

Study shows vultures have an appetite for long-distance travel

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Scientists used tracking data from 26 individual vultures. Credit: Natasha Peters

Scientists have shed light on the vast distances traveled by vultures—with several birds regularly commuting over 1,200 km in week-long excursions.

These epic journeys were observed by scientists using specialized GPS tags to track the movements of African white-backed vultures in

Tanzania.

One bird was tracked visiting eight countries as part of a "grand tour" of southern Africa, taking in Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa and Namibia.

The research team used tracking data from 26 individual vultures tagged at five locations across southern Tanzania to identify their behavior patterns. Their study is published in the *Journal of Biogeography*.

Lead author Natasha Peters, a Ph.D. student in the University of York's Department of Biology, said, "We knew vultures traveled big distances but this is the first time we have identified the specific areas they use when they forage and feed, behaviors that can put them at risk for encountering poison.

"We can use the data to inform effective [conservation](#) interventions—assessing when and where the vultures are at greatest risk from harm."

Conservation

Dr. Corinne Kendall, from North Carolina Zoo, which led the vulture research and [conservation efforts](#) in southern Tanzania, said, "Vultures are currently one of the fastest declining bird groups due to poisoning, which occurs when people lace carcasses with pesticides.

"Understanding their habitat use, and even more importantly their behavior while in certain habitats, like outside of protected areas, is thus critical for their conservation. "

The study revealed that although vultures spend most of their time in

protected areas (64.2%) and stationary (75.5%), when foraging they prefer to use areas outside National Parks, specifically in Game Reserves and Wildlife Management Areas.

Interestingly, vultures avoided areas with high livestock density when feeding, suggesting that they don't use cattle as a main food source and avoid areas with high human habitation.

The average distance traveled per month in the dry season was just over 3,000 km, dropping to 2,251km in the wet season, the data revealed.

Breeding

Dr. Colin Beale, from the University of York's Department of Biology and academic supervisor for the study, added, "One of the most remarkable findings from this study is that while many birds undertake occasional long-distance journeys, they are much more local when breeding and maintain separate breeding populations more isolated from one another than we expected."

Previous studies have shown that vultures are highly susceptible to poisoning because of their communal feeding which results in large-scale mortalities at a single poisoning event.

One way of protecting the birds is to map foraging and feeding areas and identify key locations where greater conservation action may be needed.

Wildlife Conservation Society Ruaha-Katavi Landscape Director, Aaron Nicholas, added, "While these findings provide a fascinating insight into the vast distances covered by vultures in their daily lives, it also reminds us of the interconnected nature of distant habitats and the need to think and plan at scale when developing conservation actions for [vultures](#), and other species."

More information: Natasha M. Peters et al, Combining models for animal tracking: Defining behavioural states to understand space use for conservation, *Journal of Biogeography* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/jbi.14483](https://doi.org/10.1111/jbi.14483)

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