



19 August 2022

Start

Mass poisoning a devastating blow to vulture populations. But they're fighting back

A buffalo carcass, killed by snaring and then laced with highly toxic poison, was found by patrolling rangers near Punda Maria in the northern Kruger National Park (KNP) on 11 August 2022, resulting in the death of 108 vultures died after they fed on it. Species poisoned included 104 Critically Endangered White-backed Vultures, one Critically Endangered White-headed Vulture, two Vulnerable Cape Vultures, and one Endangered Lappet-faced Vulture. Twenty-four birds survived due to the swift action of responders from SANParks and the Endangered Wildlife Trust and were taken to the Moholoholo Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre in Limpopo for treatment. Two of the surviving African White-backed Vultures had recovered well enough for release yesterday, 18 August 2022, after being fitted with GPS tracking units so that we can monitor their progress (pictured above).

The demand for animal body parts to feed the illegal wildlife trade has led to thousands of vultures being poisoned across Africa, which has devastated populations and is driving them rapidly towards extinction. Scavenging mammals, including lions, hyaenas, and Leopards, are also severely affected by poisoning. Over the last ten years, there has been a steady increase in wildlife poisoning across the Lowveld and the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTCA).

The Greater Kruger, including the Associated Private Nature Reserves and the Great Limpopo Transfrontier landscape, is an important, vulture-rich landscape and currently a hotspot for wildlife poisoning, with at least six new incidents recorded in the southern half of the Greater Kruger since February 2020. In all of these cases, vultures were the most heavily affected by poisoning, with approximately 600 vultures from five threatened species killed in the Greater Kruger since January 2019, predominantly in the northern section of the Kruger National Park.

The current scale and rate of vulture losses to poisoning can lead to the local extinction of vultures in this region within the next four years. It is important to note that many incidents are not detected or reported as they occur in vast wilderness landscapes. Because of this, we suspect our records are under-reporting the severity of the threat.

Current population estimates for White-backed Vultures in southern Africa are around 7,350 mature individuals, and based on the last aerial surveys done in 2014, there are around 900 breeding pairs (and approx. 2,400 birds) in the Kruger National Park. This event has thus led to the loss of approximately 5% of the region's vultures. The populations affected in the latest incident will take some time to recover, particularly as it is the peak of vulture breeding season, and it is estimated that for every breeding adult lost, one chick is lost too.



African White-backed Vulture. Photo credit Andre Botha

The Endangered Wildlife Trust has been working with South African National Parks (SANParks) to improve the management and response to these devastating poisoning events across the Kruger National Park since 2019. The EWT's Wildlife Poisoning Response training has trained over 400 rangers to identify, detect, and deal with these events effectively by containing the crime scene and sampling carcasses for investigative purposes. Rangers are also trained on methods to save as many surviving birds as possible and decontaminate the scene to prevent further poisoning of animals or people. The EWT works closely with the Moholoholo Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre to facilitate the rapid rescue and treatment of vultures that survive these incidents. The rangers and EWT staff swiftly administer first aid to vultures on site, then safely transport survivors to the rehabilitation centre. Here they receive around-the-clock intensive care to ensure that they are stabilised, the toxins are eliminated, and the birds are fit and healthy before release. Over 2020-2022 alone, the EWT and Moholoholo Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre rescued 75 threatened vultures that survived poisoning incidents in the Kruger, of which 67 have been successfully rehabilitated and released back into the wild to have a second chance to thrive and breed.

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About the Endangered Wildlife Trust

Founded in 1973, the Endangered Wildlife is driven by a team of passionate and dedicated conservationists working through 13 specialised programmes across southern and East Africa, each falling under one of our three key strategic pillars: Saving species, conserving habitats, and benefitting people. Our critical work includes conducting applied research, supporting community-led conservation, training and building capacity, addressing human-wildlife conflict, monitoring threatened species, and establishing safe spaces for wildlife range expansion. The EWT works alongside key partners, including communities, business, landowners, academic institutions, and governments, to create a sustainable future for wildlife and people. Find out more at www.ewt.org.za.

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