

Report on Poisoned Elephant Carcass and Dead Vultures 17th June 2012, Gonarezhou National Park

On Tuesday 17th July I was in the area around Pokwe camp conducting the carnivore spoor survey when Hugo radioed to ask me to assist with gathering some information about a poisoned elephant carcass he had seen from the air. Rueben and I met up with a team of Parks scouts headed by Pahlela Makhondo, and we followed them in to the GPS position given by Hugo. The carcass turned out to be located at 0419328 / 7633020 (UTM/UPS, WGS84).

About 600m away from the elephant carcass (at 0419147 / 7632413) we picked up the first dead vulture (African white backed) and from there they were picked up continuously, first in ones or twos, and then in groups. All that we saw before reaching the elephant carcass were African white backed vultures (possibly some were Cape Vultures, but we were unable to distinguish any).



We found a zebra carcass cleaned of meat with about 15 dead vultures scattered around it, and then came across the poachers camp (04019334 / 7632952). There was a fireplace next to a baobab and a (empty) meat drying rack with a small piece of zebra skin rope. There was one impala bone but otherwise not many bones scattered around. Nearby to this camp we saw a vulture which was still alive but clearly dying.



In total we saw about 50 dead vultures before arriving at the carcass.

About 50m away from the poachers' camp we came across the elephant carcass, which appeared to be about 2 weeks old. The tusks had been removed, apparently while the carcass was still fresh. The skin appeared to have been cut open in at least three different places; the neck, back and rear; evidence of knife marks were clearly visible on the skin. This may have been to expose poisoned flesh to vultures or, if the elephant had been shot, to subsequently poison the flesh for the vultures.



In total we counted 94 dead African white backed vultures and 15 dead lappet faced vultures at or in the immediate vicinity of the carcass. Again, there may have been some Cape Vultures amongst the carcasses but we did not distinguish any. The majority of these carcasses were in four piles under different trees or bushes next to the elephant carcass. In all piles, the upper beaks of the older carcasses had been removed. The fresher carcasses were undisturbed, perhaps suggesting the poachers had moved off before the vultures finished dying. *In total the upper beaks had been removed from 57 white backed vultures and 8 lappet faced vultures (that we counted).* Nothing else was disturbed on the vulture carcasses; the heads/brains had not been removed. It looked like the beaks had been chopped off with a machete or a heavy blow with a sharp knife. It seemed like the piles of vultures under the trees had been made by people moving the carcasses into piles.



We took photos, and samples of stomach / oesophagus contents from three of the vultures, and then moved all the vultures in the vicinity into a pile by the elephant carcass in order to cover them all with mopane branches to try and prevent any further vulture deaths. This made the scale of the incident very apparent.



We saw spoor of three spotted hyenas, two jackals, several civets and one lion around the elephant carcass and there was evidence that hyenas had chewed on the bones. No carcasses of carnivores were found although part of the lower leg bone of a lion was found nearby.

Mr Makhondo and his team did a thorough 360 search around the carcass but did not pick up any spoor of poachers or poacher dogs. They did find a dead nyala bull with all the meat removed and their feeling was that it had also been shot and perhaps poisoned. I did not see that carcass.

As their 360 sweep was at about 300-400m away from the carcass, they only picked up three additional vulture carcasses, but on a quick look around closer to the carcass, covering the areas that we did not approach from initially, we picked up another 22 dead white backed vultures.

In total therefore we actually counted 184 vulture carcasses (of which 15 were lappet faced vultures, and the rest African white backed as far as we can tell), but we suspect there are considerably more and I would not be surprised if the total exceeded 250 birds.

In light of the fact that the poison was clearly still active (due to the one vulture we found dying, and several very fresh vulture carcasses), it would be prudent to send a team back to the area as soon as possible to collect and burn the scattered carcasses as well as the elephant carcass and the pile of vultures that we covered with mopane. It would also seem sensible to check the elephant, zebra and nyala carcass with a metal detector to see if any bullets can be recovered.



Report by Dr Rosemary Groom