



From feast to famine

Vulture researcher Dr Gerhard Verdoorn said at the beginning of the drought the birds had had plenty of food, with the drought having killed off lots of livestock and wildlife. He said he was receiving calls for help from farmers as far away as the Kalahari, Botswana and Namibia

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Dry death circles SA's dying vultures

Hungry birds show up in gardens – and even at a toll plaza

By GRAEME HOSKEN

● SA's vultures are living on a wing and prayer due to drought and soaring temperatures.

In recent weeks vulture sanctuaries and rescuers across the country have been inundated with calls for help as emaciated and dehydrated birds have landed in cities, in gardens and on highways – in one case at the NI Carousel toll plaza in Pretoria.

Farmers in the Eastern Cape and the Free State report that when they shoot an animal to provide food for vultures, about 200 birds will flock to the carcass now, 10 times as many as normal.

Hardest hit is the Cape vulture, classified as globally endangered with fewer than 4,200 breeding pairs left, and the African white-backed vulture, which was recently recategorised from endangered to critically endangered.

"What is happening to these birds is unprecedented," said Kate Webster of the conservation group VulPro. "Birds such as the Cape and the white-backed vultures, which are already threatened by man, are being driven to the point of being wiped out."

Webster said that in the past the organisation would get about two calls a month to help stranded fledglings; it was now receiving dozens such calls.

"In December we were called out 23 times. In the first week of January we got called out for 13 birds. While most are fledglings, among the birds we have held are



A disoriented vulture on the N1 at the Carousel toll plaza in Pretoria.

36

THE NUMBER

of vultures VulPro has rescued since December

2

THE NUMBER

of vultures VulPro assisted on average per month, before the drought

4,200

THE NUMBER

of Cape vulture breeding pairs left in SA

adults, which is concerning," she said.

"One can see from the birds' weight they are starving. A healthy vulture can weigh up to 14kg. The birds we recover are weighing 2kg. They are suffering from calcium deficiencies from the lack of food. They are dehydrated and disoriented."

Webster said climate change and in particular the drought has had a devastating impact on vultures.

"We have found birds searching for food in the Port Elizabeth city centre, one at Pretoria's Carousel toll plaza and in gardens of homes across the country."

"Our staff in North West, in the Magaliesberg area, have been going further and further to rescue birds. At times they have driven up to 600km, which is far beyond [vultures'] normal range, which can be up to 200km with the right weather conditions."

Webster said fledglings are particularly vulnerable because they are weaker than adults.

"When the birds come down they are sustaining severe injuries from bone deficiencies, which are associated with a lack of food. The vultures are basically starving to death. Some are going without food for up to 10 days."

She said drought also posed a threat to vultures' breeding patterns, with the birds only laying one egg a year. They need five years to reach breeding age.

"If this situation carries on we are looking at a collapse of more than 90% in the Cape vulture population within the next 15 years."

Webster said one consequence of the collapse in vulture populations was an increased risk of disease for humans.

"Vultures play a very specific ecological role. They are vacuum cleaners and clean up the environment of diseased animal carcasses," she said. "There is now potential risk of the spread of infectious diseases by feral dogs and other animals feeding off diseased wildlife and livestock carcasses."

Vulture researcher Dr Gerhard Verdoorn also reported a sudden surge in appeals for help from the public.

"Over the past four days my phone has not stopped ringing, with farmers reporting hundreds of birds coming to feed off antelope they have shot for them to eat."

"Under normal circumstances at least 20 birds will feed off a carcass, but some farmers report up to 200 birds coming to feed, which is highly abnormal. This all points to the birds starving."

Verdoorn said that initially the drought had benefited vultures because they could feed on the dead livestock and wildlife.

"But as the drought continues their food supply has dwindled to virtually nothing," he said.

Verdoorn said he was receiving calls for help from farmers over a wide area, including the Kalahari, Botswana and Namibia.



Michael Govender teaches students the art and science of growing dagga at CannaMart and Holistic Relief. Picture: Thuli Dlamini

Where green fingers study the high art of cultivating weed

By NIVASHNI NAIR

● If you hear Louise Maxwell talking to "Monster Fluffy" in her garden, don't assume it's her pet dog or cat.

It's the Durban woman's 3m dagga plant.

Despite having grown 15 dagga plants on her own, she is now attending free classes to learn to grow weed in just 12 lessons.

Maxwell is set to graduate soon alongside 150 classmates – including doctors, pharmacists, housewives and retirees – who have attended the course offered by horticulture store CannaMart and Africa's first medicinal cannabis dispensary, Holistic Relief, in the Durban industrial area of Glen Amil.

The classes started on October 1 – not quite two months after the Constitutional Court decriminalised adults' smoking dagga at home and growing enough for personal consumption. As the first class, students were given free seeds from the Holy Smoke brand for their practical lessons.

The syllabus covers the ins and outs of growing dagga, and the students have applied the theory to their own crop.

"I had been growing cannabis for a little while before it was decriminalised. I wanted to learn new techniques, see what I was doing wrong and just to produce a better end product for myself," said Maxwell.

She learnt more about the nutrition of her plants and how to identify deficiencies.

"I have tweaked my grow. I do pH balance in my water. I learnt how to trim the plant and what other nutrients I can put in if I want to go organic because a lot of outdoor growers like to go organic."

Maxwell's 15 plants have to be grown outdoors because they are "massive".

For now, she doesn't intend to expand, as she is uncertain about the legal limit on the number of plants one can grow.

"The government has not yet said how much is allowed. But it all boils down to personal consumption. I may need 20g a month while someone else may need 20g a week, so I assume people grow according to their personal needs," she said.

Winston Sanders, who works in the printing industry, decided to attend the course because he wanted to gain more knowledge about his "hobby".

"I have been growing cannabis for a while and I wanted to better myself. Reading about it and gaining tips from the internet is not the same as going to an interactive class," he said.

"My plants are now on my balcony. You have to pass them to enter my home. There isn't as much stigma as there was before the Constitutional Court ruling."

On the first day of the course, the ages of the students surprised their 22-year-old teacher, Michael Govender.

"When we first thought of the course, I thought we were going to get all of the younger people, like the people who are interested in the recreational side of it, but I was completely mistaken."

"We have people of all ages. We even have some grandfathers," said Govender.

The doctors and pharmacists who attended were interested in learning the composition of the cannabis plant.

"They were very interested in creating oils for themselves and just to start the growing process on their own," said Govender.

He admits to having no horticultural or botany qualifications.

His education, like that of the other course teachers, came from "showing an interest in growing cannabis in my own personal space".

Shortly after the Constitutional Court ruling, Holistic Relief Wellness and Pain Management Centre founder Krithi Thaver realised there was a need for classes to teach people how to grow cannabis.

"There are a number of techniques that can be used to really maximise the growth of this amazing plant and we wanted to share the knowledge we have with those



Louise Maxwell has 15 dagga plants.

wanting to learn," said Thaver.

The course is divided into sections to teach beginners, intermediate and advanced students. After completing the course, students receive a certificate – though Thaver doubts anyone will be including it in their CV.

SA bird egg smuggler jailed in UK

By PHILANI NOMBEMBE

● A UK court jailed a habitual South African wildlife smuggler for three years this week after he was arrested trying to enter the country from SA with birds' eggs strapped to his chest.

The court heard that Jeffrey Lendrum, who has South African and Irish passports, has wildlife transgressions spanning decades, and some of the eggs he has smuggled hatched in transit.

He was arrested at London's Heathrow Airport in June 2018 "with eggs strapped to his body by a sling hidden underneath a heavy coat", prosecutors told Snaresbrook Crown Court.

The eggs came from African fish eagles, black sparrow hawks, African hawk eagles and Cape vultures.

Lendrum pleaded guilty to contravening the Customs & Excise Management Act.

Prosecutor Remi Ogunfowora said: "We worked with our partners in the National Crime Agency to ensure this prolific bird egg smuggler faced appropriate charges."

Documenting Lendrum's life of wildlife crime, Outside magazine in the US said he had gone as far as hiring helicopters to access raptors' nests as far afield as Patagonia, in Argentina, and Quebec, Canada.

When he was bust with 14 eggs at Birmingham Airport in 2010, Lendrum told investigators they were from ducks and said his "physiotherapist had recommended that he wear the eggs pressed against his belly to force him to keep his muscles taut and strengthen his lower back".

His explanation did not fly and he later admitted he had taken the eggs from cliffs in Wales. He said he was transporting them to his father's home in Zimbabwe, via Dubai, as additions to the family egg collection. He was jailed for 30 months.

Lendrum's convictions date back to 1984 in Zimbabwe, according to the Mail Online.



Jeffrey Lendrum at Warwick Crown Court in 2010. He has now been jailed again. Picture: David Jones/PA Images via Getty Images

InNumbers

£100k

ESTIMATED

VALUE

of the rare eggs found on Lendrum

1980s

THE TIME

when Lendrum moved to SA from his native Zimbabwe

2010

THE YEAR

Lendrum was arrested at Birmingham Airport with 14 wild bird eggs strapped around his abdomen with surgical tape