



PHOTO BY ANDRE BOTHA

Insert: An adult Bearded Vulture  
Main photo: An immature Bearded Vulture  
in flight

THE AUTHOR



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# A Brisk Taste of Ethiopia's Raptor Treasures

I've never been to the Grand Canyon. I didn't expect to find it in Ethiopia either. Standing atop a jaw-dropping expanse of cliffs at Debre Libanos in central Ethiopia, I was informed by a local youth that this was the 'Grand Canyon' of Ethiopia. Since he'd never been to the American one either, there was no point in discussing the finer details of the comparison.

I'd landed in Ethiopia two days previously and was struck by many things. The first bird I saw while taxiing to the terminal upon landing at Addis Ababa airport was a Tawny Eagle. I won't guess the last time this bird was seen at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, but it would have been more likely to have been inside someone's luggage than competing for airspace with anything invented by the Wright brothers. On the drive from the airport, my excitement at being in the country for the first time overflowing, I attempted to engage my driver in conversation to learn about the scenes unfolding in the streets of Addis. By the time we reached the hotel we were silent, the gap in his English and my complete lack of Amharic being too large. It was a recurring theme throughout the trip.

Driving along the highway just north of Addis was like travelling back in time. I cursed my malfunctioning camera when we came upon a couple journeying to town in a horse and buggy. Men on horseback emerged from bends in the road, oxen pulled ploughs through the swampy muck where tef, the Ethiopian staple, was planted, and women carried large baskets of cow dung on their backs to the market. Cow dung is widely used for fuel in a country where Eucalyptus appeared to be the national tree and all land is owned by the government, so the incentive for Ethiopians to protect, let alone, plant trees is nil. The spectacular, rolling green hills shrouded in mist caused me to speculate that the landscape resembled what I imagine the Scottish countryside to look like.

Then we arrived at the Grand Canyon. What Ethiopia lacks in terms of furry wildlife, is more than compensated for by its birds of prey. If you've ever



The author during a recent visit to Ethiopia

participated in a hawk watch, the cliffs at Debre Libanos are a 'record day' times 10, not just in terms of overall numbers, but in combination with the diversity of raptors and the close distance that the birds seemingly float around you. It is a truly unique experience. A Peregrine Falcon zipped by that I was tempted to reach out and grab. Ruppell's Vultures, all with full crops, soared casually back to cliffside roosts where they squabbled amongst each other for the best seat on the couch.

Then came the Lammergeyers. Your chance of seeing these birds elsewhere in East Africa being all but nil, here they zoomed by so close I could identify them merely from the 'beard' hanging below their beak. I don't jump up and down for much these days, but seeing my first Lammergeyer rendered me momentarily airborne. Four hours of bird watching was like trying to push yourself from the table after a Christmas day feast. So it was feeling like a gluttonous birding fool, that I sat down with my Ethiopian colleagues to a late lunch of injera flat bread and vegetables. It was the fasting season, so meat was not served, but I was perplexed to see that my colleagues ordered a big bowl of spaghetti. The spaghetti was promptly

dumped on top of the injera and eaten like all the other vegetable toppings. Maybe that's why I found myself a kilo heavier upon my return to Kenya.

My short stay in Ethiopia was to lay the groundwork for a Vulture project we hope to start in the coming year. Despite the relative abundance of Vultures in Ethiopia, conservation professionals in Addis professed to their declines. And if the recent reports of Vulture poisonings in southern Ethiopia are anything to go by, Ethiopia's seeming surplus of these birds is not immune to the threats faced by Vultures in the rest of East Africa.

So having talked of future collaborations, potential funding sources and seen amazing landscapes over the previous three days, it was with mixed emotions that I dashed through a downpour to board the plane back to Nairobi. Once in my seat I was distressed to hear my seatmate cry throughout a cell phone call prior to take-off. One look around the back of the plane revealed that many of the Amharic-only speaking young female passengers were likely on a one-way trip to tough and lowly jobs in far-off countries. Thus the challenge of making conservation of Vultures relevant to everyday Ethiopians literally flew home beside me on my way home. ●