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Mara vulture campaign

The conservation of vultures in Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve and environs gained new impetus with the holding – on 23 June this year at Fig Tree Camp in the Mara – of a groundbreaking day-long 'Vulture Workshop' attended by safari guides, senior Mara and Kenya Wildlife Service wardens and rangers, tourist lodge managers

and staff, and representatives from nearby group ranches.

The workshop – the first gathering of its kind in the area – culminated in the adoption of an Action Plan providing for improved monitoring of the Mara ecosystem's vulture populations and their health, while instituting a raft of measures aimed at safeguarding the ecological and biological integrity



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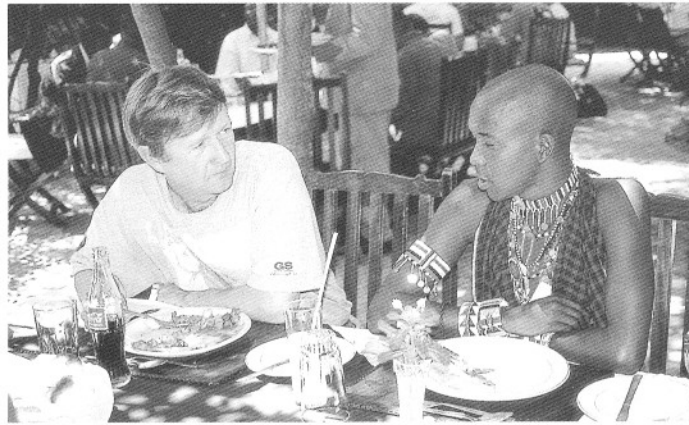
of these important scavenging birds.

It has taken the catastrophic collapse of entire vulture populations in South Asia – a crisis [SWARA 26:3&4] triggered by a bio-accumulation of the veterinary drug, diclofenac sodium, ingested from contaminated livestock carcasses – to raise the global profile of these highly efficient avian scavengers, which everywhere face severe threats of direct poisoning, persecution, and habitat loss.

The main goal of the Mara workshop, organised by the Department of Ornithology at the National Museums of Kenya in conjunction with The Peregrine Fund, was one of ensuring that mechanisms are in place to prevent a similar population crash in Africa.

Seven of the nine vulture species occurring in Kenya are represented in the Mara. These include three *Gyps* species, which are (in order of abundance) the tree-nesting **African White-backed Vulture**, *G. africanus*, the cliff-nesting **Rüppell's Vulture**, *G. rüppelli*, and the recently recorded **Eurasian Griffon**, *G. fulvus*.

The detailed proceedings and recommendations of the Mara Vulture Workshop can be downloaded from < www.peregrinefund.org >.



Clean-up squad: White-backed and Rüppell's Vultures on a kill in the Mara (facing page), with (above) one of the participants at June's Mara Vulture Workshop in discussion with Simon Thomsett (at left) of The Peregrine Fund.

Two eagle-like species, in the **Lappet-faced Vulture**, *Togus tracheliotus*, and the **White-headed Vulture**, *Trigonoceps occipitalis*, are probably more abundant in the Mara than at any other site in Kenya, with comparable densities likely to be met with only in Tanzania. The White-headed is listed as Vulnerable, while the status of the Lappet-faced has recently been upgraded to Threatened.

Two smaller species, the **Hooded Vulture**, *Necrosyrtes monachus*, and the **Egyptian Vulture**, *Neophron percnopterus*, occupy niches in the Mara not filled by the larger vultures. The Hooded Vulture tolerates close human proximity, to the extent of foraging on refuse

heaps. The Egyptian Vulture lives on scraps left over by the larger vultures, but its numbers are low in the Mara for want of protected nesting cliffs.

[Not present in the Mara, of the nine vulture species in Kenya, are the Lammergeier (or Bearded Vulture), *Gypaetus barbatus*, which is a highland bone-eating specialist (found nearby in Tanzania, however, on the Gol Mountains and in Ngorongoro Crater), and the Palm-nut Vulture, *Gypohierax angolensis*, a species that usually favours moist, low-lying palm savannahs.]

All vultures compete for the spoils of mortality wrought by starvation, disease, injury, drowning, and predation by

large mammals. Avoiding direct competition, each species specialises in a particular aspect of carcass detection, consumption, and digestion. As a group, the *Gyps* vultures typically scuffle over and around a carcass, until the hungriest of the dominant birds get to feed on the flesh and viscera by forcing their long, snake-like necks deep into cavities in the carcass. Larger and more powerful, Lappet-faced Vultures have shorter necks, but huge bills for tearing off skin and sinew. They also consume pieces of bone and cartilage that are inedible to most avian competitors.

The smaller vultures feed on fragments, as well as on insects and larvae attracted to carcasses. The low flying, early rising vultures – such as the Lappet-faced, the White-headed, and the Hooded – can locate even small carrion, and much of their food consists of bits of animal matter (afterbirths especially) weighing less than five kilos. These vultures may, on occasion, also kill small prey.

Operating in this manner, vulture groups consisting of multiple species act as the highly effective and ecologically indispensable clean-up squads of the African savannahs.

– by Munir Virani
and Simon Thomsett

Notorious Mara rhino has a calf

The female Black Rhino, whose extraordinary antics within the Mara Triangle of the Maasai Mara National Reserve have been well documented in past issues of *Swara* [throughout 2002, and then most recently in Vol. 26:1, 2003], has finally got a baby!

The first reported sighting of mother and calf came from **Francis Leboo**, a guide from Kichwa Tembo Camp, on 1 June this year. No one knows the calf's exact date of birth, but the Kichwa guides believe

this must have been towards the middle of May – more than two months after we had been expecting the new arrival, having all seen this female mating repeatedly with her then male consort late in 2002.

Mother and calf have since been seen again, although not often, in the same place where Leboo found them – near the Oloololo Gate. No one has yet succeeded in photographing them together. The mother seems very wary of approaching safari vehicles, keeping her calf

well hidden in the tall grass now covering much of the plains, so much so that it has not been possible even to determine the sex of the calf.

Knowing that she does at last have a calf is great news. *Swara* readers may recall how, in 2001, this rhino achieved notoriety through successive liaisons with eland and buffalo bulls, both of which animals she was at various times seen attempting to mount. Readers may also recall how her aggression resulted in the deaths (in

1998) of both the then dominant Kichwa lion and a zebra foal, followed (in 2000) by that of a wildebeest calf and (later still, in 2002) that of a lioness.

Her temperament appears to have cooled markedly over the past 18 months, since she took up with some male company (of her own species, for a change) late in 2002. We are all anxious now to see how motherhood affects her, although woe betide anything that presumes to threaten her calf!

– by Paul Kirui, KPSGA-S