprinted with kind permission of *Vulture News* 41, September 1999.)

This A4-sized publication is sub-titled 'Proceedings of a workshop on vulture research and conservation in southern Africa', and is exactly that. The printing and binding of the volume was sponsored by Sasol Limited; the printing is nice and clear, and the binding durable in spite of not being sewn. After considerable thumbing to and fro, my copy is still intact. There are 12 figures and 24 tables, all of which have also come out nice and clearly, but no photographs.

Although I authored/co-authored 9% of this publication, and could therefore be considered as (positively?) biased in my review of it, nevertheless I do hope to be objective. Right at the outset, however, I must say that I regard this publication as not only very significant in its own right (a 'benchmark' as main editor André Boshoff says), but also unique in vulturedom, certainly in Africa, but also possibly in the whole world. In that regard the volume is important and very welcome. It is a very comprehensive position statement.

It mentions all the nine species in southern Africa, though the Cape Griffon has the main attention.

The first half of the volume gives up-dates for these species in all 15 political areas of the subcontinent, viz. nine provinces of South Africa, and six neighbouring countries. The subcontinent covers about 3,5 million sq. km, and the Cape Griffon is endemic to it, so good up-dates here form part of the volume's unique achievement. The status of vultures is considered in altogether seven countries of the region, within which the Cape Griffon is monitored (i.e. censused annually) at no less than 17 of its colonies: in South Africa (Blouberg, Colleywobbles, Kransberg, Kranskop, Manoutsa, Mtamvuna, Nooitgedacht, Oribi Gorge, Potberg, Roberts' Farm [consistently mis-spelled as Robert's], Skeerpoort, Soutpansberg and Zastron), Botswana (Mannyela-

nong and Tswapong Hills), Namibia (Waterberg), and Zimbabwe (Wabai Hill). Some colonies are increasing in size, others are decreasing, sometimes the causes can be presumed (e.g. the vulture restaurant and sympathetic farmers at Potberg and Nooitgedacht, and electrocutions in the foraging area of Roberts' Farm), and sometimes they can't. This makes for a complicated assessment of vulnerabilities and needs of the species, and it would have been useful for the editors to have included a summary page of the status of the Cape Griffon by political arena, but they didn't.

After the province/country up-dates comes a section of 'threats', which include drowning, powerlines, poisons, traditional medicine, farmers' attitudes, and skeletal deformities. All but the last also discuss measures to reduce the threats, and there are some marvelous initiatives in operation – read them! The one page on skeletal deformities simply discards the bone-fragment story as a hypothesis, and raises the flag on trauma as the cause. As yet this itself is a hypothesis, with observations and experimental results still 'in prep'. Incidentally, Table 1 on p. 99 has two of its columns transposed.

The section on 'conservation initiatives' has a particularly useful chapter on rehabilitation. Vulture 'restaurants' and ringing are also highlighted here, with both topics based on the assumptions that they are good and should be done. This is well debated in the rehabilitation chapter, and I liked one of the concluding remarks – 'if we go to such an effort to save one bird, the species must be very worth preserving.' It would have been rather interesting to provide a cost-scheme (at veterinarian surgeon's average charges) for rehabilitating one vulture. In fact the costs of all the multifarious operations for vultures, as given in the proceedings, are conspicuous by their absence!

Table 1 on p. 127 suffers a major omission – Lappet-faced Vultures do not feature, and yet I imagine that nearly 1000 have been ringed, with a dozen or more so-called recoveries. The last two sections of the volume, called research and conservation priorities, amount to 30 pages or nearly one-fifth of it. They comprise the unbridled thoughts and comments by the participants on sundry projects and topics. Thus, there are 17 research priorities chewed over by eight persons in all, and 18 conservation priorities by nine persons. In a way these sections portray the vitality of vulture-interested people (well, of those at the workshop at least), and what they intend to get to grips with in the next lap. There are some hot ‘chestnuts’ here, such as food, marking systems, and calcium, as well as a few startling comments. Of the latter, that on p. 163 by Carl Vernon – ‘There was near consensus amongst the vocal majority at the workshop that there was no need for research’ – seemed altogether off the wall and not at all how I remembered the debates and arguments. At least this concluding remark did seem correct to me, i.e. that ‘continued research on vultures is a conservation priority’! A few other comments of interest to me, from among many of these last sections, were: it was incumbent upon the VSG to evaluate their philosophical position regarding restaurants (p. 143); the true impacts [of ecotourism] are as serious as agricultural development (p. 157); what is needed is an overall action plan for vulture conservation in southern Africa (p. 161). People spoke their minds, and of course there were disagreements. Such an exposure is important – if nothing else it indicates to newcomers how and where they can get started, and quickly. These priorities showed that there are lots to bite off and chew – if that’s how one can describe the exposure of gaps in knowledge.

One major omission in terms of the birds is that scant or no attention was given to interspecific ‘competition’, and I am particularly thinking of the Cape Griffon and African White-backed Vulture. These two species forage and feed in just about an exactly similar manner. What are the outcomes? Do Cape Griffons in fact, ever suffer in the face of

onslaughts from their smaller cousins? Do juvenile/first-year Cape Griffons have feeding problems if their ‘nursery’ areas are in high-density White-backed Vulture regions? André Boshoff mentioned the ‘dynamic relationships between sympatric vulture species’ (p. 165), and this is a key statement in my view that should be investigated.

After reading this volume, then, one can be very au fait with the status of vultures and the state of vulture conservation in southern Africa, with sundry hypotheses and controversies thrown in for good measure. It was no holds barred, but all-in-a rather friendly manner, due in no small part to the personalities of the convenors, André Boshoff and Mark Anderson. A paragraph of their introduction is worth repeating here, because it perfectly encapsulates the purposes of the workshop, as well as the (implied) fallibilities of the vulture students.

‘As we approach the millennium, a number of key questions need to [be] answered.

- Are current vulture conservation activities appropriate, and are they being properly planned and co-ordinated?
- Is any research being carried out at all, and have the many data collected during the past 30 years been analysed, interpreted and published?
- Has the momentum of the 1970s and 1980s been lost?
- Does the will and capacity exist, at governmental and non-governmental level, to study and conserve vultures into the 21st century?
- And finally, where do we go from here, and who will lead us there?’

These questions (put in bullet-point format by me) strongly suggest that vultures are important, and further that vulture students have certain responsibilities, two of which should be to co-ordinate and communicate. I agree with these opinions! The same could be said of course for lots of other groups of animals and plants, but that’s up to their own supporters. The proceedings of this workshop go only part of the way towards answering these

questions, and as André Boshoff said on the last page, 'similar workshops should be held at three yearly intervals'. Vulture conservation is too serious an issue to be left to free-lancers and dilettantes.

I am very glad to see the size and scope of the ferment of activity as illustrated by these proceedings. And I congratulate the conven-

ors, editors, and Vulture Study Group, in producing what I think is a unique and significant volume from the array of vulture workers who attended.

P.J. Mundy

*Department of National Parks
PO Box 2283, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe*

Bub, Hans. 1991. **Bird Trapping & Bird Banding: A Handbook for Trapping Methods All over the World.** Translated from the German by F. Hamerstrom and K. Wuertz-Schaefer. Illustrated by W. Noll and E. Raddatz. Published by Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York. 328 pp, 16.7 × 24.0 cm, 456 figures, diagrams and photographs. Soft cover.

Although the English translation of this handbook was published in 1991 in hardcover, Cornell have now reprinted it in soft-cover. Most bird-ringers are familiar with mist-netting as a technique for trapping birds, as it has the potential to catch large numbers. Mist-netting is generally not species specific and therefore not useful for many groups of birds. This book describes a wide variety of trapping methods that have been used over the ages. This makes it not only useful but also a fascinating history. It is richly illustrated with black-and-white figures and photographs.

The book is divided into sections rather than chapters. The first section covers basics and is a ramble about lure birds used in ancient and modern times. The next section details holding cages for birds that have been caught – vital for ethical bird ringing. This is the only place where bird ringing is specifically mentioned, so the title is slightly inappropriate. The rest of the book is devoted to actual catching methods, starting with a variety of fall traps (the box that falls down over the bird). The following sections cover cage traps and walk-in traps of all sizes to cater for waders, waterfowl, seedeaters, and other birds. One ingenious trap is a walk-in type designed to be fixed on a tree-trunk for woodpeckers! Next are sections on nets, covering trammel, mist, and Chinese bow nets. There are a variety of ways of employing these, including techniques for using them as

drop nets. This is followed by a brief section on bal-chattris for trapping raptors. Then follow sections on hand-nets, catching birds by hand from blinds, trapping at night, using clap nets and ending with cannon netting.

The bibliographic section is in four parts. Two are short lists on standard books and periodicals about bird ringing. Then follows a selected bibliography of historical bird trapping literature, given by published language and date. This list is annotated briefly. The earliest reference is a Flemish book published anonymously in 1492. The final part is a standard bibliography for the techniques mentioned in the book. The book concludes with a bird species index which allows one to look up the different trapping techniques described in the book for a particular bird. The European Swift, for instance, is mentioned four times. Three of these references refer to mist-nets set up in particular ways, while the fourth is catching roosting migratory swifts by hand.

This book is recommended for anyone with an interest in birds. A number of techniques may not be legally permitted in many countries, but they make interesting reading and show man's ingenuity through the ages in catching birds. For ringers it may provide ideas that could be adapted to trap some of those particularly elusive species safely.

Dieter Oschadleus