



VULTURE CULTURE FACT SHEET

The Bearded Vulture

Monarch of the Mountains

Zulu : uKhozilwentshebe

Sotho : Ntsu

Afrikaans : Baardaasvoël

Scientific name: *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis*

In former times the distribution of this magnificent raptor extended from the Cape of Good Hope, along the eastern mountain spine of Africa into north-west Africa, then through the Middle East and into Europe and central Asia. Now the only population left in the Southern Hemisphere resides in our isolated and rugged Maluti-Drakensberg highlands. This endangered African sub-species has suffered more than 30% decline in recent history and there are thought to be only between 125 and 155 pairs left.

BODY BASICS >>>>>>>>>>

Bearded Vultures are big shaggy, birds that look more like eagles than vultures (their Zulu name even translates as 'eagle with a beard'). They are black in colour with pale heads and bellies. Their belly feathers, however, get stained a rusty brown colour by the iron-oxide found in the mountain rock on which they roost. Juvenile birds are completely dark and change colour gradually. Bearded vultures have a pale yellow eye, outlined in red and a black mask that extends into hair-like feathers on their lower jaw to make 'the beard' after which they are named. Ornithologists suggest that this beard has a tactile function cautioning the feeding bird from inserting its head too deep into a carcass and befouling its feathers.

They are well-adapted to their cold mountainous homes. Their broad, stiff overlapping contour feathers prevent the icy wind from penetrating the soft, insulating down underneath. Bearded vultures spend 80% of daylight hours soaring gracefully on the wing, their bare feet tucked in shaggy feathers to keep them warm. They weigh in at approximately 6kg, have long pointed wingspans extending 2.6m and extremely long, diamond-shaped tails.

Like all vultures they have a carrion diet, but Bearded Vultures are uniquely specialized, both physically and behaviourally, to live mostly on a remarkable diet of bones and bone-marrow. They have a very wide mouth and can swallow bones as long as 25cm, but accessing the nutritious bone marrow requires more work.

