

Polyandrous trios in the southern African Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis*?

Sonja Krüger

Trios of adult Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis* were recently observed at a nest site in South Africa and have been observed regularly over the past three breeding seasons at a nest site in Lesotho. This is the first time that trios have been seen at a nest site in South Africa and documented for southern Africa.

The observations were made during the annual nest site monitoring activities undertaken by various observers in both countries. In each case, observations were recorded during a period of up to three hours at the nest.

The South African trio was observed by Douglas van Zyl at a nest site in Monk's Cowl in the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site during June 2004. Two of the individuals were observed copulating near the nest. Observations at the Black Mountain nest site in Lesotho indicate the presence of a trio during each of the past three breeding seasons. A trio was observed at the site by John Crowson, Sonja Krüger and Athol Marchant in August 2004, where two individuals were observed copulating. In September 2005, Sonja Krüger and Alfonso Godino also observed a trio with all three individuals relieving at the nest. During the observation period,

two individuals were seen entering the nest to relieve the bird that was on the nest. In 2006, observations of a trio were made on three different occasions by David Allan, Sonja Krüger, Chris Wex and John Crowson between March and July. David Allan also observed two individuals copulating (D.G. Allan pers. comm).

Trios have not been recorded for the Black Mountain nest site prior to 2004, but trios have been observed at other nest sites in Lesotho in the past. Andrew Jenkins and David Maphisa observed a trio at a nest in the Mohale area in the late 1990s, with two of the birds behaving aggressively towards each other (A. Jenkins pers. comm.). David Allan also observed a trio at a nest in the Katse Dam area in August 2000, where three adults had been observed together on the breeding cliff during the previous two summers (D.G. Allan pers. comm). It would thus appear that trios are a more common sight in Lesotho than in South Africa.

Polyandrous trios have frequently been recorded in Bearded Vulture populations in Europe; for example, by Heredia & Donázar (1990) and Bertran & Margalida (2002). In contrast, polyandrous trios have not been recorded for southern

Africa, despite detailed observations by Christopher Brown of the breeding biology of the species in the 1980s (Brown 1988). Before assumptions of polyandry can be made, more detailed observations are required over the next few breeding seasons to determine whether the presence of trios suggests polyandry in the southern African Bearded Vulture

or just cooperative foraging by off-duty birds from neighbouring nests. In addition, the implementation of various actions identified during the Population and Habitat Viability Assessment of the Bearded Vulture (Krüger et al. 2006), may provide more information on the possible reasons for, and frequency of, trios in southern Africa.

References

- Bertran, J. & Margalida, A. 2002. Social organization of a trio of Bearded Vultures (*Gypaetus barbatus*): Sexual and parental roles. *Journal of Raptor Research* 36: 66-70.
- Brown, C.J. 1988. A study of the Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* in southern Africa. Ph.D. Thesis, Zoology Department. Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal.
- Heredia, R. & Donazar, J.A. 1990. High frequency of polyandrous trios in an endangered population of Lammergeiers *Gypaetus barbatus* in northern Spain. *Biological Conservation* 53(3): 163-171.
- Krüger, S., Piper, S., Rushworth, I., Botha, A., Daly, B., Allan, D., Jenkins, A., Burden, D. & Friedmann, Y. (eds). 2006. Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis*) Population and Habitat Viability Assessment Workshop Report. Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (SSC / IUCN) / CBSG Southern Africa. Endangered Wildlife Trust, Johannesburg.

Keywords: Behaviour, breeding, polyandrous trios.
Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus meridionalis*.

Author's address: Sonja Krüger, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, P.O. Box 13053, Cascades, 3202; e-mail address: skrueger@kznwildlife.com.

