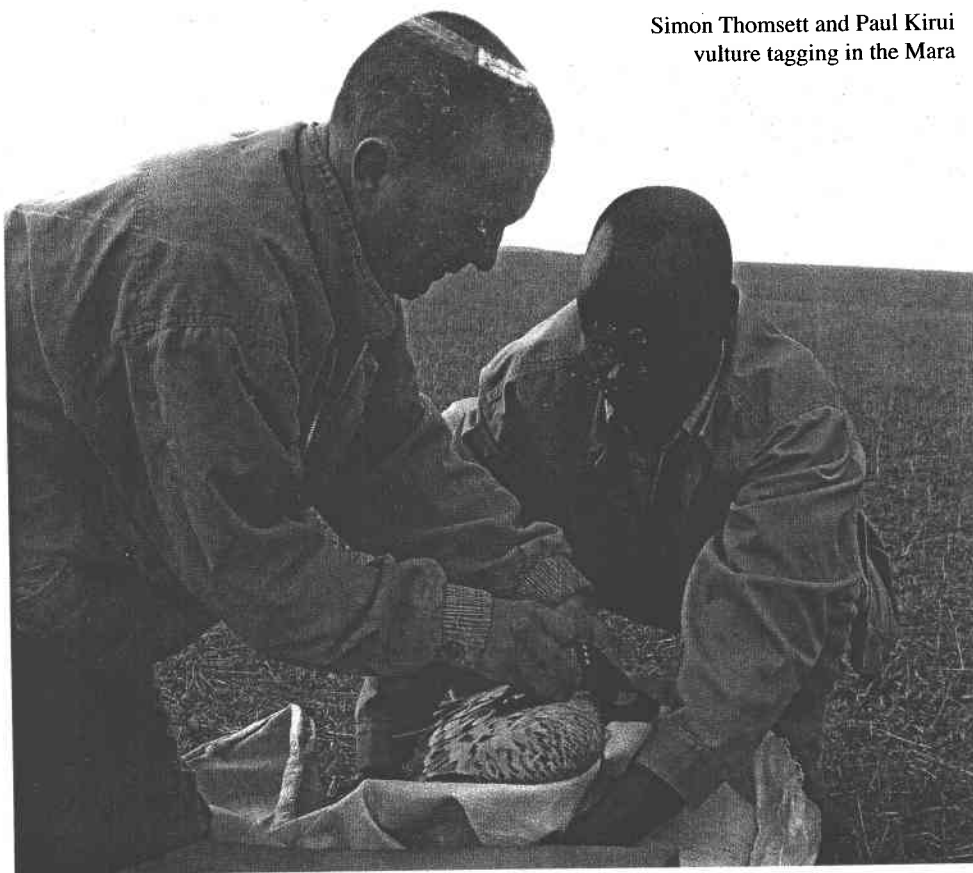




➤ African White-backed Vultures around carcass  
*Photos by Munir Virani*

# SAVING EAST AFRICA'S VULTURES

Simon Thomsett and Paul Kirui  
vulture tagging in the Mara



the Egyptian Vulture - is classified as Endangered, which means that this species has the highest probability of going extinct. The main threat to vultures in Africa is from indiscriminate poisoning of 'nuisance' wildlife such as jackals and hyenas, mainly by communities that raise livestock.

The main weapon of use is a carbamate-based pesticide containing the ingredient carbofuran (sold under the trade name Furadan). Banned in many countries around the world, this product is cheap and easily available over the counter in shops that stock agricultural products in the region. It only takes one carcass to

be laced with carbofuran to cause large-scale mortalities of vultures and other scavenging birds, like Marabou Storks, Bateleurs and Tawny Eagles.

In 2003, The Peregrine Fund in collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya and the Masai Mara National Reserve began studies on vultures and other raptors in and around the Masai Mara environs to understand their population dynamics and foraging range. With support from the Senior Warden, Michael Koikai, and Paul Kirui of Heritage Hotels, the team of vulture researchers has obtained valuable information that will contribute towards ensuring the future survival of this remarkable group of birds. Conservation action on species in jeopardy can only succeed if there is a scientifically sound understanding of the ecological processes that drive their populations. The vulture research team has so far wing-tagged approximately 70 vultures and is getting useful information on their movement patterns from reports of sightings (see vulture poster, page 25).

By Munir Virani

When Charles Darwin first saw Turkey Vultures on his famous voyage to South America on the H.M.S. Beagle in 1832, he was appalled and wrote about them as "disgusting birds with bald scarlet heads, formed to revel in putridity". It's a view of vultures and their "grotesque" habits, that echoes to this day - "hate is ravening vulture beaks descending on a place of skulls" writes poet Amy Lowell.

Vultures do not normally bring to mind a particularly inspirational image. We are familiar with vivid images of vultures jostling with their blood-stained heads, at a putrefying carcass amidst a dissonance of hissing. No wonder they are viewed as famished villains and opportunistic hooligans waiting for their chance to cash in at a kill. However, despite this popular view, there are those of us who regard vultures as among the most graceful and spectacular of all flying animals. With great mastery of flight, these denizens of the skies soar effortlessly, riding natural air currents to carry them afar in search of their food.

Of the eight species of vultures that occur in East Africa, five are listed in the IUCN Red Data list of globally threatened species, meaning that if no remedial conservation action is taken, their populations are likely to go extinct in the future. One in particular -

So why should we care about vultures disappearing in East Africa? Firstly, we have an obligation to protect vultures, as Kenya is a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which aims to conserve the world's biodiversity. Secondly, vultures are nature's free garbage disposal agents. They rapidly dispose of infected and rotting carcasses that may spread diseases like anthrax and brucellosis, which affect both humans and livestock. Imagine the Masai Mara plains during the peak of the wildebeest migration – vultures dispose of nearly 70% of all dead herbivores in the Mara-Serengeti complex.

Loss of vultures, therefore, represents loss of important ecological, economic and human health resources. It was not long ago when we used to perceive sharks and hyenas with horror and abhorrence. We have begun to appreciate these animals after discovering that they possess unique behavioral qualities. Vultures deserve not only the same appreciation but also gratitude for their ecological services, sympathy for what we have put them through and above all, our unstinting support to help their populations recover.

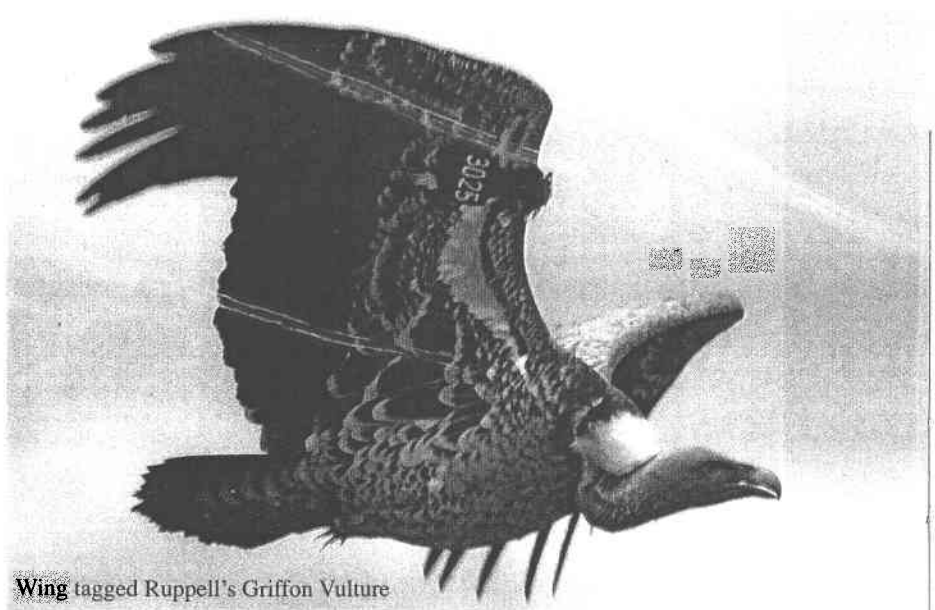
Charles Darwin later wrote “it is truly wonderful and beautiful to see so great a bird, hour upon hour, without any apparent exertion, wheeling and gliding upon mountain and river”.

*Munir would like to thank Simon Thomsett, Paul Kirui, Michael Koikai, Mwangi Githiru and Peter Njoroge and all the volunteers who have helped with the project.*



Dr Munir Virani is a Research Associate with the Ornithology Section of the National Museums of Kenya. He also directs the Africa and South Asia programs for The Peregrine Fund, a US conservation organization dedicated to conserving birds of prey worldwide. His

interests are raptors, photography and cricket.



Wing tagged Ruppell's Griffon Vulture

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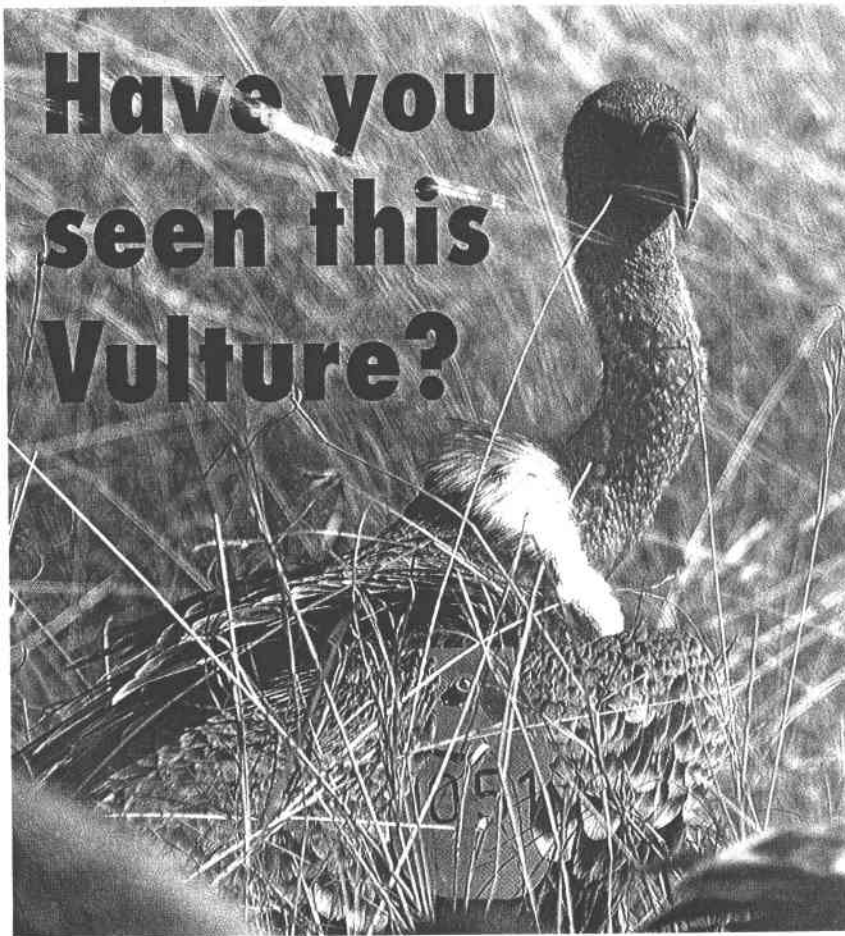
Vultures are highly evolved raptors that gave up their predatory skills a long time ago to specialize as scavengers. The first fossil records of vultures, nearly 50 million years old, show that vultures evolved alongside the cattle, antelope and deer on which they fed. Mammals began to thrive after the great dinosaur die-off and it made sense for vultures to exploit the large numbers of dead mammals that littered the landscape. It was also less stressful, easier and more fun to eat with your friends. So off went the talons and with them agility, aggression and killer instinct.

Instead, vultures became extremely efficient in locating dead animals by mastering the art of soaring to great heights, from where they could spot carrion. This is their greatest asset and notwithstanding human pressures of persecution, habitat loss and poisoning, vultures became the most successful of all raptors.

Vultures may look hideous by human standards, but they are marvels of evolutionary engineering. Their unparalleled ability to soar and glide through the air for long periods of time without losing altitude comes from having a large wing area in relation to body size. Combined with a skillful understanding of their environment to detect rising air currents, this makes them proficient at traveling long distances effortlessly in search of food. Vultures need to be heavy and large to soar at great speeds and they need to be able to eat huge amounts (up to 20% of their body weight) quickly to take back to their chicks. Being heavy and large helps them defend themselves — and their food — against jackals and hyenas at a carcass and it allows them to store more fat and go longer periods between meals.

Bare skin on their heads and necks helps vultures keep clean despite sticking their heads into rotting carcasses. More importantly, this bare area helps them radiate heat in hot conditions, thus avoiding heat stress. They have long necks for reaching far into carcasses and they have powerful and sharp bills to tear through meat and sometimes even through rawhide. Their feet are weak and designed for walking rather than grasping. Vultures are also usually silent, perhaps so that other scavengers are not attracted to a carcass. They are however extremely vocal during copulation, amplifying a series of groans, important as a pair-bonding ritual – basically warning their neighbors to keep off!

# Have you seen this Vulture?



A number of vultures in the Mara and Serengeti are tagged. If you see one, please note the number, date, time, and location (by GPS or nearest landmark). Kindly e-mail information to any of the following addresses:

[tanzaniabirds@yahoo.com](mailto:tanzaniabirds@yahoo.com)

[pkirui@mitsuminet.com](mailto:pkirui@mitsuminet.com)

[mkoikai@hotmail.com](mailto:mkoikai@hotmail.com)

[tpf@africaonline.co.ke](mailto:tpf@africaonline.co.ke)

**Play a part for the Mara-Serengeti...  
report tagged vultures.**

Vultures play an important role by feeding on wildebeest and zebra that die during their migration. It is estimated that vultures (not lions and hyenas) consume nearly 70% of the dead animals in the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem.

If vultures disappeared from the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem, the sights and smells of rotting animal carcasses would turn away millions of visitors, denying Kenya and Tanzania revenue.

Vulture populations are fast disappearing in Africa. In South Asia and parts of West Africa, populations have declined by as much as 98 percent over the last decade. They face poisoning, habitat loss and persecution.

The Vulture Project is aimed at improving our knowledge about vulture ecology so that conservation interventions are based on sound scientific principles.



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