

The Raptor Warrior: Meet BirdLife SA's Linda van den Heever

Conservationist Linda van den Heever is the manager of BirdLife South Africa's [Vulture Project](#), which forms part of their Terrestrial Bird Conservation Programme (TBCP). Her somewhat unusual line of work is not for the faint-hearted, but she wouldn't have it any other way.



Linda van den Heever, manager of BirdLife South Africa's Vulture Project

“Working in conservation, you are confronted with the stark reality of humanity’s impact on nature on a daily basis, and sometimes it can be difficult not to get discouraged,” she says. “For example, we recently suffered the senseless loss of 28 vultures in Zululand, followed shortly thereafter by the gut-wrenching news that another 537 vultures – covering five different endangered and critically endangered species, had been poisoned in Botswana. And as this occurred during breeding season, the true magnitude of the losses will never be known, as many chicks will also be lost as a result of starvation or exposure.”

Passion and perseverance are key to surviving a career in conservation. “You just have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and soldier on,” she says. “And if you have what it takes to push through those dark days, it really is incredibly rewarding. For me, the idea of going back to the corporate world – where I started, is now unthinkable!”



From corporate world to conservation

A born-and-bred Joburger, after school Van den Heever went on to study at the then Rand Afrikaans University, now University of Johannesburg, obtaining BCom (Accounting) and BSc (Applied Mathematics) degrees. From there she embarked on a 15-year career in the corporate world, but deep in her heart she always knew she wanted to work in

conservation. And so, in 2013, she left her job as sales manager at a direct marketing company specialising in the financial services industry, applied for a position as programme administrator at BirdLife SA's TBCP, and resumed her studies.

She subsequently went on to obtain BSc (Zoology) and BScHons (Zoology) degrees, from Unisa and University of Pretoria (UP) respectively, and will soon be adding an MSc (Zoology) degree from UP to her raft of academic qualifications. In 2016, she was promoted to manager of the Vulture Project, and it is here – at the thrilling intersection of scientific research and adrenaline-pumping field work – that she seems to have found her true métier.

“There is no average day, which is part of the reason I love my job so much,” she says. “When I’m at the office, I spend most of my time in meetings, writing reports and funding applications, reading scientific articles, analysing data, and planning research projects. When I’m in the field, you’ll find me sourcing samples from wild vultures for my research project, negotiating with farmers, giving presentations, riding around game farms to investigate infrastructure, travelling to remote areas to monitor vulture breeding colonies, or attending various task force meetings.”

Vulture culture

Vultures are truly fascinating birds. There are two types: New World vultures, found in the Western Hemisphere – North America and South America; and Old World vultures, found in the Eastern Hemisphere – Africa, Europe, and Asia. They are distinct from other raptors in that they are classified as obligate scavengers – relying predominantly on carrion, rather than birds of prey. A group of vultures in flight is called a kettle, a group of vultures resting in the trees or on the ground is called a committee, and a group of vultures feeding is called a wake.

These iconic birds, which feature prominently in ancient mythology, play a crucial role in ecosystems. By swiftly removing decomposing carcasses from the environment, they help prevent the spread of disease. Their digestive system is highly acidic, so it is able to neutralise the bacteria and other harmful organisms found in decaying flesh, and dense material like bone can be digested in under 24 hours.



Knowledge hub launched to help save African Lion

16 Aug 2019



Vultures poisoned to brink of extinction

Recent decades have seen an alarming decline in Africa's vulture populations, with four of South Africa's nine vulture species now regarded as critically endangered. Reasons for the increase in mortalities are numerous and complex. But being obligate scavengers, and therefore particularly susceptible to dietary toxins, poisoning is cited as the biggest contributing factor.

Intentional poisoning, often for the harvesting of vulture brains for use in 'muti', or traditional medicine, involves the lacing of poached animal carcasses. According to believers, smoking dried vulture brains can help with winning at the lottery or horse races, boosting exam performance, or luring more clients to a business. Secondary poisoning can occur from veterinary drugs, like diclofenac. And unintentional poisoning can happen through the accidental ingestion of spent lead ammunition.

Merck, BioRescue Project collaborate to save Northern White Rhino





12 Aug 2019



Impact of lead toxicity in vultures

“Lead is a toxic heavy metal which serves no known biological function in any living organism,” says Van den Heever. “Its harmful effects on both human and animal health have been well-documented. In birds, lead exposure, even low-level chronic exposure, affects all the important biological pathways, including the cardiovascular, renal, hematopoietic, gastrointestinal, reproductive, and nervous systems.”

“Following a nationwide assessment of lead levels in our Critically Endangered White-backed Vulture population, we found that a significant proportion of the birds, including chicks, had elevated concentrations of lead in their blood and bones,” she adds. “In nest-bound chicks, this is from lead fragments which are regurgitated by their parents during feeding.”

Lead Task Team and Vulture Safe Zones

In partnership with multiple stakeholders, BirdLife SA is committed to finding and pursuing constructive solutions to mitigate the impacts of lead poisoning across all of Africa’s beleaguered vulture populations, and reverse their dramatic population declines.

Van den Heever serves on the national Lead Task Team, working closely with farmers and hunters to remove the threat of lead poisoning to vultures and other scavengers, by urging them to switch to non-lead alternatives. She also works on the Vulture Safe Zone project, helping land-owners to manage their properties in ways that are safe to vultures. Their work is currently taking place in Pongola, Mkuze, and Hluhluwe.



CapeNature, Sanbona Wildlife Reserve capture, translocate Cape mountain zebra

8 Aug 2019



Ford Wildlife Foundation

“The sponsorship of a Ford Ranger double cab from the Ford Wildlife Foundation (FWF) has made a huge difference to our Vulture Project,” says Van den Heever. “My job frequently takes me to remote areas where the use of a sedan is impossible. The Ranger has taken me over impassable roads in Lesotho, northern Limpopo, and Zululand, and also carried me through deep sand and across dunes in the Kalahari. I wouldn’t be able to conduct my lead research, or implement the Vulture Safe Zone initiative without it.”

“Although our names are spelt slightly differently, Linda van den Heever and I are definitely cut from the same cloth when it comes to our passion for conservation,” says Lynda du Plessis, manager of FWF. FWF was established in 2014, but Ford has been actively involved in conservation efforts in Southern Africa for 30 years. “Linda is one of those inspiring ladies who epitomises the ethos of what we have fondly dubbed Ford’s #WomenWithDrive,” adds du Plessis. “And it really is such an honour for us to be able to support organisations like BirdLife SA, and their Vulture Project, through the use of our vehicles. We’d like to take this opportunity to thank Linda and the rest of the team for all that they do to help stem the flow of vulture losses, and we wish them well in their ongoing efforts to give conservation wings.”

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