

# Vultures:

## The Finishing Touch on the African Veld

by Carol Polich  
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Photos by Carol Polich



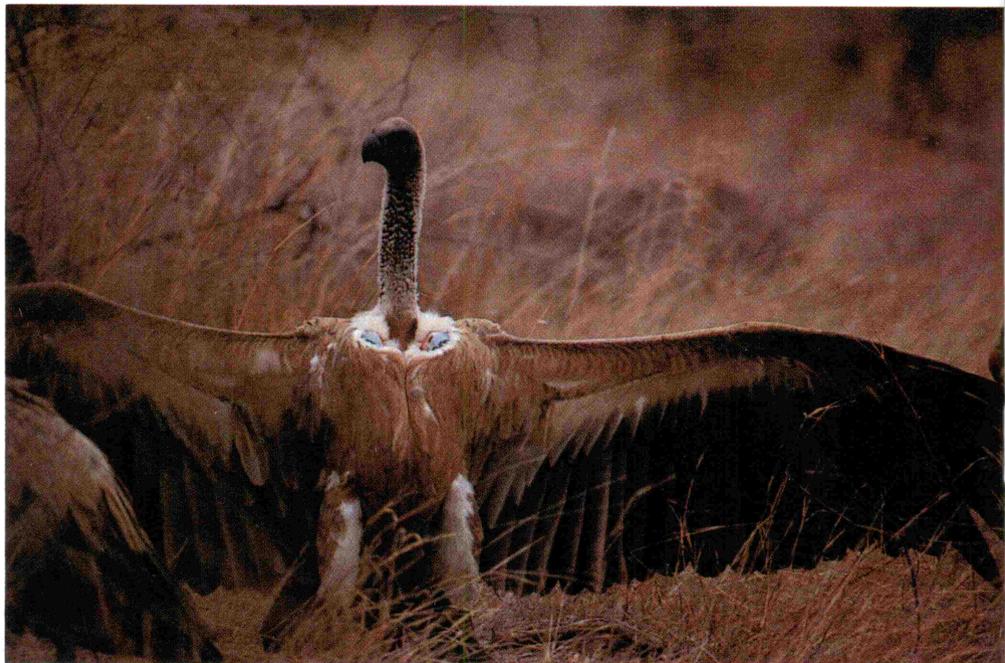
*White-headed Vulture, the prettiest in coloring; has feathers on its neck so generally does not peck within the carrion.*

“For some five minutes we watched the cheetah enjoying the fresh, hot meat, before leaving the kill. Ten minutes later it was back with two other cheetahs. The three of them had a hearty meal. By this time, the vultures were circling the scene, waiting their turn and we left.” (*Custos*, Nov. 1991; vol. 20, 8; pg. 8)

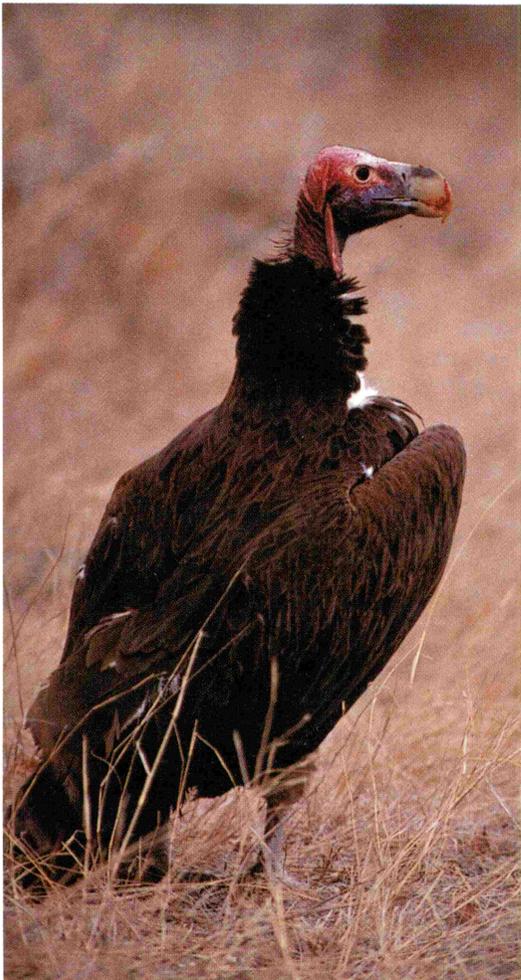
Vultures . . . YUK! This seems to be the usual statement attached to these ugly, feathered scavengers. People continue on with their game viewing when they see these raptors (birds of prey) sit hunched in lifeless trees with necks drooped between their rounded “shoulders.” Against the silhouetted sky, they seem to hover

over the African veld waiting for death to occur. With keen eyesight, they can find the best, or worst, of dead carcasses. The carrion, which to us might be the most sickening of smells and most vulgar of sights, may cause a vulture to drool and froth at the beak. Yes, their job may be the pits. They have the ghastly task of cleaning up the South African veld. But, as in the human world, the African wildlife ecosystem also needs its local garbage disposal, the vulture. The rest of this natural phenomenon is unraveled in the next scene of this cycle . . .

I had been to Kruger Park in South Africa several times but during this most recent adventure into the Afri-



*White-backed Vulture; featherless neck enables it to peck inside the carrion.*



*Lappetface Vulture*

can veld, I decided to add to my experiences and study something that might be of less interest to the average person . . . vultures. Before leaving my comfortable environment of Bozeman, Montana (USA), where no vultures soar, I began to study and read about them. I quickly found there was not much information about this raptor in our cold, mountainous community. Fortunately, a friend who had been to South Africa had accumulated quite a large library

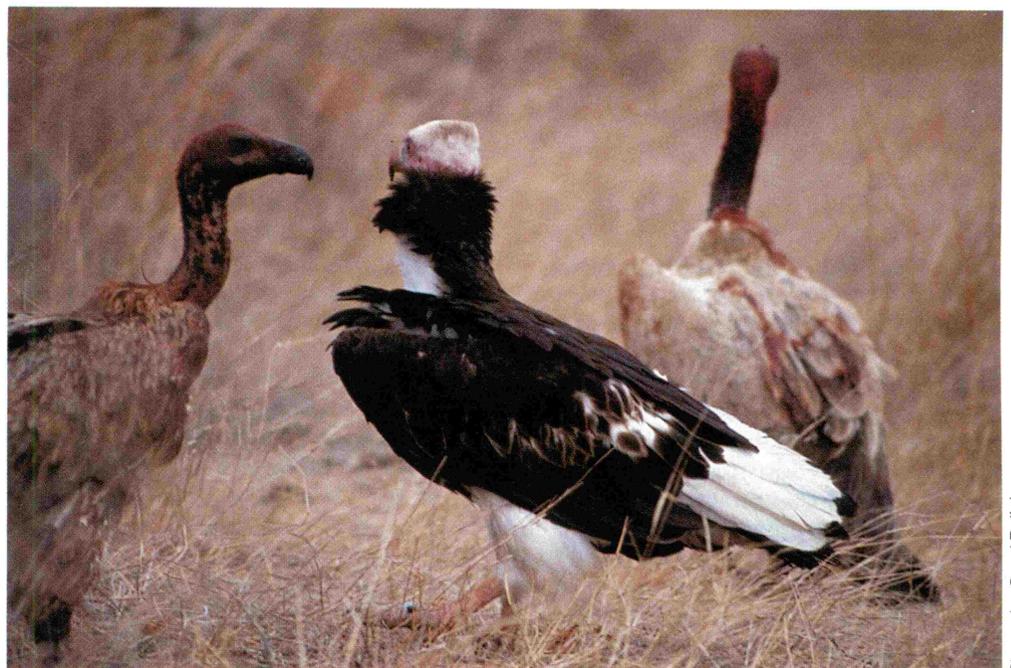
of African birds which included detailed information on vultures. I was amazed at how many species were to be found in South Africa and what role each of these species played in the consumption of a carcass. After looking at photos and trying to remember each description, I decided the only way I was to learn "who was who" was to trek off to the dark continent. Hopefully, I would find a carcass where these birds might be feasting!



*Lappetface Vulture, the largest of these raptors with a wingspan of nine feet, has a huge, thick beak for tearing.*



*The Hooded Vulture, the smallest and shyest of this group of raptors, has a small beak for picking up scraps and a neck full of feathers, therefore, does not get inside a carcass.*



*White-headed with two White-backed Vultures who are bloodstained from pecking within the carrion; the two are shown together, note the differences.*

Photos by Carol Polich

Finding a lone cheetah eating upon his impala kill was an exciting event in itself but the scene that followed, stirred an excitement I hadn't yet felt.

After the cheetah departed, a solitary, rather timid bird flew to the sandy, sparsely grassed veld near where the dead animal lay. With his large, dark eyes, he looked warily in my direction, only fifteen meters away, and daintily stepped towards the kill. Again, he turned to face me as though to question my presence. I noticed his pale face was lightly colored, which gave the appearance of a mime. His very long, slender beak looked like it was made for pecking and picking up scraps, even though it was slightly curved at the end. The brown hood that covered his head gave the image of a character from the Batman comic strip. The breeze gently tousled his deep brown feathers, lifting the short feathers at the base of his neck. He cast a shy glance towards me showing his timid mannerisms about approaching the dead impala. Why wasn't he about to eat? The material I had read to prepare myself for this incident quickly came back to me . . . slender beak, smaller in stature, waiting for scraps. This was the Hooded Vulture, one designed to clean up the leftovers.

Where were those bigger beaked specimens? Lo and behold, the sky was suddenly engulfed with the populous Whitebacked Vultures. Their legs dropped like landing gears from a 747. One after another they landed and with a springy gait, they reached the carcass. Fifteen and then twenty swarmed the limp body. Their wider and stronger beaks tore at the hind end of the impala which had been eaten by the cheetah. The vultures gorged and impelled themselves further into the remains of the hind quarters. As they emerged, their featherless necks were bloodstained from devouring the meaty flesh. They squawked and hissed, each trying to be in control. They challenged each other by spreading their enormous, gray-white wings and arching their long, snake-like necks with hooked beaks wide open. These vultures seemed to constantly have a quizzical frown with deeply furrowed eyebrows making them look as though they were quite unapproachable. Certainly, they were the bolder of the present two species.

At this point, there was still an enormous amount of meat to be consumed since the front quarters of the

impala lay intact.

Next in line to enter this scene was the formidable Lappetfaced Vulture who has a wing span of over nine feet. Now here is a bird with whom you wouldn't want to have any close encounters nor would he ever catch the eye of a beautiful and graceful pink flamingo! Not only were his wings and body twice the size of the normally large Whitebacked Vulture, but his beak was of considerable length and thickness: just what they needed for tearing open their dead specimen. To my surprise, this vulture's wings were even more impressive in scale than the Whitebacked Vulture wings. With massive black wings held outwardly and a floppy, prune-wrinkled, red skinned neck, arched forward, this foreboding looking creature took bold steps towards the kill. Immediately, the now thirty plus Whitebacks scattered in all directions not liking but displaying a fearful respect for this menacing bird. His look was ominous. Like a Zulu warrior he stood tall and straight in his proud manner. His white, downy soft leg feathers made him look fuller than he actually was. When he strutted, everyone was in awe. Up he hopped onto the body of the antelope and began to rip at the skin. You could almost hear the Whitebacks cheer and applaud for they now had another ready-made banquet. His wings spread outwardly almost completely covering the impala as the vulture once again pulled and tore at the skin. Still, the Whitebacks held their ground, feathers quivering in excitement. Sixty-plus had now gathered for mid-morning "tea." This enormous Lappetfaced raptor was definitely the king in this scenario.

Being captivated in this mass of feathers, beaks, and hissing, I nearly forgot to scan the outskirts of this chaos. In so doing, I spied this conspicuous character standing by the few Whiteback onlookers and the shy Hooded Vulture. Which vulture species was this? His white head wasn't rounded like the other birds but was more flat topped like the style of Bart Simpson. This species that eluded me is known as the White-headed Vulture. He had a red face which led to a rainbow colored, thickly, hooked beak. He looked as though he wore a high collared cloak for his short, black neck feathers reached high up his neck barely stopping at the back of his head. His

arrogant manner and cloaked appearance made him look as though he were Count Dracula from a scene in "Return of the Vampires"! White, downy soft feathers covered his legs, again, giving him a fuller look. Opposite his white head and white frontal side of his neck, his white tail feathers contrasted sharply against his black wing feathers which were white underneath. This beautifully colored bird would better attract the graceful flamingo who might be looking for a date! In his haughty manner, he looked about for scraps of meat that began to lay hither-thither from the mass of vultures who were now all relishing morsels of bloody flesh. With this aloof behavior, he would quickly snatch a tidbit with his brightly colored, curved beak. He was undeterred by the numerous Whitebacks who hissed at him as he went about looking for scraps.

Nearly an hour passed with over sixty vultures and four species of these raptors making an appearance in a social pecking order. Once the Lappetfaced Vulture removed himself, the mass quantity of Whitebacks continued to demolish the carcass. The bodies were tightly packed and squirmed savagely for a chance at the pieces of raw meat. At this point, the carcass was engulfed in a blanket of wings. Once satisfied, each vulture removed himself to the "runway" not far from this commotion. It was like an international airport. Each bird needed take off space to get into flight. One step, two hops, a third step, up and away they flew, soaring for a possible sighting of another meal.

The African ecosystem was nearly complete. The other "garbage collectors" so necessary in this cycle were yet to approach — the jackals and hyenas. These animals would then rip the rest of the scraps of meat from the bones as well as clean up the bones themselves.

Seeing the big cats at work is truly exciting and is really an added feature when driving in the bush. Watching the scavengers and then having a chance to see the social order displayed among the various species is still a plus in the magnificent African wildlife viewing. So, the next time the cat leaves the scene, don't leave. Another picture will unfold before your eyes teaching us humans how complex this ecosystem is and how everyone within it has a role in survival. ●