

Project Update May 2024

We travelled to western, southern and eastern Nigeria. In Cross River State, we investigated vulture populations and local beliefs surrounding these birds. After observing and counting vultures, we took the coordinates and also, in some cases, searched for vulture feathers (dropped), which we will use for some laboratory analysis to determine contaminants also impacting vulture population across Nigeria. In Cross River State, the survey began in Ogoja LGA and extended to other LGAs and finally, Calabar City and its municipalities.

Observations

A total of 18 vultures were sighted across various locations: four at an abattoir and two near a cattle "ranch"; one at a cemetery, near a dumping site of a hotel, and three within a university campus (both within the same pentad); four around a slaughter center's waste dump site in a different LGA within the city; and four at a separate hotel waste dump site (two perched on the roof and two in a tree) in Calabar City.

Unlike in some states where we did not encounter any live vulture, Cross River State (south Nigeria) holds some hope as a sanctuary for vultures and more conservation initiatives should target them. The ethno-ornithological survey we undertook in all the surveyed communities also revealed reasons we still find vultures in some communities and the reason we no longer found them in others.

Useful local beliefs and practices in Cross River State

Based on our Ethno-ornithological survey, interviews, questionnaires and responses, the abundance of vultures we observed suggests a cultural reverence for these birds in Cross River State communities. Unlike the negative perceptions of vultures in some regions or states of Nigeria, residents there view harming a vulture as a serious offence. Local vigilantes have reportedly apprehended and even punished individuals attempting to hunt vultures. The communities believe that harming vultures brings misfortune upon them.

Survey of Vultures in Ekiti state

We proceeded with our research in Ekiti state (southwest Nigeria), a 12-hour drive from Calabar. We looked for vultures and surveyed different localities covering seven local governments instead of the initial five planned, but we did not encounter any living vultures in the areas sampled and no one confirmed seeing any vultures or knowing where they could be seen within the state. My local field assistant, who is also an experienced ornithologist and a wildlife ecologist, told us he encountered a palm nut vulture in flight in one of the communities sometimes in February 2024. However, our research and survey round the local government areas resulted in no single encounter. Most people from different localities kept mentioning that we might find vultures in the abattoir of Ado Ekiti, which is the state capital. However, we went there and unfortunately, we found two men with den guns, hunting raptors (yellow-billed kites and pied crows). There were no vultures seen at that spot. The security man did not feel happy seeing us with a camera and zoom lenses for fear of reporting unethical activities against animals to law enforcement agencies or they feared we were the law enforcers, hence his aggression toward us. Thanks to my field assistant who understood and spoke the local language, we explained that we were on harmless research of vultures. We had to return the next day after butchers left the slaughter centre, before we were allowed by security to survey the abattoir which, as earlier said, resulted in no sighting of vultures. We sighted over 600

yellow-billed kites and 80 pied crows foraging on scraps and pieces of meats on the ground and on the butchers' tables.

Reasons for absence of vultures in Ekiti state

Our detailed ethno-ornithological investigations led us to different traders dealing in animal body parts, including vultures. We had different interactions with people and traders on record (after seeking their consent). We saw body parts of hooded vultures, a head of a white-headed vulture and many different dead birds and ungulates. I interviewed them on where they found the vultures which they dismembered for sale. Their responses were that vulture sources were no longer within Ekiti state because they were not found there. They travelled to distant states of Nigeria and other West African states, to buy complete vulture bodies or parts of the vultures for use as medicines or to give their clients. Moreso, the people in the communities, as part of their beliefs, hate to see vultures around them or in the community as they considered them an indication of a bad luck to the community or something bad which is going to happen. Answering the questions of what would do when they saw a living vulture perching closer to them or in their community, most responded that, they would run away to escape from imminent danger. Hence, they don't like the presence of vultures in their communities and their absence does not bother them, rather it is a good thing to them not to have vultures. The only time they need vultures is for their medicinal purposes. Some of their healers said they used the vulture body parts to mix it with other herbs to cure epilepsy and madness. They confirmed that the vultures are no longer found close and they had to travel to purchase it in different states of Nigeria where the vultures were becoming rarer to see hence the increase in cost of the dead vultures or their body parts.

To my observation, deliberate killings, persecution and harvesting of vulture body parts for belief - based purposes are the major cause of vulture disappearances in communities where we did not encounter vultures across Nigeria. The beliefs that vultures carry bad luck and are not needed in some communities, are other reasons causing hatred for vultures.

Samples collected

1. Vulture feather samples in the locations with vulture presence.
2. Vulture food sample from the foraging locations of vultures, all for laboratory analysis and comparisons.

Indication

These findings highlight the positive as well as the negative influences of cultural beliefs on wildlife conservation. The deep-rooted respect for vultures in Cross River State has likely contributed to the healthy population observed in the region. This model of harmonious human-vulture coexistence offers important insights for future conservation efforts to replicate or spread such beliefs to different localities that may adapt it. We are currently sampling vultures in Anambra state (southeast Nigeria).

Road transect research on vultures across Nigeria

As found in my last report, since we have the resources and the manpower, we are planning to carry a 1-week road transect survey of vultures from northern to southern Nigeria in June 2024 after completing the survey of vultures within Anambra state. This will be the longest or most distant road transect which will ever be carried to investigate vultures in the country. This is an

important expansion of the research because encountering vultures or otherwise will be used to compare with the point counting of vultures and this will help researchers compare the best sampling technique for vultures in Nigeria in the wake of their massive population decline. It'll help to thoroughly record areas with vultures in addition to the point counting of vultures across Nigeria for future conservation actions.