

Project Update: May 2015

On 16th February 2015, I embarked on my third and penultimate trip to the study site in the Eastern Cape. Initially I set out to complete three full replicates, i.o.w. 36 days of sampling. After setting up the radar at site T1, I had to find a way to make the microphones inaccessible to the cattle on the land. While several fencing attempts failed, we (myself and a member of the farm staff) set up four (one for each microphone) impenetrable fence squares. This delay was stretched further, by some technical problems, which required me to take the radar's computer in for maintenance. After completing my sampling at T1 and T3, which were only interrupted occasionally by thunderstorms, T2 brought about some more problems. What we assume to be a porcupine, severed the ethernet cable connecting the acoustic array to the computer system. After having a replacement delivered from Cape Town my data collection was again brought to halt, when the porcupine struck again - this time chewing through all microphone cables. Fortunately, I was able to have them repaired, but due to these cumulative delays, I only managed to complete two replicates.

The time waiting for cables to arrive was used to explore the area and to visit the Vumenjani Cape vulture colony, about 40 km northeast of my research base. After two visits and several counts, we estimated an average of 114 individuals at the colony. Moreover, I decided to have a look at a rumoured vulture roosting site not far from my base. There I encountered between 15 and 20 Cape vultures, as they prepared to settle down for the night.

In terms of bird activity on-site, T1 and T2 offered very little, even though the occasional Cape vulture was spotted. On T3, on the other hand, I was able to capture some valuable data, as blue cranes, grey-crowned cranes, black harriers, martial eagles, secretary birds and, of course, Cape vultures frequently dissected the radar's range.

The data collected on my first two trips is busy being processed and analysed at the EchoTrack HQ in Vancouver, BC, while the most recent dataset should arrive there this month (May 2015) still. I will conduct my final round of sampling at the end of May 2015, where I hope to complete two more replicates. May usually marks the start of the Cape vulture breeding season, which could deliver some interesting results. Once I return, the final set of data will be shipped to Canada. Once the data has been analysed, I will be able to finalise my dissertation, the first draft of which is due at the end of August 2015.