



Kenyan refuse collectors under poison cloud

BY MARIA HALL

“God, it’s such an ugly bird,” my classmate mutters. I have to agree. Standing beside a wildebeest carcass is a Lappet-faced Vulture, one of five species of vultures found in the Maasai Mara. It is a truly unsightly bird with a large, naked, bright red head and scowling, dark eyes. Its thick feathers are jet black, unlike the surrounding Ruppell’s and White-backed Vultures that have tan-and-white bodies. The lone Lappet-faced is the most hideous in an already unattractive crowd of scavenger birds.

But it is a species at risk. The “garbage collectors” of the ecosystem are under threat from factors as diverse as changing land use patterns to poisons aimed at carnivores. But perhaps their most vulnerable facet is their reputation, often ill-deserved.

In Kenya and all over the world, these unsightly vultures have long had a tumultuous relationship with humans. People over the centuries have worshipped, feared and exploited them. Biologists have realised the ecological importance of these creatures, but this

understanding has not reached everyone, especially those in rural, pastoral regions. Today in Kenya, all vultures are threatened by farmers using toxic pesticides to exterminate predators such as lions and hyenas because they kill livestock. Vultures that scavenge on the poison-laced carcasses also die-quickly. If this continues on a large scale, the Maasai Mara will no longer contain these scavengers, and the beautiful plains will pile high with ugly carcasses rotting in the hot sun, promoting the spread of disease and carrion flies.





Vultures are not charismatic or sexy like so many carnivores found throughout the Mara region, but the role these birds play in the ecosystem is critical to the overall health of the environment. While soaring on thermals that can carry them many kilometres a day, vultures use their keen eyesight to spot predator kills and carcasses. Within minutes, a group of vultures can strip a full-grown wildebeest carcass of meat and organs. Evolution over millions of years has allowed vultures to fill this job of nature's janitor perfectly. All vultures have strong beaks that tear through skin and tendons, and in some cases, bone. Usually the first vultures to arrive at a carcass are White-backed Vultures, then Ruppell's Vultures—two species of Gyps vultures that are tricky to tell apart due to the fact that both birds are similar in size and coloration. Lappet-faced Vultures are more cautious than other species. This much larger bird feeds primarily on bones thanks to its large, powerful beak. Hooded Vultures are smaller compared to these other vultures and, unlike the

others, they have thin, delicate-looking beaks for getting the very last bits of meat off bones. White-headed Vultures are rare and elusive, and are surprisingly delicate eaters, being careful not to get their white-and-blue heads bloody.

Vultures keep Kenya's Maasai Mara clean and disease-free by consuming over 70% of carcasses, according to a study conducted by Dr. David Houston of the University of Glasgow. Hyenas and jackals travel to where food is near, but vultures are highly nomadic. Where vultures travel is still largely a mystery, but it is being examined. (see SWARA 2003:09)

For centuries, people have integrated vultures into culture. These distinct birds have earned respect and importance especially in religions.

Ancient Egyptians believed vultures were linked to maternity and love because their wide wings provided protection for infants. The goddess *Mut* of the New Kingdom was the goddess of motherhood, and her name was a variation of the ancient Egyptian word for vulture, "*mwt*". She was represented as a woman with the head of a vulture and was at the centre of one of the most popular festivals of the time.

In Tibet, dead people are often dismembered and fed to vultures in a practice known as 'sky burial'. The vultures consume everything, helping decompose a body in a region where firewood is not abundant. The birds are highly respected because of their service. A few years ago, a Chinese soldier shot a vulture and was stoned to death by Tibetans, an event that highlighted not just political tensions, but the veneration Tibetans have for these birds.

Contemporary views of vultures are more negative due to lack of understanding. Farmers worldwide have persecuted vultures they believe kill and consume livestock, despite the fact that vultures lack the strength and precision needed to take down prey. In cartoons and movies, vultures are sneering, ugly cowards associated with the bad guys. Remember Disney's classic film "*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*"? The Evil



PHOTOS BY: MUNIR VIRANI

Left Page: African White-backed Vulture on shrub.

Top: Ruppell's Vulture taking off.

Bottom: Lappet-faced Vulture in flight.



The endangered Egyptian Vulture.

THE PRIMARY KILLER OF VULTURES IN KENYA IN RECENT YEARS HAS BEEN THE DEADLY CARBAMATE-BASED PESTICIDE SOLD IN SHOPS AS FURADAN. MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES, THIS CHEMICAL IS INTENDED TO KILL NEMATODES AND BEETLES THAT EAT CROPS.

Witch had a pair of Lappet-faced Vultures follow her.

Vultures in East Africa are threatened by a number of factors, including habitat loss through human encroachment, exploitation and, most significantly, poisoning. Land use is a challenge in Kenya. Since independence in 1963, the nation's population has exploded from two million to 42 million people, and as a result, there have been rapid changes in land usage. In the Mara region, the Maasai now own land individually after centuries of viewing land as a common asset. Land is often subdivided and leased to farm wheat or maize. Agriculture and cattle grazing put pressure on areas where vultures forage, since the birds depend on ungulates that require wide, open expanses of land. Exploitation is a problem that many might not think of in terms of vultures. More charismatic

animals like tigers and elephants are the poster creatures for overexploitation.

The primary killer of vultures in Kenya in recent years has been the deadly carbamate-based pesticide sold in shops as Furadan (See SWARA 2009:04). Manufactured in the United States, this chemical is intended to kill nematodes and beetles that eat crops. It is used on rice, corn and alfalfa. Even in small quantities, the chemical blocks neural transmissions, putting people who come in contact with it in danger. In Africa it is being used to exterminate "nuisance" predators, namely lions and hyenas that occasionally take down livestock. In regions where poaching is still an issue, poachers target vultures and poison them to stop the birds from attracting authorities towards an illegally hunted animal. The carcasses are sprinkled with the poison, and all animals that come to

feed are killed almost instantly. In 2004 the largest case of vulture poisoning was recorded in Athi River, with 187 birds found dead at one carcass. Regarded as the most toxic chemical to birds, this poison destroys any species that scavenges, such as hyenas, vultures, Marabou Storks, Bateleur Eagles, jackals and Tawny Eagles.

Vultures in Kenya are at a tipping point. These long-lived, slow maturing birds cannot afford years of continued Furadan use. According to Kenya's Ministry of Agriculture and the Pest Control Products Board, Furadan is "a safe pesticide" whose "benefits outweigh the harm". The product website claims that proper use of the poison "does not create a risk to human health, wildlife, or the environment, and we will continue to promote its responsible use". Organisations such as the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the World Wildlife Fund, WildlifeDirect, the Peregrine Fund and the National Museums of Kenya have joined the effort to ban the chemical entirely. This has proven to be a battle and if it is not successful soon, there may be very few or even no vultures soaring over the Mara in a matter of years.

The Lappet-faced Vulture we have been watching turns and stares at us for a moment before snapping at the White-backed Vulture standing beside it. It seems too full to harass the White-backed any further. The annual migration of wildebeest has started, and the vultures are busy tidying the landscape.

Approximately 100,000 of the one million or so wildebeests on the move will die of natural causes during this migration. Only a healthy population of vultures can handle that clean-up job. The alternative is too awful to contemplate. ●

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