

MOBBING BY KELP GULLS *LARUS DOMINICANUS* AS A POSSIBLE CAUSE
OF CAPE VULTURE *GYPSE COPROTHERES* MORTALITY

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INTRODUCTION

The population of the Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres*, a species endemic to southern Africa, has undergone a critical downward trend (Ledger & Mundy 1976, 1977) and the species is considered to be "threatened and vulnerable" (Siegfried *et al.* 1976, King 1979). In the Cape Province there is a reduced, fluctuating population in the eastern Cape and a small colony survives at and in the vicinity of the Potberg mountain in the Bredasdorp district, southern Cape (Boshoff & Currie 1980).

The major causes of mortality of Cape Vultures in the Cape Province are listed as direct persecution by farmers, accidental poisoning, electrocution by powerlines, osteodystrophy (calcium deficiency) and starvation (Boshoff & Vernon 1980). However, mortality may also result from mobbing by Kelp Gulls *Larus dominicanus*, and two incidents supporting this contention have been recorded and are described here.

OBSERVATIONS

On the first occasion, on 2 January 1978, several Kelp Gulls were seen to force a Cape Vulture into the waters of the Heuningnes Estuary at Die Mond, which lies some 20 km SSE of Bredasdorp. The vulture, which was ringed, was rescued from the water by the resident Forestry Officer and flew off after being kept under observation for a few hours. On 29 January 1978 the vulture was found dead on the beach, 0,5 km from the initial point of recapture. The second, similar, incident took place on 6 April 1980 when a ringed Cape Vulture was mobbed by Kelp Gulls at sea about 30 m off the Point (Cape St Blaize) at Mossel Bay. This vulture managed to lift itself out of the water and stay airborne long enough to reach the shore, where it was rescued and cared for by onlookers.

DISCUSSION

In both cases the vultures were juvenile birds, aged six and nine months respectively, and had been ringed as chicks at the Potberg colony. While the death of the first vulture could not be directly attributed to the actions of the gulls, it is possible that in both cases the vultures could have drowned as a result of being mobbed. The reasons for the mobbing activities of the gulls are not known but, since both species are scavengers, competition for carrion may have been involved. However, the mobbing may have been the normal reaction of many species to a 'hawk-like' bird. It is possible that a lack of food inland may have caused the juvenile and inexperienced vultures to forage along the coast. The feathers of the vulture from Mossel Bay, although the bird was apparently in good condition, exhibited faint hunger traces but this would be an indication of the feeding situation when the feathers were

growing. After being kept under observation for a week the Mossel Bay vulture was successfully released at the nearest active Cape Vulture site. The condition of the bird from Die Mond was not established.

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