

BIRDS

WORDS & PICTURES
MARK D ANDERSON

Nature's undertakers

The white-backed vulture, possibly the most numerous African vulture, has the job of ridding our savannahs of decaying carcasses. You can help to secure their future, says Mark D Anderson.

"Dirty", "smelly" and "disgusting" are adjectives sometimes used to describe the African white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*). The truth is that vultures like to bath after every meal, and that they are exceptionally good parents.

White-backed vultures like to hang out together, much like us humans. But just wait until they get together around a carcass – that's when you'll see the feathers fly.

What's so special about these birds? As soon as the earth starts to heat up in the morning, white-backed vultures take to the thermals, catching a ride to distant places in their search for food.

They use their sharp eyesight not only to find food but also to keep an eye out for other vultures so as not to lose out on a tasty meal.

White-backed vultures are usually the first to arrive at a carcass and they quickly fill their crops before the larger lappet-

faced, Cape and Rüppell's vultures descend on the smelly, rotting beast and assert their dominance. The vultures make short work of a dead animal; within a few minutes an impala carcass will be reduced to skin and bones. This prevents the spread of diseases.

What's the problem? Although there are about 3,500 pairs in South Africa, white-backed vulture numbers are declining and they are listed in our Red Data Book. Threats to these birds include poisons, drowning in farm reservoirs and electrocution on electricity pylons. Many of their acacia nest sites have also disappeared as the savannah is cleared to make way for development and agricultural lands.

Believe it or not, the chemical sodium diclofenac, widely known as Voltaren, has been responsible for the virtual extinction of the African white-backed vulture's cousin, the oriental white-backed

vulture, in Pakistan and India. This anti-inflammatory drug, used to treat sick, lame and lazy cattle, is deadly for *Gyps* vultures.

What can I do to help? In the past three years, 700 vultures (498 white-backs) in southern Africa have been marked with wing tags, each having unique letters and numbers. The aim is to get information on their movement and the threats to their survival.

This research has shown white-backed vultures like going "walk-about": Kimberley-marked birds have been spotted near the Kruger and Vanzylsrus-marked birds have been seen in northern Botswana.

Keep an eye out for tagged birds. If you can, take a picture and send it to André Botha at the Birds of Prey Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust. Be sure to say when and where you saw the bird. Call him on ☎ 082 962 5725 or send an e-mail to ✉ andreb@ewt.org.za or bopwg@ewt.org.za

UP A TREE. An African white-backed vulture chick in its nest on top of a camel thorn tree.



MARK IS LEFT HOLDING THE BABY (left). Vulture nestlings are removed from their nests for a few minutes by ornithologists to take body measurements and fit rings and wing tags.

CHICKEN LICKEN (right). Watching the antics of vultures and other scavengers, such as marabou storks, at a carcass is one of Africa's great wildlife experiences.

