

Familiar Chat



Welcome to the quarterly Chat - which tends to come out biannually. These days our BLB members communicate on our WhatsApp group about activities, sightings, shared news etc and little comes in the direction of the editor of the Familiar Chat. Thanks in this edition go to Nicky Bousfield who has shared with you her journey over the last few months with regards her adopted daughter, a Barn Owl chick, which is now a fully-fledged adult, and Ian White for photos.

What I'm doing perhaps is to diarise some of the events / chats / incidents / issues that are coming up on that forum. I would like to encourage members to share their bird lists for the walks they do – especially the monthly walks, so we can have a permanent record of them for future reference.

In this edition there is a long article about vultures. It is very informative, and I encourage all to read this to get a real insight into the challenges faced by them across the continent.

VULTURE AWARENESS MONTH.

As we near the end of September, here is what you need to know about the month and our vultures.

The first Saturday of September is internationally recognized as the **International Vulture Awareness Day (IVAD)**.

Vultures are an ecologically vital group of birds that face a range of threats globally.

All of Botswana's five (5) resident vulture species are classified as either endangered or critically endangered on the IUCN Redlist and are faced with threats such as poisoning, electrocution and collision with power lines amongst others.



Cape Vulture (Lenong lè-lefatshwa, Diswaane) - *Cyps coprotheres*
STATUS: **ENDANGERED**



Hooded Vulture (Motlhanka wa Manong) - *Necrosyrtes monachus*
STATUS: **CRITICALLY ENDANGERED**



White-headed Vulture (Motlhanka wa Manong) - *Aegypius occipitalis*
STATUS: **CRITICALLY ENDANGERED**



White-backed Vulture (Lenong lè lè tuba, Kopajammutla) - *Cyps africanus*
STATUS: **CRITICALLY ENDANGERED**



Lappet-faced Vulture (Lenong -pitsa, Bibing) - *Aegypius tracheliotos*
STATUS: **ENDANGERED**



PHOTO CREDIT: *Ian White*

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Virat, our honourable Director, pointed out that last month, September was Vulture Awareness Month, and here is the flyer that accompanied it...



please cut the strings on your mask when you throw it away
Wildlife is getting caught up in the crossfire

Stop the Insect Apocalypse



Silently, the insect apocalypse keeps unfolding - **billions of bees, butterflies, and other extraordinary tiny creatures are dying off**, and the consequences may soon be catastrophic for our crops and fragile ecosystems worldwide.

Agricultural pesticides are among the key culprits. But now the European Union is considering a **proposal to cut pesticide use by 2030** that could pave the way for a total phase-out across Europe in 15 years. As a trading superpower, the EU has enormous influence on setting global standards -- and a win here could have ripple effects globally.

But first **we must prevent the powerful chemical lobby from wrecking the plan.** Avaaz is working with an incredible coalition of environmental groups, farmers, beekeepers, and scientists to bring one million citizen signatures and ensure EU institutions address our demands. **Now let's add another million voices from all over the world!**

..... AVAAZ.

Posted: 13 September 2021

The 'insect apocalypse' is more complicated than it sounds

Freshwater arthropods trended upward, while terrestrial ones declined, decades of data suggest

By [Susan Milius](#)

Taking a big view of the so-called Insect Apocalypse finds some possible winners among the losers, plus a lot of things we don't know yet.

Overheated end-times terms have popped up during the last few years conveying fear that the bounty of Earth's butterflies, beetles, bees and many other insects has started slipping away. The worry is not just about species likely to go extinct. Even species that will probably survive might be shrinking in population so much that their skimpy numbers no can longer fill their current roles in ecosystems.

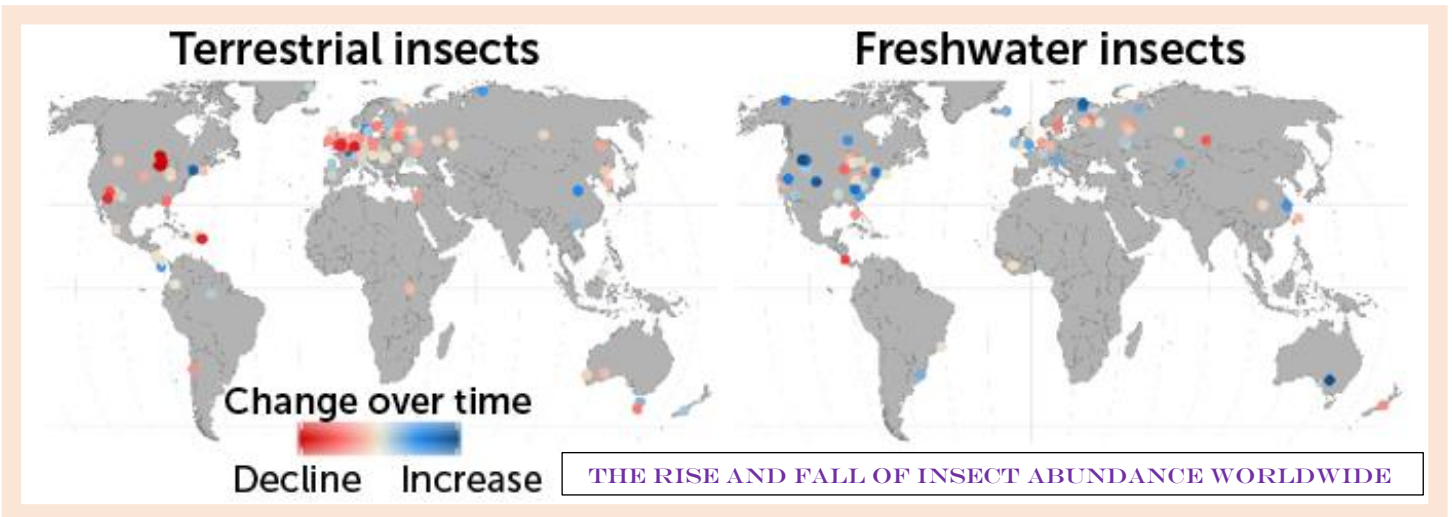
Now a new look at insect abundance, slanted toward North America and Europe, hints that freshwater residents are overall increasing. Data mostly gathered since the 1960s suggests that beetles, mayflies, dragonflies and other creatures that spend a good part of their lives in water [increased about 11 percent per decade](#), says a study in *Science* April 24. In contrast, land-dwelling insects shrank in abundance by about 9 percent per decade, the study says.

Insects will not disappear," says coauthor Roel van Klink, an entomologist at the German Center for Integrative Biodiversity Research in Leipzig. He and colleagues found, however, "a lot of reason for concern" overall, he says.

Van Klink first started thinking about the project in 2017, when careful, long-term monitoring of the biomass of insects flying in 63 protected nature preserves in Germany [had dropped more than 75 percent](#) over 27 years. "I doubt that's a



Face masks pose new threat to wildlife



“general phenomenon,” van Klink remembers thinking. After two months without hearing about anybody else starting a worldwide search for data, he says he realized, “I’ve got to do it.”

Van Klink and colleagues found 166 surveys of abundance (numbers of individuals and/or the absolute mass of insects and occasionally spiders mixed in) that ran for at least 10 years at 1,676 sites around the world. The oldest data went back to 1928, but data are most abundant from the 1980s. Researchers compared how steeply or gently the populations were falling and rising. Many of the sites already were affected heavily by humans when surveys began. For instance, he speculates that the rise in freshwater arthropod abundance may reflect some recovery as environmental laws improved water quality in the United States.

Surveys (dots) lasting at least 10 years show a range of abundance trends (redder for steeper declines, blue for steeper increases). Overall, freshwater insects have been increasing, and terrestrial ones declining, but both trends are distorted by disproportionate amounts of data from North America.

Van Klink warns against a search for one big threat to explain the trends. Even if humans stopped using pesticides tomorrow, “there’s no evidence that insects would suddenly be alright,” he says. He reels off a list of other threats — habitat destruction or fragmentation, climate change, pesticides, urbanization, light pollution and so on — that may be important in some places. The new paper’s search for studies and its strategies for mixing data from diverse sites seems “much more thorough and analytically

thoughtful” than those of previous papers on insect decline, says Alison Johnston, a quantitative ecologist at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Still she cautions that the trends this paper sees are driven largely by the outsized share of data from North America. Pulling the continent out of the data cuts the decline about in half.

Van Klink agrees this kind of analysis needs data from more places. “In all of Africa, we have two datasets,” he says. There’s nothing from India, and Australia “is shockingly underrepresented.”

The paper bristles with other cautions about conclusions drawn from such geographically skewed and relatively recent information. The news that freshwater organisms have been thriving may cheer you up, but such waters represent only 2.49 percent of Earth’s land area. In another caveat, researchers point out that datasets from protected areas are more abundant in this new study than protected areas are on the ground, so surveys of life in those cushy conditions may have weakened any signals of decline in the overall study.

Even with all the caveats, van Klink sees a looming problem in the apparently mild decline the paper detected of around 1 percent a year. “This is not even something you would notice from year to year, because the insect population varies so much,” he says. “But after 30 years you will have lost a quarter of your insects.” Despite the need for clearer data on insect decline, “we definitely need to do something about it.”

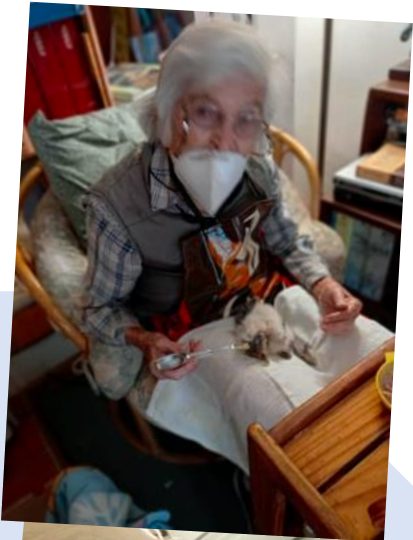
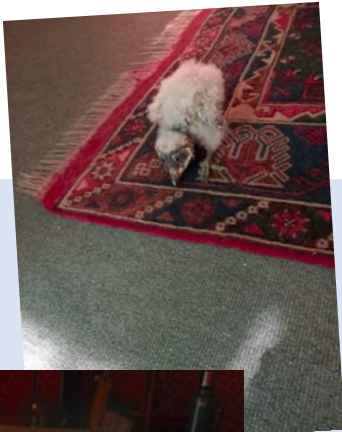
<https://www.sciencenews.org/article/insect-apocalypse-declines-biodiversity>

the story of Ooly the owlet

RAISING AN OWLET - Not for the faint hearted....

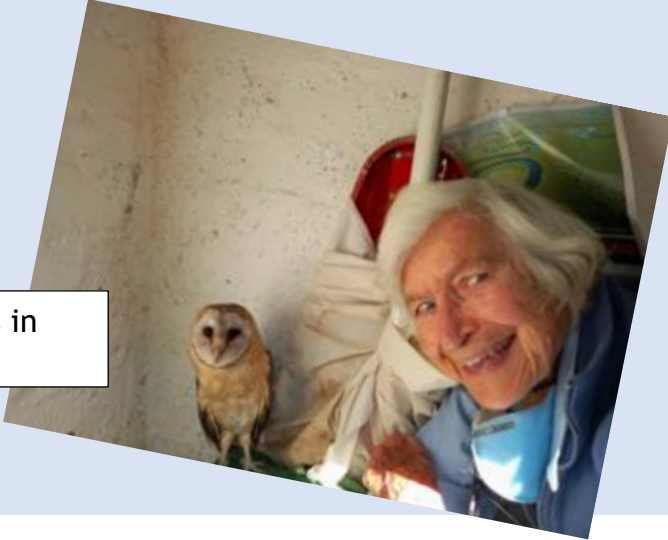
'I picked him/her up on evening of 17th June in Marang garden when he was a couple of days after hatching- maybe 2.

Surprisingly, the many feral cats had not got to him. I tucked him under my jersey and took him home and so the story begins. Next challenge is for Ooly to learn to kill his own prey and to strengthen his flight muscles before he is released in the bush away from cats/dogs/man.'



with his mum

Nicky Bousfield lives in Francistown.



SCATOLOGY ... an interest in or preoccupation with excrement and excretion.

What Makes Bird Poop White?

And why is it so hard to wash off your car?

Park under the wrong tree – one where a flock of starlings or grackles comes to roost – and nature may be painted in white on your car so thickly that it takes a trip or two through the carwash just to see through the windshield again.

Aside from helping you decide where not to park next time, this messy event raises a scientific question: Why is most of the bird poop we see white? The answer lies in the fact that birds, unlike mammals, don't produce urine. Instead they excrete nitrogenous wastes in the form of uric acid, which emerges as a white paste. And uric acid doesn't dissolve in water easily. Hence its ability to stick to your windshield like blobs of white plaster.

It appears that drivers of some cars might be asking for trouble. A study in England found that red cars are most likely to be the target of bird droppings, followed by blue and black. Green was the least likely. So be careful where you park. And give that red Mustang a wide berth.

For BirdNote, I'm Michael Stein.

<https://www.audubon.org/news/what-makes-bird-poop-white>



Female bar-tailed godwit 4BYWW sets landbird flight record



The female, named 4BYWW, travelled without stopping from Alaska to New Zealand, covering 12 200 kilometres in 8 days and 12 hours at an average speed of 59 kilometres per hour.

After touching down in Firth of Thames, a bay in New Zealand's North Island, Pukorokoro Miranda Shorebird Centre manager Keith Woodley, who has been monitoring the bird's migration, told local broadcaster RNZ about the remarkable feat.

The bar-tailed godwit species is known for taking this non-stop flight over the Pacific Ocean. A previous record holder, a male godwit dubbed 4BBRW made the same flight exactly a year ago travelling almost the same distance in 11 days. The previous longest recorded non-stop flight by a bird, of 11,680km, was recorded in 2007.

Dr Jesse Conklin, from the Global Flyway Network, told the Guardian: "They seem to have an onboard map. "They are flying over open ocean for days and days in the mid-Pacific; there is no land at all. Then they get to New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea where there are quite a few islands and, we might be anthropomorphising, but it really looks like they start spotting land and sort of think: 'Oh, I need to start veering or I will miss New Zealand'."

Picture: Wikimedia Commons

<https://www.getaway.co.za/travel-news/female-bar-tailed-godwit-sets-flight-distance-record/>

Growing Demand for Vulture Heads Threatens the Birds' Survival in Africa

Across the continent, traditional healers are increasingly using the body parts of vultures, creating an illegal market that has experts alarmed.



Last year, at dawn on March 26, an exhausted Mohamed Henriques slid into his airplane seat. He had just managed to make it onto the last flight that left Guinea-Bissau before the small West African country closed its borders due to the coronavirus pandemic. Down below, amid the rest of the passengers' luggage, sat the sole reason for his trip: a Styrofoam box filled with the corpses of three Hooded Vultures.

The days leading up to the flight had been a relentless race against the clock. As an internationally protected species, Hooded Vultures require transportation permits that usually take months to acquire. Henriques had a couple of weeks. And though the birds had arrived from the crime scene eight days before his flight, a pandemic curfew and ongoing [political turmoil](#) within the country further complicated the process. Eventually, with only seven hours left, Henriques managed to obtain the permits. But it wasn't until the wheels of the plane were tucked into the aircraft's belly did the ecologist begin to feel a sense of relief. Once safely back at his lab at University of Lisbon, in Portugal, where he was working on his PhD, he could finally find out what exactly had killed the birds.

Along with a hundred others, the vultures had been found dead near the city of Bafatá, located in eastern Guinea-Bissau. Henriques, who was in the country at the time doing fieldwork for his thesis on migratory shorebirds in the Bijagós Islands, had heard that people in the eastern part of the country had witnessed at least 50 vultures drop dead from the sky. "And then, the day after, we heard on the radio that people found 100 more birds," he says. In the following days Henriques started hearing of even more dead vultures in the same region. "That's when it got really confusing."

To discover what was behind the deaths, Henriques joined a team of five people from various African conservation organizations and veterinary services on a mission to one of the mass die-off areas near the city of Gabú. When they arrived, the group found hundreds of birds with their wings bent to the sides—a clear sign of the contortions poisoned raptors go through

before dying. Disturbingly, many had also been decapitated, and in some cases the team found freshly dead vultures with their heads recently removed. “Surely someone knew they were going to die,” Henriques says.

While he was in the field, new reports of deaths kept popping up, and over the course of three weeks around 2,000 vultures—all but one of them Hooded Vultures—were found dead in six locations throughout eastern Guinea-Bissau. “Without a doubt, this is the biggest single incident of mass mortality of vultures we have ever recorded anywhere in the world,” says André Bothá, co-chair of the Vulture Specialist Group for the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Even more troublesome was that one of every four corpses had been missing its head.



A poisoned Hooded Vulture in Gabú, Guinea-Bissau around March, 2020. Photo: Mohamed Henriques

After interviewing local environmental authorities, livestock herders, and residents in areas where the birds had been found, the field team discovered that three men from Senegal had convinced locals to place poisoned pieces of meat as bait in exchange for payment. The toxicology analysis from the three dead vultures that Henriques took back to Portugal confirmed that the birds had died from consuming methiocarb, a pesticide commonly used in agriculture and easy to find in any market. “We have enough evidence to believe this was a coordinated thing,” he says.

Now, a year after the crime, many questions remain unanswered. The police investigation stalled after the only suspect fled the country. Travel restrictions due to the pandemic made it impossible to track him beyond Guinea-Bissau’s borders, says Henriques. The pandemic and ongoing political instability also distracted from the incident and paralyzed institutions that might have been able to find an answer. Meanwhile, in the past year, almost 1,200 vultures have been found dead across the continent, and 200 of them were beheaded Hooded Vultures in West Africa, according to the African Wildlife Poisoning Database.

“This poisoning continues to kill vultures in Africa,” Henriques says. “Things on the ground have sadly not changed.”

Darcy Ogada, an ecologist at The Peregrine Fund, has been warning about the decline of African vulture populations for almost a decade. According to an [alarming 2015 report](#) led by Ogada, the population of eight vulture species on the continent has declined 80 percent in only 10 years. The report called for action to protect the 11 vulture species in Africa that are “collapsing toward extinction.” Since then, 7 of those 11 vulture species are now considered critically endangered. “The areas where things were really bad in 2015 have pretty much remained the same,” Ogada says.

Poisoning—either intentional or accidental—is responsible for 90 percent of the vulture deaths, Ogada found in 2015. In some cases, to keep circling vultures from tipping off enforcement agencies, poachers of big mammals in South and Central Africa poison the birds. “Whenever they kill an elephant or a rhinoceros, a few meters away, they put some meat laced with poison, so that the vultures come down, eat the poison, and die immediately,” explains José Tavares, director of the Vulture Conservation Foundation. In other cases, when farmers poison large carnivores and

mammals to prevent them from eating livestock or destroying crops, vultures become the unintended victims.

What happened in Guinea-Bissau, though, shows that the illegal killing and trade of vultures for their body parts is an increasingly worrisome threat, Ogada says. In most of West and South Africa, vulture heads are regarded by many as a good luck charm, similar to a rabbit’s foot in Europe or North America. Various vulture body parts are also used for traditional medicinal purposes. There’s evidence that more than a dozen ethnic groups use vulture heads, feet, and blood as treatments for a range of illnesses, as spiritual protection, or to gain the gift of looking into the future. According to a [2016 study](#), poisoning for such uses was behind 29 percent of the recorded vulture deaths in 26 West and Central African countries.



Hooded Vultures flock in Guinea-Bissau. Photo: Ana Coelho

Species like the White-backed Vulture or Rüppell’s Vulture are the most desired by traditional healers, leading to both birds’ populations being decimated and leaving both species critically endangered. Because of their scarcity now, poachers seem to be sourcing parts from countries where the populations of other species, like Hooded Vultures, have remained somewhat healthy, Ogada explains. Guinea-Bissau is one of those places. With roughly 43,000 Hooded Vultures, the country has the healthiest population in all West Africa, according to a survey Henriques conducted in 2017.

The pandemic has only exacerbated the problem, making an already lucrative business more alluring.

The use of vulture heads is a relatively new practice in Guinea-Bissau, which could partially explain its strong Hooded Vulture population, says Henriques. For this reason, experts don’t believe there’s enough internal demand in the country for all the missing heads from last year’s mass killing. Most likely, the body parts ended up in the stands of traditional healers in the bigger markets of Senegal or Nigeria, says Samuel Bakari, a vulture specialist for Africa at Birdlife International.

The pandemic has only exacerbated the problem, making an already lucrative business more alluring, says [Stephen Awoyemi](#), conservation biologist at Central European University. Awoyemi has spent the past 10 years investigating the illegal trade of vulture body parts in Nigerian markets. Due to the travel restrictions to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, prices have skyrocketed. Before the pandemic, a vulture head ranged between \$10-\$25, a dead bird went for \$42, and a live vulture could cost up to \$140 in Nigerian markets. Now, a head’s price can reach \$39, a whole carcass is \$92, and a live bird costs up to \$210. As long as prices keep rising, the illegal trade will remain extremely attractive for many, says Awoyemi. “Just like in every profession, if you excel, you can become rich in a matter of years.”

In 2017, 128 African, European, and Asian countries signed the first plan to tackle the mass mortality of vultures across the three continents. According to the [Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures](#), through 2029, all participating states have to implement 124 conservation actions, such as promoting poison-free alternatives to mitigate human-wildlife conflict, introducing and enforcing strict penalties for illegal wildlife poisoning, and establishing an international, coordinated funding strategy. But according to Chris Bowden, one of the plan’s original architects who works for the Royal Society to Protect Birds, the program hasn’t spurred the actions or commitment necessary to make a meaningful dent in the killings or the demand behind them. “I don’t think it’s added as much relative to what was already happening,” he says.

Curbing the vulture trade is particularly difficult in West African countries, says Ogada. There, the legal system historically hasn’t been as aggressive about prosecuting wildlife crimes as it has been in African countries where big mammals still roam. That’s why in several West African countries conservationists have focused on training police officers and authorities on collecting evidence that could be used in court, border patrol officers on identifying the critically endangered species, lawyers on prosecuting wildlife cases, and judges on understanding the gravity of the crimes. But this is a long process, and in the meantime, says Ogada, it’s key to engage with those who create the demand in the first place.

One attempt at this strategy started in 2019, when Birdlife International partnered up with the Nigerian Conservation Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the first project working directly with traditional healers from Nigeria, the country with the highest demand for vulture heads. The team has been working with 80 Nigerian traditional healers, trying to untangle trade networks and identify botanical alternatives used to treat illnesses supposedly cured by the vulture heads.



More than 100 White-backed Vultures and Hooded Vultures, both critically endangered, were poisoned in Mbashene, Mozambique in February of 2018. The birds were killed after feeding on a poisoned elephant carcass that was poached for its tusks. Photo: Andre Botha
The way leaders of the traditional healers’ organizations [in Nigeria] pass this knowledge is very organized,” Bakari explains. “They train other people and, through the project, we are trying to influence what they train. We want them to practice their tradition without having negative impacts on their biodiversity.”

But replicating the project in other countries might be tricky, says Bakari. In Nigeria, healers belonging to the Nigerian Traditional Healers Association don’t mind talking openly about their practices. In other countries, like Guinea-Bissau, the identity of a village’s healer is an open secret within the community, but the healer will not publicly admit that he plays that role. That doesn’t deter Henriques, though. “I think it’s a very interesting approach, and we should try it,” he says.

Yet others are skeptical that this strategy will even work in Nigeria. During his decade-long research in Nigerian markets, most buyers have told Awoyemi that they would never consider buying a vegetal alternative to a vulture body part. The birds’ powerful eyesight and the fact that they can

feed on anything—including human beings—gives them unique healing powers, according to religious beliefs. In the Yoruba primordial myth, a vulture flew to Olodumare, in heaven, carrying a sacrifice to the gods over its head so that the Earth could be saved. “In that case, telling a Yoruba healer to use a plant instead of a vulture’s head is not gonna cut it,” Awoyemi says.

The birds’ powerful eyesight and the fact that they can feed on anything gives them unique healing powers, according to religious beliefs.

Rather, he believes introducing vulture conservation into peoples’ value system is more effective than trying to challenge or change those beliefs. As the president of the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group at the Society for Conservation Biology in 2015, Awoyemi noticed that most traders selling vulture body parts in Nigerian markets are Muslims. Just as public health authorities have worked with [religious groups](#) to prevent HIV/AIDS in several African countries, Awoyemi wants to work with religious leaders in Nigeria to find passages in their scriptures that will inspire people to take up vulture conservation.

In the meantime, in Guinea-Bissau, Henriques is taking another approach, which includes education campaigns for the public and local environmental authorities. Through radio and TV appearances, he is trying to spread the message that the risk of a public health crisis increases without Hooded Vultures and their sophisticated digestive systems, which degrade tons of rotten meat and feces in urban settlements. Soon Henriques and his team will start meeting with stakeholders all over the country to make them aware of how important these animals are for humans.

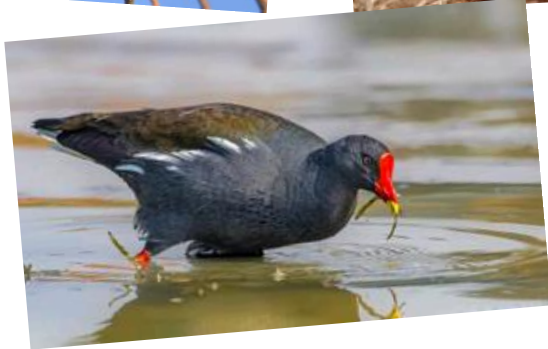
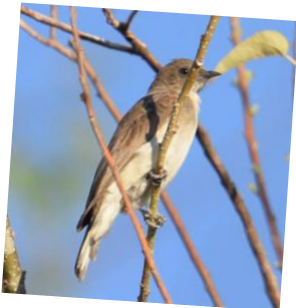
Ultimately, greater awareness among local residents and internationally could be the most powerful force to save these birds, says Ogada. Since the killings in Guinea-Bissau, some progress has been made on the international front: The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora recognized the belief-based use of vulture body parts as a priority threat for the birds, and created the first working group on West African Vultures. Its members are now working on a special report about the illegal trade that they hope will be introduced during the next UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties in Glasgow, Scotland. Through the report, they want to pressure African countries to adopt a regulation that will effectively tackle the issue.

When people talk about illegal wildlife trade in Africa, they think of elephants, rhinos, right?” Ogada says. “Nobody thinks of birds. But I think it’s time.

<https://www.audubon.org/news/growing-demand-vulture-heads-threatens-birds-survival-africa>



SOME OF THE PHOTOS FROM THE BLB WHATSAPP GROUP BEING SHARED, MOST BY IAN WHITE, CHAIRPERSON OF THE BLB, AND PHOTOGRAPHER



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Which birds can you identify? Contact I White on https://www.flickr.com/photos/ian_white/