

# **VULTURE CULTURE :**

## **THE CAPE VULTURE FACT SHEET**

**Scientific name : *Gyps coprotheres***  
**Zulu : Inqe**  
**Xhosa : Idlanga**  
**Sotho : Lenong**  
**Afrikaans : Kransaasvoël**

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The Cape vulture is one of the nine different vultures recorded in Southern Africa. Its conservation status is classified as "Vulnerable". What makes this species so important is that it is endemic to this region and is found nowhere else in the world. If our Cape vultures become extinct, there are no replacements! Cape vultures used to occur all over southern Africa, even on Table Mountain, but now their population is declining and there are only six big breeding colonies left.

### **BODY BASICS >>>>>>>**

Cape vultures are big, bulky, creamy-white birds with long, muscular un-feathered necks. Some people call them ugly! Their bald heads and long necks help them to keep clean while scavenging and accessing juicy morsels from right inside the carcass. Males and females look alike. Young birds have brown eyes which change to the yellow colour of adulthood at about five to six years of age when they become ready to breed.

### **VULTURE APARTMENT BLOCKS >>>>>>>**

Cape vultures are the only vultures in southern Africa that live together in large colonies on cliff-face ledges. These roosts can be visible from many kilometres due to extensive faecal 'white-washing'.

Cape vultures spend many hours every day on the wing, looking for food. They form part of an extensive aerial communication network watching not only each other, but other scavenging birds and animals. After all, many eyes make light work! Vultures can locate their meals from kilometres away using neither intuition nor smell, but excellent eyesight. They in fact see about eight times better than humans do. This is the equivalent of looking through a pair of binoculars.

### **FIRST COME, FIRST SERVE >>>>>>>**

Competition is always fierce at the carcass and a feeding frenzy often ensues. As nature's 'clean-up crew' vultures have an important ecological role to play. A group of gobbling, squabbling vultures can strip a dead impala in a few minutes

or a cow in a few hours, long before the carcass decays. This helps prevent the spread of disease and parasite build up. Their tongues are rough and scoop-like, enabling them to gobble muscle, intestines, organs and even bone fragments at a rapid rate. They store this hasty meal in their crop for later digestion. Although vultures get filthy dirty when feeding, they are in fact very clean creatures and preen and bathe often. They then 'bake' in the hot sun with open wings, which also helps to kill bacteria and viruses.

## **GROWING PAINS >>>>>>**

Although they have large extended families, Cape vultures are believed to be loyal to a single partner. They build their nest together and line it with dry grass which they carry to the cliff in their beaks and then stomp into shape. The female only lays one egg and chicks are fed by 'mouth-to-mouth regurgitation'. Sadly less than 65% of these fluffy bundles survive their first year of life.

Scientists have noticed malformed and thin bones in Cape vulture chicks caused by insufficient calcium intake. It is thought that this is because there are less large free-ranging predators (like lions and hyena) to break up carcass bones, so there are fewer bone fragments available for adult vultures to take back to their growing chicks. By physically breaking up carcass bones placed at feeding stations we can facilitate this calcium requirement.

## **SURVIVOR SOUTH AFRICA >>>>>>**

As the big herds of wild animals have diminished, there is less food available for vultures. Man-made threats put even more pressure on their survival chances. As better farm husbandry practices develop there are less livestock mortalities. Conversely, over-grazing causes bush encroachment, which hinders the vultures' visual ability to find carcasses. Vultures often get electrocuted by, or collide with, power-lines and even poisoned indirectly by people targeting stock killers. There is a cultural belief that vultures locate their food with a clairvoyant ability. As a result, vultures are killed and their body parts (especially brains) used for traditional medicine purposes to transfer this 'foresight' to the consumer.

Another myth is that these big birds are a threat to livestock. Unlike the big eagles, vultures have weak feet, designed for gripping not killing. They are extremely wary when approaching a carcass, often perching to assess whether the coast is clear. They would be even less likely to try and immobilize live prey.

Cape vultures are awesome birds, in the truest sense of the word, worthy of our respect and protection. We, as South Africans, hold the key to their survival.

