

Raptors and farm reservoirs

Background

Raptors often fall into farm reservoirs and drown. A bird of prey with waterlogged feathers has little chance of getting out, especially if the dam is not full, since the sheer walls offer no purchase for it to scramble up. The carcass then floats in the water for several days, and as a result the water is polluted and often rendered unpotable for humans and livestock. These reservoirs then have to be emptied and cleaned.

Conservationists are concerned as this unnecessary mortality results in raptors being lost from the already small populations. In the Kalahari and Karoo, for example, reservoir drownings account for a significant proportion of the unnatural mortality of birds of prey.

There are records of 322 raptors of 29 species drowning in reservoirs in southern Africa (Anderson *et al.* 1999. Raptors drowning in farm reservoirs in South Africa. *Ostrich* 70(2): 139-144). This probably only represents the tip of the iceberg, and it is likely that hundreds of raptors drown annually!

Why do raptors drown in reservoirs?

Three theories have been proposed to explain this unfortunate phenomenon:

- When perched on the wall to drink, raptors may accidentally slip into the reservoir.
- They may not be able to judge the depth of the water and therefore attempt to stand in the reservoir. This theory is supported by the many observations of raptors standing in the shallow water of rivers and dams while drinking and bathing. This may be important in hot climates as it would assist with thermoregulation.
- Birds of prey, especially vultures, which have eaten poison, such as strychnine (which apparently induces thirst), may plunge into the nearest water in an attempt to slake their thirst; and a drowning bird may attract others in what may appear to them to be a feeding melee.

The first two theories may explain why individual birds are found drowned in reservoirs; while the third theory may explain the mass drownings, particularly of vultures.

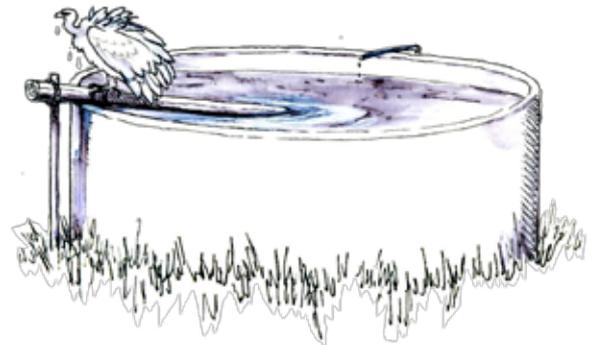


Mass drowning of vultures

There are at least 12 vulture mass drowning incidents, with recent incidents including the mass drowning of 16 African White-backed Vultures in a reservoir near Vryburg, nine White-backed Vultures and a Lappet-faced Vulture in a reservoir in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, 38 African White-backed Vultures in a reservoir near Vanzylsrus, and 64 Cape Vultures, during four separate incidents in the same reservoir, in the Eastern Cape.

There are simple solutions to prevent reservoir drownings

- Keep the reservoir full
- Cover the reservoir with shade cloth or another material. This method has the added advantages of reducing evaporation and preventing the growth of algae.
- A more simply method is place a wooden plank, log, ladder or branch into the reservoir, attaching one end firmly to the side. A drowning bird will then be able to grasp onto the structure and lift itself out of the water.



A modified reservoir will allow raptors to drink and bathe, preventing drownings, and thus contribute to raptor conservation.

More detailed designs and illustrations are available from

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**Please modify farm reservoirs!
This will contribute towards
raptor conservation. It will also
keep reservoir water clean!**

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