

LAPPET-FACED VULTURE WORKSHOP IN ETHIOPIA

During late-June I spent a fantastic week in Ethiopia and herewith follows a brief summary of some of the highlights of my visit.

I was invited by BirdLife International to attend a Lappet-faced Vulture workshop. There were 11 delegates at the workshop, from Namibia, South Africa, Burundi, Uganda, Djibouti and Ethiopia. The meeting was hosted by the Ethiopian Wildlife & Natural History Society and very professionally facilitated by Dr Eric Sande (Nature Uganda and Africa Species Working Group) and Steven Evans (BirdLife South Africa). I received my invitation about three weeks before the workshop, so it was frantic rush to obtain Ministerial permission to travel to Ethiopia, get a visa, etc.

The purpose of the workshop was as follows. The BirdLife African Partnership started the BirdLife African Species Working Group in 1998 to spearhead species conservation initiatives in Africa, including the preparation and implementation of species action plans. In April 2001 the BirdLife African Species Working Group and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (the BirdLife International partner in the UK) started a 3-year Species Action Plans Project for seven priority bird species in Africa, including the Lappet-faced Vulture. The Lappet-faced Vulture is a globally threatened species with a wide distribution, but occurs in low numbers in about 30 African countries. The species is of national and international concern and therefore its conservation requires a concerted effort. Other aims of the species action plan workshops are to build capacity in species action planning and to promote cooperation between different African countries. The draft Action Plan will soon be made available to various interested affected parties. It was a great privilege for me to travel to Ethiopia and I am grateful to my hosts (especially Anteneh Shimilis) who went out of their way to make our stay enjoyable.

Some of the extramural activities worth mentioning are the following:

While in Addis Ababa, we had the opportunity to visit the Addis Ababa City Abattoir (in the Kera part of town). There were possibly 300 vultures present (of three species: Hooded Vulture, African White-backed Vulture and Rüppell's Griffon), right in the middle of town!. Also present were Wattled Ibises (an Ethiopian endemic), many Sacred Ibises, Marabouts, a single Augur Buzzard and an assortment of other scavenging birds. I did a morning and a late-afternoon count and will publish the results in Vulture News. Unfortunately, the abattoir's managers would not allow us access into the grounds (we

were hoping to get some good photos and perhaps undertake a more accurate survey), so we had to peer over the perimeter wall, much to the intrigue of the locals. Steven Evans, who is now a master of digi-scoping, took some really good images of the vultures perched on a mountain of bones. Things are however not too rosy for these urban vultures, as there is talk that the hygiene standards of the abattoir may be improved and/or that the abattoir may be shifted elsewhere. Also many vultures collide with the cables of a powerline that is located adjacent to the abattoir. This information has been provided to Chris van Rooyen, coordinator of the Eskom-EWT Strategic Partnership and he will approach Eskom to enquire about the possible sponsorship of Bird Flappers to the Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation so that the earth-wire cable can be made more visible.

Also on the vulture front, I was interested to hear about that African White-backed Vultures build their nests on gum trees, the first record (as far as I am aware) of this species using an alien tree for breeding purposes. I also heard about the Rüppell's Griffon breeding site at Mt Yerer just outside Addis (not known to Peter Mundy) which, much to my envy, Rob Simmons, Maria Diekmann and Steven Evans visited after my departure to South Africa. They will also prepare a note for Vulture News.

To take a break from the formal activities, we spent one day bird-watching, travelling to Menagesha State Forest, a 9248 ha mainly Juniper forest. The drive to this conservation area was quite depressing, as the environment around Addis Ababa has been badly degraded (overgrazing, severe erosion, spread of gum trees, etc.). Things were very different at the Menagesha however where, despite arriving relatively late in the morning, we were greeted by the calls of many forest birds. During the few hours that we spent in the State Forest, we managed to see several of the Ethiopian endemics, including White-backed Black Tit, Black-headed Forest Oriole and Yellow-fronted Parrot. Other highlights were a pair of Crowned Eagles at a nest and a pair of breeding sparrow-hawks (a new breeding species for West Africa, Steven Evans will elaborate in an article that will possibly be submitted to the Bulletin of the ABC). Later that day we did some shopping at the Addis Ababa Mercato, the largest open-air market in Africa.

On my last night I managed to convince my colleagues (after a big dinner and lots of Metas!) to go Spotted Hyaena watching. You may have heard of the men who hand-feed Spotted Hyaenas at Harar (the 4th most holy city of Islam) in eastern Ethiopia, but few know that Addis also has its resident hyaena population. At several places in the

capital city these animals emerge from their dens at night to search for food, feeding amongst domestic dogs on the city's sidewalks. We managed to find a taxi driver who was willing to drive this strange bunch of tourists (with Anteneh in toe) to the 'wrong side' of town. After quering a few pedestrians (those who were still up at 23h30) we eventually located a few hyaenas. I was so impressed, one of Africa's "big and hairies" (eat your heart our Guy Castley!) foraging along the streets of one of the continent's biggest and most populous cities! I remember telling Anteneh that there was potential for an entrepreneur (taxi driver/mammal guide) to take visitors to see the hyaenas. Shortly thereafter I thought very differently about this ecotourism opportunity. Out of the darkness an unruly mob appeared. They were wielding sticks and rocks and they packed rocks behind the wheels of our minibus taxi. In their local dialect, they demanded money from our driver and eventually we coughed up a few Birrs. They were however not satisfied and things started turning nasty and at that point we dug deeper into our pockets and parted with even more Birrs. Fortunately, at that moment, one of the youngsters in the group removed the rocks from behind our wheels and our driver sped off. Now racing back down to our hotel in central Addis (with hardly any headlights to speak of), listening to Anteneh saying that this was definitely his first and last visit to the hyaenas, our taxi driver promptly rode over a dog. Turning to me, he said "sorry", his only English word of the evening, despite me trying to converse with him during the entire journey!. Well, I suppose that we were lucky to get away with our lives and the few Birrs was a small price to pay. Future visitors to see these nocturnal carnivores should request a police escort.

Addis Ababa is not too different from other large African cities: a sprawling metropolis (spread out horizontally; i.e. few "high-rise" buildings), masses of people, similar smells to Nairobi, Accra or Kampala, and a general hustle and bustle as people carry out their daily activities. We stayed in a reasonable hotel, the Semien, which prepared excellent meals. The rooms were comfortable, but fairly mediocre and the occasionally power failure and lack of water was at times an inconvenience, but probably out of the hands of the hotel management.

Ethiopian people are very friendly and I certainly felt safer than I do in parts of Johannesburg! Not only are they friendlier than South Africans, but they are decidedly more attractive, especially the women (no offence to my friend Anteneh!). I had heard previously that Ethiopians are the most attractive nation on earth and this was certainly confirmed during my visit.

While chatting to Anteneh Shimilis and Lakew Berhanu (from the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organization) I learnt about fantastic wild places in Ethiopia, especially the Simen Mountains National Park and the Bale Mountains National Park. During a future visit I would certainly like to visit these areas and see Ethiopian Wolves (the world's most threatened canid), Gelada Baboons (one of several Ethiopian endemic mammals), the Ethiopian endemic birds that I missed during this visit, Golden Eagles and Verreaux's Eagles (probably the only place where these two species breed side by side) and the apparently unsurpassed scenery. Then of course one of my many goals is to travel to Lake Turkana (the Sea of Jade), either from the south (via Kenya) or perhaps better still via Ethiopia. So much to see, so little time and so little money!

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