

Project Update: December 2003

I am proud to announce that we have run out of satellite collars for our vultures. We are desperate to get more: the data which is already being received is incredible and is starting to rock the vulture world. These units are absolutely amazing and in the first 2 months of data collection, we have been surprised time and time again.

Why do we need more satellite collars (PTT's)? Well, we did it again. On the 21 March 2004, Namibia's Independence Day, we prepared for another capture of Cape Griffon vultures in order to fit our last two PTT's. The day was long and we had a few minor mechanical problems with the trap, but we were able to continue the operation and at approximately 4:30pm we sprang the trap with an adult Cape Griffon, a very unusual first year vulture and 28 Whitebacked vultures inside. Due to the lateness of the day we decided to process the Whitebacked vultures with basic measurements, blood samples and rings only. The satellite telemetry team was able to do a full work up on our Cape, fit the satellite telemetry and release him just as the sun was setting. With the arrival of darkness the team members packed up and we brought the unusual first year bird back to the house for observation.

Now - what was so unusual about this bird that she should receive such preferential treatment? Anne Scott first noticed her and we observed her all day long. She exhibits physical characteristics of both a Cape Griffon vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*) and a Whitebacked vulture (*Gyps africanus*). The same, or a similar bird, was observed during the January capture (but not caught) and the general feeling amongst all of the experts present was that perhaps our population may be producing 'hybrids'. This is amazing if it is so. It is possible that due to the near extinction of the Cape Griffon vulture in Namibia, the remaining male birds are breeding with Whitebacks. REST has observed copulation of these two species, but a chick has never been recorded anywhere in the world. In order to lend support to this hypothesis, we have found that our first satellite collared bird, Sky Banker, is roosting most nights in a tree. YES - you read correctly - A TREE, while he is supposed to be a cliff dweller! We are busy making further observations with the help of John Mendelson who is analyzing all of our satellite data. If you do not have John's book - The Namibian Atlas - I recommend it - it's a keeper. I haven't seen his latest book about the Okavango yet, but have heard it is great.

Anyway back to our vultures. The adult Cape Griffon is believed to be a male. If DNA confirms that he is a male, he will receive the name of EMPEROR and it is perfect as he is big and powerful. We hope that he will give us wonderful comparison data to Sky Banker so that we can get a feel for average flights, heights, distances, roosts etc. Hopefully he will be a Waterberg Plateau cliff dweller - which is where the Capes are supposed to roost. The second vulture, perhaps a 'hybrid', received the name of TEA BAG and we will be waiting with baited breath to see what her DNA tests produce. Will she in fact be the first ever recorded hybrid of a Cape and Whitebacked combo? If she does end up being a very unusually colored Whitebacked, she is still absolutely fascinating as it will be the first recorded juvenile Whitebacked vulture whose feather coloration is that believed to be only exhibited by a Cape. So it is a win win situation for us as researchers, and we are quite excited to get her DNA results.