



Results of the 2014 Vulture Count Day

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Introduction

The Vulture Count Day was initiated in 2003 by Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (Ezemvelo) with the purpose of; 1) obtaining a minimum total count of each species, 2) recording marked individuals, as well as 3) raising awareness about the plight of vultures.

The count day involves the counting of vultures at feeding sites/vulture restaurants across the country annually on the first Saturday of September. The Count Day is now held as part of a National Vulture Awareness Day organised by the Birds of Prey Programme of the Endangered Wildlife Trust which forms part of International Vulture Awareness Day.

Method

Observers were required to identify and count all vultures seen at the feeding site between 07h00 and 14h00 on 6 September 2014. Birds were classified into age classes where possible and details of any marked birds were recorded.

In order to reduce the risk of double counting birds at neighbouring sites, observers were asked to record the time of each observation.

Results

The count day began with nine sites taking part in the Drakensberg area during 2003 and 2004. No count day was organised in 2005 and only an awareness day was held in 2006 and 2007. Since 2008, the number of sites taking part has grown to c. 30 sites from the coast, Zululand and the Maloti-Drakensberg mountains in Lesotho, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State and Eastern Cape.

In 2014 vulture count results were received from 26 sites overall, 23 of which were counts done at feeding sites (Figure 1). The sites that took part in the count day included, two from the Eastern Cape, two from the Free State, 16 from KwaZulu-Natal and three from Zimbabwe (Figure 1). A large number of sites were counted in the Drakensberg region (13). Of the 23 sites, 10 were in provincially managed protected areas, four were in privately run nature reserves/lodges, eight were on private farm-land and one was on communal land. Not all sites had carcasses on the day of the count, and some sites had no vultures on the day.

Overall; 913 Cape Vultures (617 in 2013), 27 Bearded Vultures (35 in 2013), 760 White-backed Vultures (438 in 2013), 16 Lappet-faced Vultures (26 in 2013), four White-headed Vultures (three in 2013) and 178 Hooded Vultures (two in 2013) were counted during the observation period on 6 September 2014 (Table 1). More Cape and White-backed Vultures were sighted in 2014 than in 2013 and many more Hooded Vultures were sighted, all in Zimbabwe. A comparison of the number of sightings per species over the past few years is provided in Figures 2a and 2b.

Table 1: Summary of the total number of vultures observed at participating vulture feeding sites on 6 September 2014

Species	Province observed in	Total	Adults	Juveniles	Unknown
Cape Vulture	KZN, FS, EC	913	762	83	326
Bearded Vulture	KZN, FS, EC, Lesotho	27	11	5	11
Whitebacked Vulture	KZN	760	296	78	386
Lappetfaced Vulture	KZN	16	14	1	1
Whiteheaded Vulture	KZN	4	3	1	0
Hooded Vulture	KZN	178	86	37	55

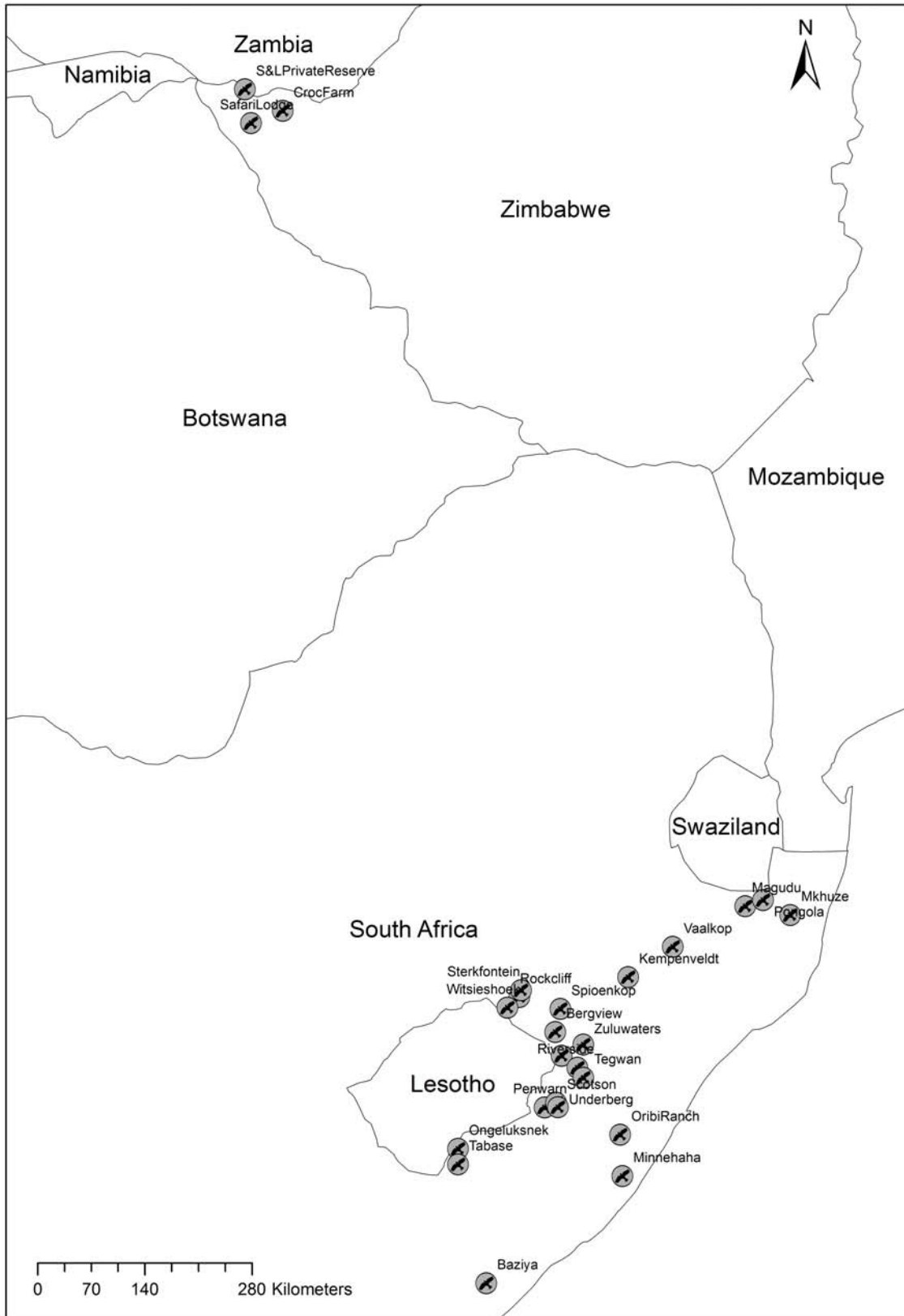


Figure1: The location of sites that participated in the 2014 Vulture Count Day.

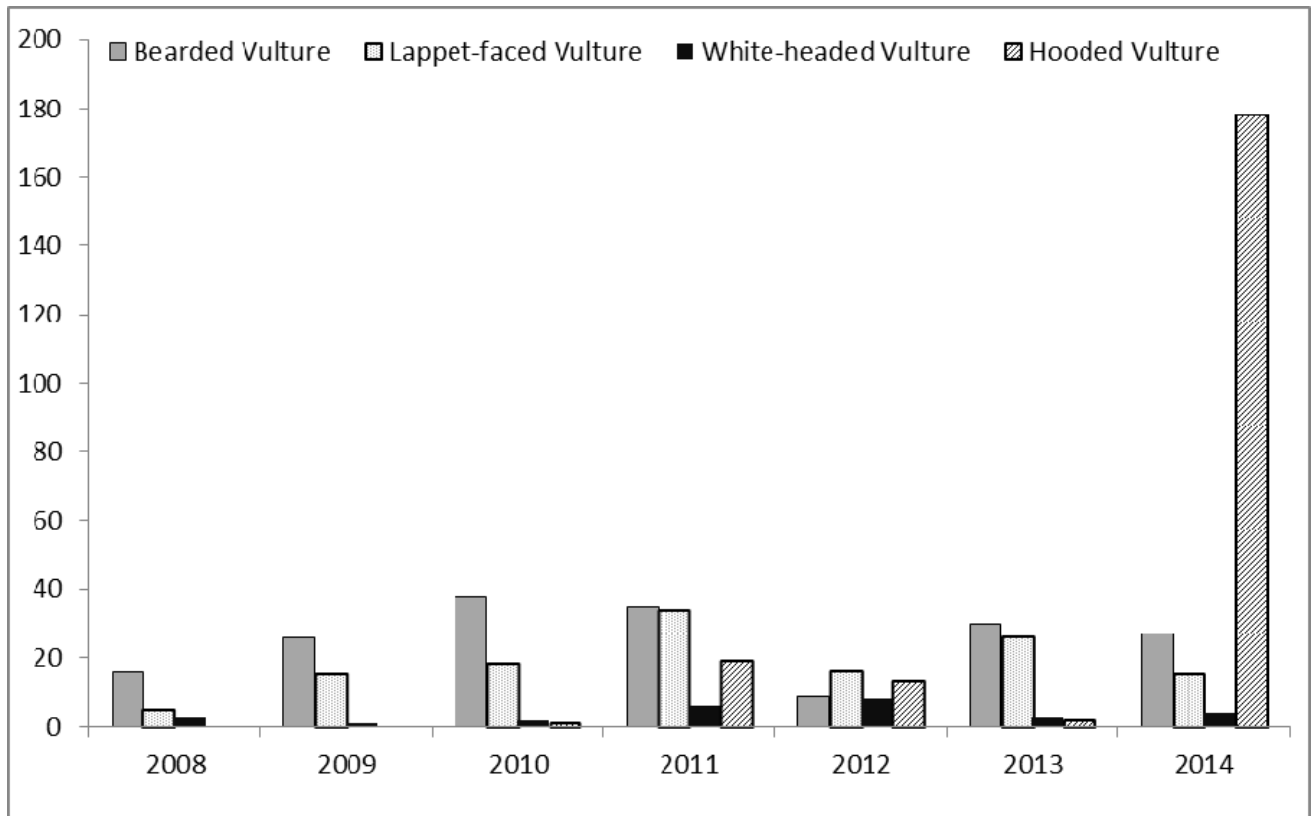


Figure 2a: The number of sightings of Bearded, Hooded, Lappetfaced, Palmnut and Whiteheaded Vultures between 2008 and 2014.

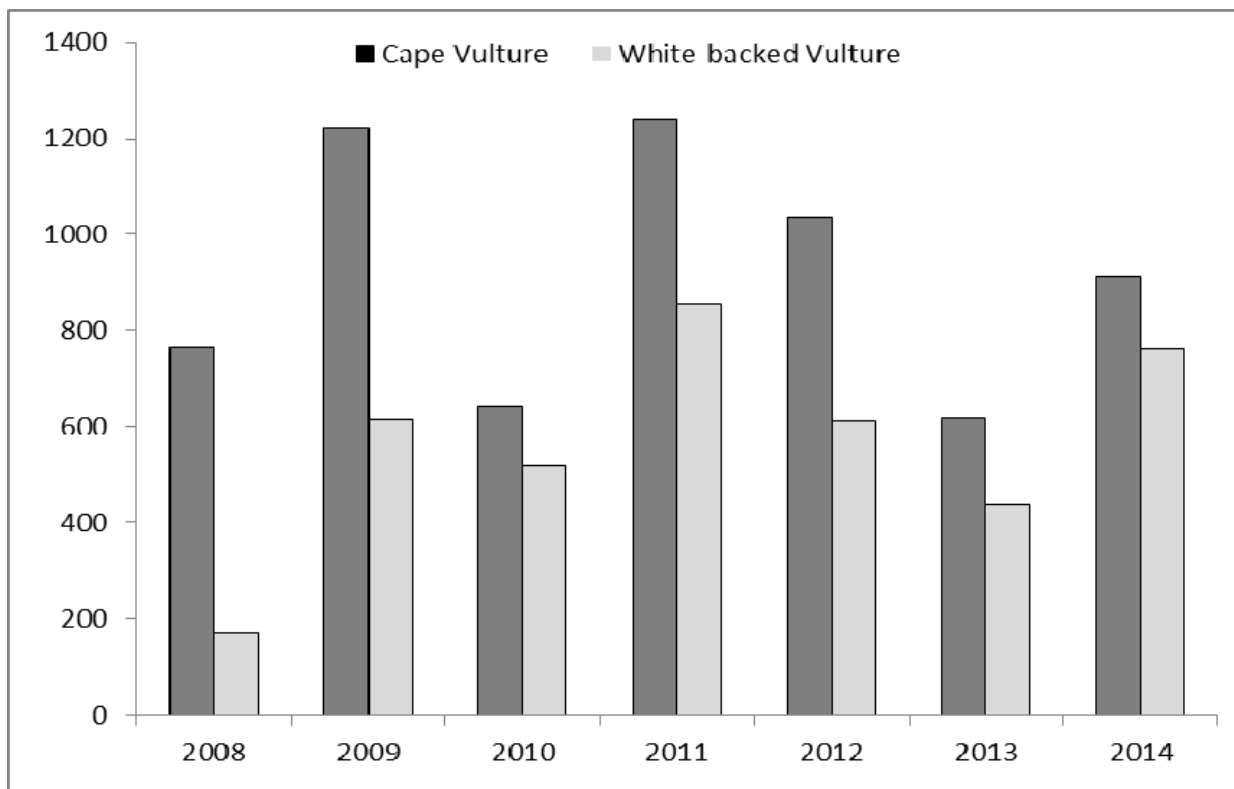


Figure 2b: The number of sightings of Cape and Whitebacked Vultures between 2008 and 2014.

The details of the number of birds per site are provided in Appendix 1, Tables 3-9. The highest numbers of Cape Vultures (Table 3) were seen at Scotson Farm, Rockcliff roost site, Bergview and Sterkfontein Dam Nature Reserve. There were also a large number of Bearded Vultures sighted at Rockcliff as well as Giants Castle (Table 4). Pongola Game Reserve, Kempenveldt and Safari Lodge and Stanley and Livingston Private Reserve had by far the largest numbers of White-backed Vultures with up to 180 counted at a site (Table 5). Few Lappetfaced Vultures were sighted, mainly at Pongola and Magudu Game Reserves (Table 6) and Whiteheaded (four) were only sighted at Stanley and Livingston Private Rerve (Table 7). Hooded Vultures were only sighted in Zimbabwe in 2014 (Table 8), with most of these sightings at Safari Lodge (Victoria Falls). Although the time of each observation was used to avoid double counting between nearby sites, it is possible that some individuals were sighted at more than one feeding site.

Sites where no birds were seen on the count day included: Mkuze, Zuluwaters, Spioenkop and Tegwan. Many of these sites had carcasses available the day before and were visited by vultures either before or after the count day.

Twelve marked birds were seen at feeding sites on the count day, most of which were seen at Pongola Game Reserve and Minnehaha (Table 2). Six White-backed Vultures with yellow patagial tags were seen in Pongola Game Reserve of which three tags were visible. Two were birds tagged at Kempendveldt feeding site near Dundee and one was tagged at Pongola Nature Reserve. The tagged Lappet-faced Vulture seen at Pongola Game Reserve was tagged in Hluhluwe Game Reserve. All tagged birds seen at Minnehaha (Umzimkhulu) were Cape Vultures tagged at the site in January 2013. One Bearded Vulture was seen with a satellite transmitter at Witsieshoek. This individual, Jeremia, has a nest on the escarpment nearby the feeding site. The other tagged Bearded Vulture seen at the same site during the 2013 count day was found dead (poisoned) earlier in 2014.

Table 2: The details of marked birds observed on 6 September 2014

Vulture restaurant	Vulture Species	Type of marking	Location and date of marking event
Pongola	White-backed Vulture	Patagial tag N043	Kempenveldt 2010
Pongola	White-backed Vulture	Patagial tag N096	Kempenveldt 2013
Pongola	White-backed Vulture	Patagial tag not visible	Kempenveldt 2010
Pongola	White-backed Vulture	Patagial tag not visible	Kempenveldt 2010
Pongola	White-backed Vulture	Patagial tag not visible	Kempenveldt 2010
Pongola	White-backed Vulture	Patagial tag P046	Pongola Nature Reserve
Pongola	White-backed Vulture	Patagial tag H022	Hluhluwe Game Reserve
Minnehaha	Cape Vulture	Patagial tag N127	Minnehaha 2013
Minnehaha	Cape Vulture	Patagial tag N145	Minnehaha 2013
Minnehaha	Cape Vulture	Patagial tag N114	Minnehaha 2013
Minnehaha	Cape Vulture	Patagial tag not visible	Minnehaha 2013
Witsieshoek	Bearded Vulture	Satellite transmitter	Witsieshoek 2011

Conclusion

The Vulture Count Day is a valuable part of Vulture Awareness Day which has been an international event for the past three years. Although the number of sites participating in 2014 was lower than in previous years, there are still a high number of sites that were counted, particularly in the Drakensberg area. Although it is possible that some birds may have been recorded at more than one feeding site, the count provides a reasonable minimum count of each vulture species. The count day is also an opportunity to collect data on marked birds, and in 2014 a number of marked birds were sighted across KwaZulu-Natal.

The overall number of birds counted in 2014 was lower than the numbers counted in 2012 and 2013. This could, however, be because more sites participated in the previous years' counts.

Considering that more than 100 vultures can visit a site at a time, the number of sites participating in the count has a considerable effect on the count day results. The number of birds sighted at the Zimbabwe feeding sites added considerably to the total number of vultures observed, particularly Hooded Vultures which are rarely seen in KwaZulu-Natal.

Ideally the count day should cover sites throughout the range of the five vulture species. The coverage in the Free State, northern part of the Eastern Cape and East Griqualand area has been poor the last few years. The inclusion of more sites in these areas will undoubtedly increase the total count numbers since they are within the foraging range of Cape and Bearded Vultures. Sites within the range of the Palmnut Vulture should also be included in the count.

Recommendations

For this count to be successful in estimating a minimum population size, several recommendations are listed below:

- The event must be held annually on the first Saturday in September from 7h00 to 14h00.
- The event must be organised by the Birds of Prey Working Group and publicised internationally.
- Regional Champions are needed to coordinate the count in their regions.
- The event must be used to update the Vulture Restaurant/Feeding Site Database.
- Sites in the same geographical area must be in radio or cell phone contact with each other to reduce the possibility of birds moving between sites being counted twice.
- Even if no birds visit the site on the count day, forms must still be submitted.
- Sites must be regularly supplied with carcasses leading up to the count day (those sites with freezer storage container facilities within the Drakensberg area can assist with this).
- Conservation Officers are to determine which feeding sites are active within their areas and encourage land owners to participate.
- A special effort must be made to include sites not well covered during previous years.
- Counts at feeding sites throughout the year will provide an indication of the age ratios within the population and seasonal trends in feeding site use.
- Observers should estimate the total number of birds counted on the day or at any one time. A number of "busy" sites may have the same birds may return later in the day, therefore totalling all the sightings may result in an over-estimation of the number of birds.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all those that participated in the count day and those that collated the data.

APPENDIX 1

Table 3: The number of Cape Vultures observed on 6 September 2014

Vulture restaurant	Location	Total	Adults	Juveniles	Unknown
Highflats, Oribi Ranch	Port Shepstone, KZN	48	0	0	48
Minnehaha (Umzimkulu)	Port Shepstone, KZN	52	0	0	52
Bergview Estate	Winterton, KZN	157	0	0	157
Scotson Farm	Underberg, KZN	199	149	50	0
Underberg (roost)	Underberg, KZN	13	13	0	0
Kempenveldt	Dundee, KZN	10	10	0	0
Sterkfontein Dam	Harrismith, FS	49	40	9	0
Vaalkop Farm	Vryheid, KZN	42	0	0	0
Ongeluksnek	Matatiele, EC	19	0	0	19
Rockcliff (roost)	Bergville, KZN	137	137	0	0
Baziya A/A	Eastern Cape	26	26	0	0
Penwarn Farm	Underberg, KZN	6	1	5	0
Sterkfontein	Harrismith, Free State	105	86	19	0
Giants Castle	Moorriver, KZN	50	0	0	50
Total		913	462	83	326

Table 4: The number of Bearded Vultures observed on 6 September 2014

Vulture restaurant	Location	Total	Adults	Juveniles	Unknown
Scotson Farm	Drakensberg, KZN	1			
Tabase (nest site)	Drakensberg, Eastern Cape	1	1		
Giant's Castle	Drakensberg, KZN	10			
Rockcliffe	Drakensberg, KZN	8	8		
Witsieshoek	Drakensberg, Free State	4	2	2	
Riverside	Drakensberg, KZN	3		3	
Total		27	11	5	11

Table 5: The number of Whitebacked Vultures observed on 6 September 2014

Vulture restaurant	Location	Total	Adults	Juveniles	Unknown
Safari Lodge (Victoria Falls)	Zimbabwe	173	12	2	159
Stanley and Livingstone Private Reserve	Zimbabwe	121	43	31	47
Crocodile Farm (Victoria Falls)	Zimbabwe	72	60	12	0
Pongola Game Reserve	Pongola, KZN	180	154	26	0
Kempenveldt	Dundee, KZN	180	0	0	180
Magudu Game Reserve	Pongola, KZN	31	24	7	0
Amakhosi Lodge	Pongola, KZN	3	3	0	0
Total		760	296	78	386

Table 6: The number of Lappetfaced Vultures observed on 6 September 2014

Vulture restaurant	Location	Total	Adults	Juveniles	Unknown
Amakhosi Lodge	Pongola, KZN	1	1	0	0
Pongola Game Reserve	Pongola, KZN	6	6	1	0
Magudu Game Reserve	Pongola, KZN	4	4	0	0
Kempenveldt	Dundee, KZN	1	1	0	0
Bergview	Drakensberg, KZN	1	0	0	1
Stanley and Livingstone Private Reserve	Zimbabwe	3	2	1	0
Total		16	14	1	1

Table 7: The number of Whiteheaded Vultures observed on 6 September 2014

Vulture restaurant	Location	Total	Adults	Juveniles	Unknown
Stanley and Livingstone Private Reserve	Zimbabwe	4	3	1	0
Total		4	3	1	0

Table 8: The number of Hooded Vultures observed on 6 September 2014

Vulture restaurant	Location	Total	Adults	Juveniles	Unknown
Safari Lodge (Victoria Falls)	Zimbabwe	109	34	20	55
Stanley and Livingstone Private Reserve	Zimbabwe	3	2	1	0
Crocodile Farm (Victoria Falls)	Zimbabwe	66	50	16	0
Total		178	86	37	55

Table 9: Other birds observed on 6 September 2014

Vulture restaurant	Location	Species	Total
Safari Lodge (Victoria Falls)	Zimbabwe	Marabou Stork	2
Stanley and Livingstone Private Reserve	Zimbabwe	Yellow-billed Kite	1
		Tawny Eagle	2
		Yellow-billed Kite	3
Crocodile Farm (Victoria Falls)	Zimbabwe	Marabou Stork	17
		Hawk	1
Baziya A/A	Eastern Cape	Pied Crows	10
Scotson Farm	Drakensberg, KZN	Sacred Ibis	2
		Yellow-billed Kite	1
		Jackal Buzzard	1
		Jackal Buzzard	1
		Tawny Eagle	1
Giants Castle	Drakensberg, KZN	Pied Crow	5
		Marabou Stork	2
		Marabou Stork	5
Pongola Game Reserve	Pongola, KZN	Steppe Buzzard	1
		House Crow	100
Magudu Game Reserve	Pongola, KZN	Raven	30-40
		Yellow-billed Kite	1
Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve	Drakensberg, Eastern Cape	Tawny Eagle	2
Kempenveldt	Dundee, KZN		