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## TOP SPOT

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# Give a bird a bone

The bearded vulture lives in the mountains and feeds on bones. Count yourself lucky if you've seen one of these magnificent birds, says **Mark D Anderson**.

**Carcass eater.** The bearded vulture's diet consists mainly of bone and bone marrow from carcasses. An adult bird can swallow a bone nearly 30 cm long! The extremely acidic digestive juices in its stomach start to dissolve the bone even before it's completely swallowed. If the bone is too big for it to swallow, it will fly up into the air and drop it onto rocks to break it into pieces.

**Not a lamb-catcher!** In a book published in 1750, *A Natural History of Birds*, British ornithologist George Edwards calls the bird a "bearded" vulture because of a "remarkable tuft of black feathers" on its face.

It was once also known as a lammergeyer because of the belief that it preys on lambs, which is not true.

**Sibling rivalry.** Several years ago, I spent several days in a small hide overlooking a bearded vulture nest on a cliff for the television programme *50/50*. It was a typical nest in a pothole, and through my spotting scope I could see the untidy structure of twigs and branches, lined with wool, hair and skin. There were two eggs and both hatched.

The older chick eventually out-competed its sibling, which starved. Interestingly, the dead chick was fed to its surviving sibling, something that had not previously been recorded.

**The best place to see them.** Bearded vultures are found mainly in the mountainous regions of Lesotho, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. You'd have to travel a few thousand kilometres north

to find their nearest neighbours, on the snow-capped mountains of Mt Kilimanjaro, Mt Meru and Mt Kenya in East Africa.

Possibly the best place to get close to them is at the vulture restaurant at Giant's Castle. The hide can be booked through Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife on ☎ 036 353 3718. A visit costs R170 per person, and a maximum of six people are allowed at a time.

**A species in trouble.** In the 1980s, ornithologist Dr Chris Brown mapped the bearded vulture nest sites in the Drakensberg and Maloti Mountains and, to his dismay, found only 204 breeding pairs. Since then the population has declined, and there may only be 100 pairs today. Poisoning of carcasses is one of the main threats to these birds.

### If you want to know more...

Bearded vultures are listed as endangered in the Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. You can find out more about the Bearded Vulture Project, which aims to study and conserve the last 100 pairs of these birds, from Sonja Krüger of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (e-mail [skruger@kznwildlife.com](mailto:skruger@kznwildlife.com)). 



**AN OCHRE COAT.** The rusty colour of adult bearded vultures' feathers comes from iron oxide staining from the rocks; the feathers are naturally white.