

BFA SEMINAR SERIES NO. 15

The Crisis Among Asian Vultures, and Warnings for Africa Peter Mundy

Held at the Bulawayo Club, Friday 13 September 2002. 19 people attended.

The talk was on the crisis and massive population declines of two species of Asian vulture. Within the last 10-15 years in India, the Eurasian Griffon (*Gyps fulvus*) and Indian White-backed Vulture (*Pseudogyps bengalensis*) have become almost extinct, a population decline of up to 90% in places. The cause of this is still speculative. A major concern in the vulture world is that the cause - whatever it is - will spread to closely related species in Africa. The two Asian species are very similar to African species of *Gyps*.

Peter began by explaining the difference between the various *Gyps* species and other vulture genera. The Asian species are often found in large groups, sometimes up to 1000. At Delhi airport 15,000 were once seen together. All these species are very sociable, more so than other vultures, which has consequences for any disease transmission.

Various explanations have been given for this catastrophic decline:- lack of sacred cow carcasses as a food source, pesticides, pollution, birds being shot by airport authorities. But the most likely so far is a virus disease. Laboratories in India, USA and Europe have been looking at samples from dead vultures, but cannot pick up anything definitive. No new toxins appear to have been released into the environment. Vets have found concentrations of uric acid around the kidneys of dead birds, a sign of gout. But this is unlikely to be the cause of death; it is more likely to be a physiological manifestation of another disease.

Eurasian Griffons are migratory and come into Africa down to Senegal, Ethiopia and sometimes to Kenya. There is a possibility that infected birds migrating into Africa could spread any the virus. This could then be passed on to the Ruppells Griffon (*Gyps rueppellii*), Cape Vulture (*G. coprotheres*) and White-backed Vulture (*G. africanus*). The fear is that within 10 years of this happening, the African *Gyps* populations could decline to be as low as those in India.

Various ways have been discussed about how to stop infected vultures coming into Africa. But it is not practically possible to stop such movements. Ornithologists at present are focussing their attention on establishing baseline data on population distribution and numbers across the bird's African range, particularly in southern Africa and Kenya, and establishing a monitoring scheme. Funding has been obtained, for example the Darwin Initiative has given US\$48 000,00 for research.