

FACTSHEET – White-headed Vulture

Very little is known about this enigmatic bird, except for the fact that it is one of the rarest vultures in Botswana. Why it should be so scarce is not clear, but one of the theories put forward goes by the interesting name of the 'Early rising crow hypothesis'. According to this theory, White-headed Vultures are scavengers of small prey items - this is the reason why they are solitary – if they were found in large groups like the *Gyps* vultures, there would be serious competition for these small carcasses. Now this is where the crows come in – they have been increasing in number in Southern Africa, and since they get airborne before the vultures every morning (White-headed Vultures wait for the thermals) they clean up these small prey items leaving the White-headed Vulture (and the Bateleur) with a dearth of food.



Photo: M Muller

There are other reasons too for its rarity – it is susceptible to poisoning, is killed for traditional medicine, it is adversely affected by habitat changes, and it may be disturbed at its breeding sites unless they are in remote areas. The Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drug (NSAID) Diclofenac may be causing some mortalities.

The White-headed Vulture is classified as vulnerable due to its relatively small global population (7,000 to 12,500 birds) and documented declines across its range. Certainly, raptor road counts in Botswana, conducted by Marc Herremans during the 1990s when he was Ornithologist for the Dept. of Wildlife and National Parks, showed that this species is virtually confined to protected areas as it is absent from communal and commercial land. A comprehensive study of the ecological requirements of this species is currently underway in Southern Africa under the auspices of the UK-based Hawk Conservancy; hopefully this will provide some clear direction as to how best to conserve this species.

