

## Somalia Vulture Survey Summary Report – January 2010

Abdi Jama recently sent a report and photographs on the second part of his survey into the plight of vultures in Somaliland. This second survey was east of longitude 45 degrees east and continued east to the environs of Erigavo City, the capital of the massive Sanaag Region

He wrote:

The first stop was the old Burao City solid waste dump where, about 18 months earlier, we had found a decent mix of raptors among which were Egyptian Vultures, Lappet-faced Vultures, Ruppell's Griffon Vultures and White-backed Vultures. This time we found both good and disappointing news. The good news was that the Egyptian Vulture population was even larger. We estimated a couple of hundred pairs in and around the vicinity of the massive site. The mix of age-groups was excellent. We also saw nearly 50 Lappet-faced Vultures in and around the dump and roosting on tree-tops further out.

The disappointment was that the Ruppell's Vultures we saw last time were nowhere to be seen in three visits to the dump, and the story was the same for the White-backed Vultures. Of the good number we saw 18 months ago, there was only one lone bird that we determined was a juvenile because of the missing white patch in the lower middle back.

As we continued down the tired and scuffed up tar road heading east, almost every hamlet (Beer, Ina Afmadoobe, Kirid, Wadamo Go) we passed had its own contingent Egyptian cleaning crew. We took detours either side of the tar road now and then to check on interior bush communities. It was clear that the semi-commensal existence of the Egyptian Vultures petered out as we entered poorer areas where apparently there was not much to scavenge on. There were nothing but Tawny Eagles and Black-breasted Snake Eagles soaring about in the late morning ever-blue sky. Not even a single Egyptian Vulture was away from established villages and towns.

Back on the tar road and at the village of Oog, we saw a nice but strange mix of Egyptian Vultures and Tawny Eagles feeding together amicably on the remains of a goat slaughtered for the only restaurant in that hamlet.

The locals were not of much help to our incessant questions about vultures. Even though they would show consternation that the Geel-toosiye (long-necked vultures) are no longer seen, the people we talked to expressed mirth and suspicion over a trio of seemingly grown men professing to be looking for vultures in their ragged clothes and weird-looking truck. Our society, like many other traditional cultures in Africa that I have known, does not appreciate the need or importance of researching birds or any other 'esoteric' subject. Our Maslow level of development is not much beyond basic survival. I stand out like the proverbial sore thumb talking about birds, the interconnectedness of living things and where one link breaks (vultures disappear), other life forms also eventually disappear including humans.

Once in a while, we would run into the bird 'expert' who would invite us to go along to see millions of birds down the side-road. They were usually just folks looking for some change for their kat (a locally chewed weed) addiction.

We did not see any other vulture species (other than the ubiquitous Egyptians) between Burao City and Yuffle village, a distance of near 400km, unfortunately attesting to the drastic decline of vulture numbers in our country. In a wet vlei from a recent rain storm, we came across a contingent of twelve Lappet-faced Vultures scattered about in pairs as well as some roosting Egyptian Vultures. I never thought Egyptian Vultures used trees for roosting or resting up, only cliffs and elevated ledges in the far off Golis Range.

We were looking forward to the expansive trash dump just outside Erigavo City only to find that the site had been cleared for development since we had last been there. The vultures were gone completely.

All along, we were hoping for a carcass of some kind, antelope or stock that would attract the less man-dependent vultures. There was none of the traditional telltale sign of vultures alighting on a carcass in the distance. I proved too squeamish when the discussion came up from colleagues that we consider buying and slaughtering a goat to see if any vultures show up in isolated landscapes. Local legend has it that vultures can spot a food source in Somaliland from Hadaramout (meaning '...and death has arrived...') across the Gulf of Aden in Yemen!!

Possible causes for the absence of 'independent' vultures are tougher to pin down in the east of our country. The general environment is cleaner and seemingly less congested and hence the reduced likelihood of poisoning as a main factor for their disappearance as is in the more congested west. It is a mystery. Maybe the decline in the once abundant livestock herds as well as antelope (especially Speke's Gazelle) in the east is a major cause. The string of drought years since the 1990s has possibly reduced the food source for the various vulture species.

Even the very old little port of Maydh has its own healthy vulture population. The place has the graves of ancient Mullas and Sheikhs and violence against wildlife is frowned upon. And hence the confiding nature of the birdlife and even the herds of Pelzelni's antelope just outside the village periphery.

A program to transport a few properly-tagged Egyptian and Lappet Faces to the west of the country would have been invaluable just to see what happens to them. Even the Egyptians are entirely absent west of Longitude 45 degrees East.

Conclusion:

We have a big problem regarding our traditionally plentiful vulture species. It indicates a clear break in the chain of life and the plight of vultures has ramifications for humans. An overall deterioration in the general health of the environment has to eventually explain some things.

Abdi A. Jama  
NatureSomaliland  
[www.naturesomaliland.com](http://www.naturesomaliland.com)  
[Info@naturesomaliland.com](mailto:Info@naturesomaliland.com)