CR White-headed Vulture *Trigonoceps occipitalis*

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Justification

Justification of Red List Category

This species is listed as Critically Endangered. Recent data suggests the already small population is declining at an extremely rapid rate owing to a variety of threats including poisoning, persecution and ecosystem alterations. The species has a very small population and local extinctions may be accelerated by major poisoning events in isolated localised subpopulations.

Population justification

An old estimate of 7,000-12,500 mature individuals was extrapolated from a number of regional estimates. This equates to 10,500-18,750 individuals in total. However, a new estimate of the global population suggests the population is much smaller, consisting of just 5,500 individuals (Murn *et al.* 2016). This equates to just 3,685 mature individuals here placed in the band 2,500-9,999 mature individuals.

Trend justification

The species is thought to be declining at an extremely rapid rate. Ogada *et al.* (2016) estimate a median decline of 6.7% per year (range: 2.8-8.8%), equating to a decline of 88% (range: 59-94%) over three generations (31.26 years [Bird *et al.* 2020]). Road surveys in Botswana support these rates of decline, with a decline of 78% recorded between 1991-1995 and 2015-2016, equating to a decline of 87.5% over three generations. The species has shown severe declines throughout its West African range (F. Dowsett-Lemaire *in litt*. 2006, J.M. Thiollay *in litt*. 2006) and also across southern Africa (Ferguson-Lees *et al.* 2001). As many significant threats are ongoing, similar rates of decline are suspected to continue into the future.

Distribution and population

This species has an extremely large range in sub-Saharan Africa (from **Senegal**, **Gambia** and **Guinea-Bissau** disjunctly east to **Eritrea**, **Ethiopia** and **Somalia**, and south to easternmost **South Africa** and **Eswatini**), where it is uncommon, but generally widespread outside forested regions (Harrison *et al.* 1997). It has declined rapidly in parts of West Africa since the early 1940s (P. Hall *in litt.* 1999, J. M. Thiollay *in litt*. 2006, 2012), is declining in East Africa (Virani *et al.* 2011) and in southern Africa is now largely confined to protected areas. New data suggests the regional populations are now much smaller than was previously thought: 721 nests in East Africa; 548 nests in Central Africa; 468 nests in Southern Africa and 156 nests in West Africa (Murn *et al*. 2016). In **Botswana** only four nests were located during gyrocopter surveys of three Important Bird Areas during 2008 and the species has the lowest relative abundance of the vulture species recorded (Hancock 2008), while in **Niger** there are only four records since 1995, all in the Gadabeji area (J. Brouwer *in litt*. 2012). The species has probably declined in central **Mozambique** (Parker 2005a), where the population was estimated at 200 pairs (Parker 2005b), but the entire country now contains approximately 150 pairs (Murn *et al.* 2016). The largest protected area in South Africa contains approximately 50 nests (Murn *et al*. 2013, Murn and Botha *in press*), but the species is likely to disappear from the country in the near future should current levels of exploitation and other pressures continue (McKean *et al*. 2013). An extrapolated estimate of the global population suggested there were 2,600-4,700 pairs (7,000-12,500 mature individuals) (Mundy *et al.* 1992) however new data suggests the population is much smaller, at just 5,500 individuals (Murn *et al*. 2016).

Ecology

It prefers mixed, dry woodland at low altitudes, avoiding semi-arid thornbelt areas (Mundy *et al.* 1992). It also occurs up to 4,000 m in Ethiopia, and perhaps 3,000 m in Kenya, and ranges across the thorny *Acacia*-dominated landscape of Botswana (Mundy *et al.* 1992). It generally avoids human habitation (Mundy *et al.* 1992). The species is thought to be a long-lived resident that maintains a territory (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994, Murn and Holloway 2014). It may generally fly lower than other vultures, and is often the first vulture species to arrive at carcasses (Mundy *et al.* 1992). While it is often found on the periphery of vulture congregations at large carcasses, it is also often found at small carcasses and is probably an occasional predator (Mundy *et al.* 1992, Murn 2014, F. Dowsett-Lemaire *in litt.* 2006). It nests and roosts in trees, most nests being in *Acacia* spp. or baobabs (Mundy *et al.* 1992). Clutch size is one, the egg being laid a couple of months after rains have finished and the dry season is underway (Mundy *et al.* 1992). Pairs that breed have a success rate of 65-75% (Hustler and Howells 1988, Murn and Holloway 2014), however, up to 61% of pairs do not attempt to breed each year (Mundy *et al.* 1992, del Hoyo *et al.* 1994), often due to the presence of a dependent chick from the previous breeding season (Murn and Holloway 2014).

Threats

Reductions in populations of medium-sized mammals and wild ungulates, as well as habitat conversion through agricultural intensification and development throughout its range best explain the current decline (Mundy *et al.* 1992, P. Hall *in litt.* 1999, R. Davies *in litt.* 2006). Additional threats include indirect poisoning (R. Davies *in litt.* 2006) at baits set to kill jackals in small-stock farming areas, and in East Africa at poisoned baits set for larger mammalian carnivores such as lions and hyenas (C. Kendall *in litt.* 2012), and, particularly in East Africa, secondary poisoning from carbofuran and other poisons (Otieno *et al.* 2010). Deliberate poisoning to prevent vultures drawing attention to poaching activities has also been documented (Roxburgh and McDougall 2012, Ogada *et al.* 2016). 17 White-headed Vultures were killed in a mass poisoning event in Botswana in 2019 (BirdGuides 2019). Exploitation for the international trade in raptors (N. Baker *in litt*. 2006) also poses a threat. In 2005, 30 individuals of this species were confiscated by the Italian authorities (F. Genero *in litt.* 2005).

The species is recorded in trade in West and Central Africa (Buij *et al*. 2015). In South Africa, this species is captured for use in traditional medicines (R. E. Simmons and C. J. Brown *in litt.* 2006) and in Zambia White-headed Vultures have apparently been intentionally killed for use in witchcraft (Roxburgh and McDougall 2012). Breeding birds may readily desert nests in areas of high human disturbance (R. E. Simmons and C. J. Brown *in litt.* 2006). The species is highly sensitive to land-use and is highly concentrated in protected areas (Hancock 2008). Potential introduction of the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac, which is fatal to *Gyps* spp. when ingested at livestock carcasses may represent a potential future threat to the species, although livestock have not been recorded as a potential food source for this species (C. Murn *in litt.* 2016).

Conservation actions

Conservation and Research Actions Underway

CITES Appendix II, CMS Appendix I & II, Raptors MOU Category 1. This species currently occurs throughout much of southern and East Africa's protected areas network (F. Dowsett-Lemaire *in litt.* 2006, Murn *et al.* 2016). It is classified as Vulnerable in Namibia (Simmons 2015), Critically Endangered in Uganda and South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland (Allan 2015; WCS 2016). It is covered by a Multi-species Action Plan (MsAP) for the conservation of African-Eurasian vultures (Botha *et al.* 2017). Individuals were marked with patagial tags in Fouta Djallon vulture sanctuary, Guinea, in 2007 to monitor movements and for a toxicological assessment of the vulture population of the park (Rondeau 2008). Additional studies to monitor the movement of individuals within and between protected areas is under way in South Africa (C. Murn *in litt*. 2016). In 2007, a survey began to establish the extent of diclofenac use for veterinary purposes in Tanzania (BirdLife International 2008), and in 2008 an awareness-raising campaign at a conference of the World Organisation for Animal Health in Senegal led to a resolution being adopted unanimously by more than 160 delegates to "request Members to consider their national situation with the aim to seek measures to find solutions to the problems caused by the administration of diclofenac in livestock" (Woodford *et al.* 2008). At the 2014 Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Migratory Species, a set of guidelines to address poisoning was formally adopted (Ogada *et al*. 2016). The Hawk Conservancy along with the Endangered Wildlife Trust are currently working on providing training and equipment for anti-poisoning teams so that field staff will have the skills and equipment to respond to and neutralise poisoned carcasses (C. Murn *in litt.* 2016). Ongoing monitoring occurs in South Africa, Botswana, Kenya and Tanzania (C. Kendall *in litt.* 2016).

Conservation and Research Actions Proposed

Carry out co-ordinated surveys throughout the range of this species to clarify its population size and trends. Continue to raise awareness about the impact of poisoning on this species (R. E. Simmons and C. J. Brown *in litt.* 2006), and attempt to reduce the human-wildlife conflict that motivated the poisoning of carrion (C. Kendall *in litt.* 2016). There is potential for communal conservancies to raise awareness of vulture conservation in their constituencies in Namibia (Craig *et al.* 2018). Enforce anti-poisoning legislation (R. E. Simmons and C. J. Brown *in litt.* 2006). Minimise disturbance at nests (C. Kendall *in litt.* 2012). Eliminate the veterinary use of diclofenac and other toxic drugs in Africa. Limit the use of lead based ammunition. Carry out education and awareness programmes, particularly targeted at farmers, to reduce persecution, unintentional poisoning and hunting for cultural reasons, and continue to carry out the deployment of anti-poisoning training and equipment (C. Murn *in litt.* 2016). Promote measures to join up isolated protected areas and where suitable consider translocating birds to expand the range of the species (Murn *et al*. 2016), and research the movement ecology of this species to determine the extent of movement between breeding populations (C. Murn *in litt.* 2016). A number of recommendations were produced at the 2012 Pan-Africa Vulture Summit (Botha *et al*. 2012, Ogada *et al*. 2016): 1) Regulate import, manufacture and sale of poisons; 2) Legislate and enforce measures to prosecute those involved in illegal killing and trade in vulture species; 3) Protect and effectively manage breeding sites; 4) Ensure new energy infrastructure is 'vulture-friendly' and modify existing unsafe infrastructure; 5) Support activities to conserve vulture populations, including research and outreach activities. For a comprehensive list of necessary conservation and research actions, see Botha *et al.* (2017).

Identification

Mid-sized, chunky vulture with predominantly blackish and white plumage as an adult. Strong colourful bill and rear-peaked head. Ruffed white legs and belly separated from downy white head by its striking black breast. Black ruff.

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Text account compilers

Haskell, L.

Contributors

Baker, N., Barlow, C., Bowden, C., Brown, C.J., Davies, R., Dowsett, R.J., Dowsett-Lemaire, F., Genero, F., Hall, P., Ndang'ang'a, P.K., Pomeroy, D., Simmons, R.E., Thiollay, J.-M., Wolstencroft, J., Brouwer, J., Kendall, C., Mundy, P., Rainey, H., Goodwin, W., Mhlanga, W., Murn, C., Bird, J., Westrip, J.R.S., Taylor, J., Martin, R., Evans, M., Butchart, S., Ekstrom, J., Harding, M., Pilgrim, J., Symes, A. & Ashpole, J

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