

Project Update: January 2017

The nesting fieldwork in 2016 ended on somewhat of a discouraging note. The number of successful nests has again decreased since the previous year and indeed the years before that. The final aerial surveys that we carried out in October 2016 actually identified two further active nests which we did not find or were not yet active when we did the first surveys back in June 2016. This totalled 10 active lappet-faced vulture nests in 2016, only three of which were successful. In 2015, there were the same number of active nests but five were successful. The number of successful nests has declined each consecutive year of surveys, which has now spanned 3 years. Furthermore, all 3 years of surveys have shown declines since the very first surveys were carried out in 2007. This is somewhat of a worrying scenario.



Figure 1: Lappet-faced vulture chick in the Makgadikgadi Pans

As far as the number of breeding vultures carrying GPS tags is concerned, these numbers actually rose slightly in 2016. In 2015 and 2016 there were the same number of vultures carrying GPS tags (as part of the project), but in 2016 a higher percentage of them reproduced. However, a very small number of these nests were successful. One was actually found to have lost the very tree in which the nest was located; likely because of elephant destruction.

Due to unforeseen circumstances (foot and mouth outbreak) the blood sampling of cattle has still not been carried out; however feedlots are slowly normalising and we hope that sampling can begin to be carried out in the next few weeks.

We now have plenty of water samples from a great geographic spread and the good news is that no lead has been found to be present in any of the samples. We are cautious to assume that this means that there is no lead available to vultures through water because other studies have found relatively high levels of lead in water sources in Botswana. Of course, the cattle blood sampling, as intended will inform us further on possible environmental sources.