

Vulture nest monitoring update for Grietjie

30 June 2022

Highlights:

- On 30 June 2022, we did the 1st vulture nest check for the year on Grietjie
- We recorded 9 incubating vulture nests (8 White-backed, and 1 Hooded Vulture)
- The next check will take place during the Balule Waterbird Survey (end of July)

Vulture nest check

On 30 June 2022, Lindy Thompson (EWT) did the first vulture nest check of this breeding season (vultures breed in the winter) for Grietjie.

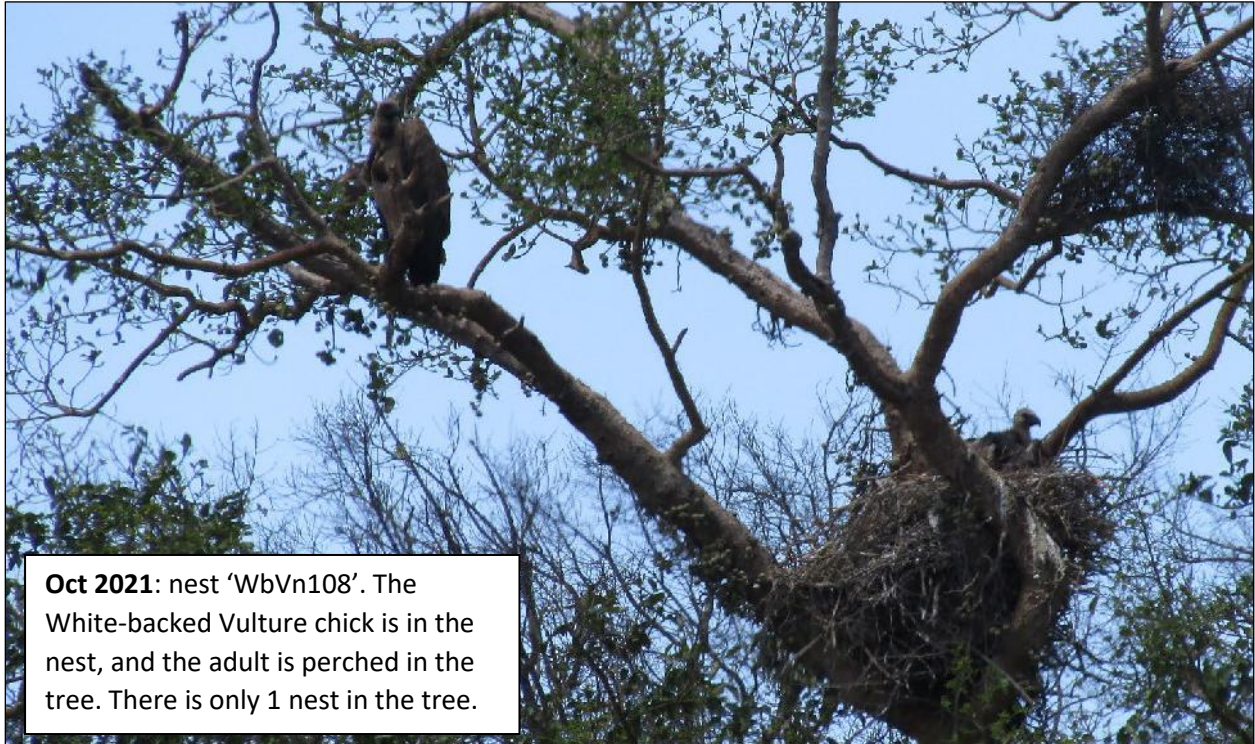
We recorded 8 incubating White-backed Vulture nests, and 1 incubating Hooded Vulture nest (see Table 1). Hooded Vultures begin breeding a little later than White-backed Vultures, and it is possible that this nest check was a little early for the Hoodeds, so we may find more active (incubating) Hooded Vulture nests during our next nest check (in late July).

Table 1. Results from the vulture nest check on Grietjie, on 30 June 2022.

	White-backed Vulture	Hooded Vulture
active nests	8	1
inactive nests	4	2



Above: the beautiful riparian vegetation along the Olifants River at Grietjie, on 30 June 2022.



Oct 2021: nest 'WbVn108'. The White-backed Vulture chick is in the nest, and the adult is perched in the tree. There is only 1 nest in the tree.



30 June 2022: The same tree, now with a new nest.

Above: A comparison of the same nest in 2021 and 2022.



Annual trends

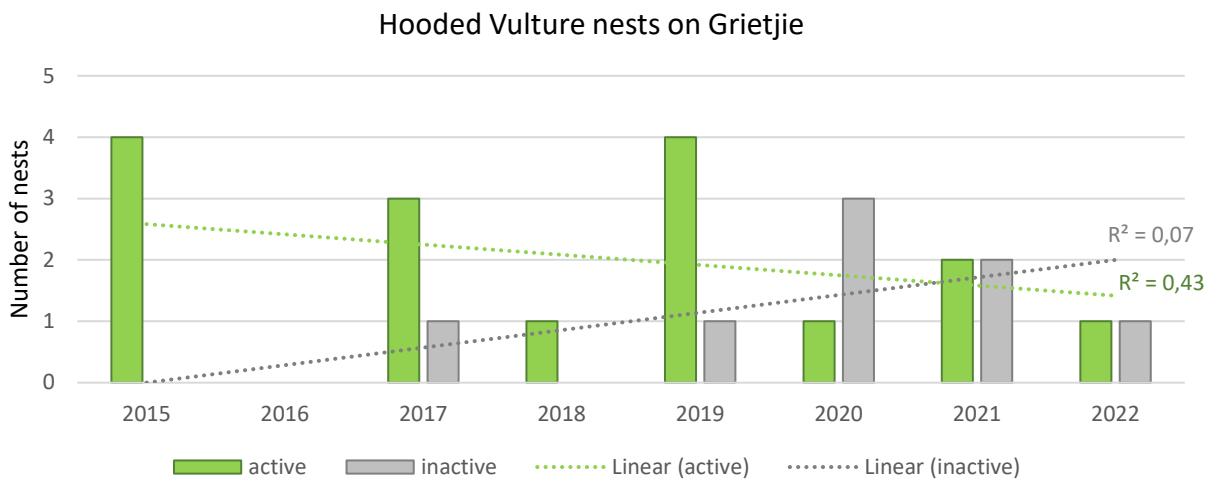
In 2015, we initially focused on recording just Hooded Vulture nests (this species was the focus of Lindy's postdoctoral studies), which is why the numbers of Hooded Vulture nests in Grietjie have been fairly consistent since 2015.

On the other hand, we started paying the same attention to White-backed Vulture nests later, and so an increase in survey effort (actively recording White-backed Vulture nests) caused the apparent spike in the number of White-backed Vulture nests.

White-backed Vulture nests are more numerous on Grietjie (and throughout Balule) than Hooded Vulture nests.

(i) Hooded Vultures

The number of *active* Hooded Vulture nests (nests which are being used for breeding) on Grietjie is decreasing, and the number of *inactive* Hooded Vulture nests (nests that are not being used for breeding) is increasing very slightly.



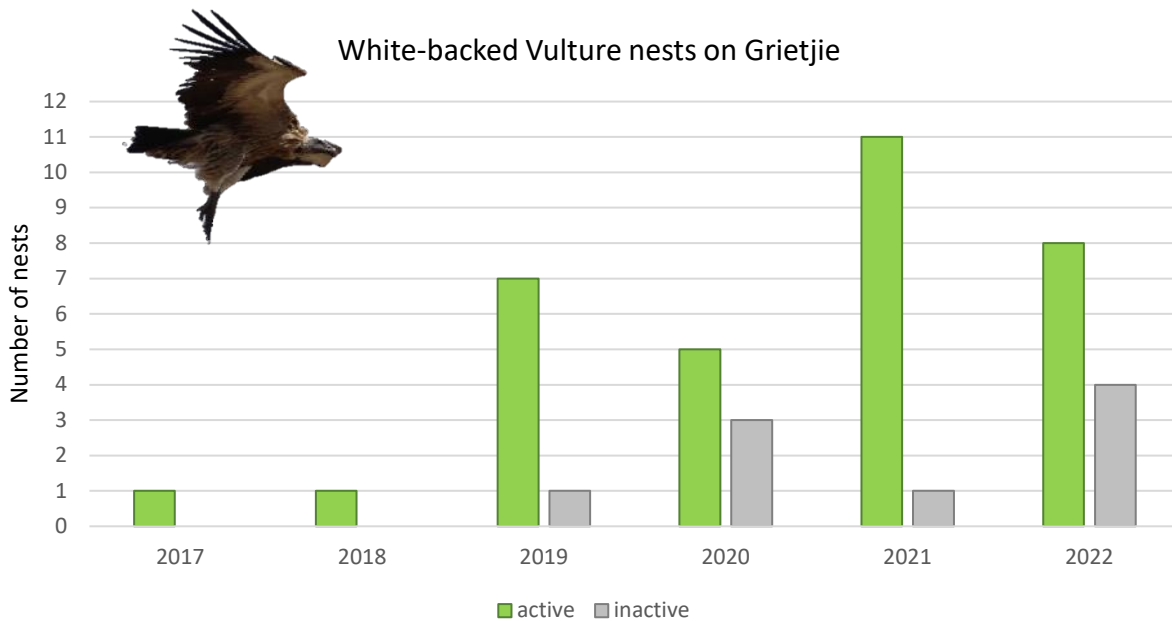
Above: the number of 'active' (being used) and 'inactive' (not being used) Hooded Vulture nests on Grietjie each year, from 2015 to 2022.

Interestingly, in 2020, an Egyptian Goose used a Hooded Vulture nest (at Baluleni). This was also seen at a Hooded Vulture nest along the Crocodile River, where both species (Hooded Vultures and Egyptian Geese) tried to use the nest at the same time.



Above: a young Hooded Vulture returns to its nest to be fed by its parents, to find an incubating Egyptian Goose has taken over the nest. This camera trap photo was taken at a nest on the Crocodile River in 2016. Reference: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15627020.2019.1647116>

(ii) White-backed Vultures



Above: the number of ‘active’ and ‘inactive’ White-backed Vulture nests on Grietjie each year, from 2015 to 2022. Increased survey effort for this species from 2019 onwards caused the apparent increase in the number of nests.



Dead vultures in Balule:

In 2021, Logan van Zyl found a dead White-backed Vulture on a nest ('WbVn297') - the cause of death was unknown. Since September 2020, three other dead vultures were found at their nests elsewhere in Balule, and a further 3 vulture nests had remains (wings and/or bones) on the ground below them (also elsewhere in Balule). We suspect these vultures may have been poisoned elsewhere, and died after they returned to their nests.

Other threats to our Lowveld vultures include electrocutions and collisions with powerlines. If you see a dead bird or mammal below (or close to) a powerline, please report it to Lindy (LindyT@ewt.org.za, WhatsApp: 0722 414 611), and she will forward the information to Eskom, who will then come and do a site inspection, and thereafter mitigate the line if possible, to make it safer for Grietjie's wildlife. Thanks to Ian Nowak, Logan van Zyl, and the Grietjie homeowners who have reported mortalities so far.



Research on Balule's Hooded Vultures:

Recently, a new paper was published which provides a guide for Hooded Vulture nesting behaviour. This study made use of camera trap photos and direct observations from 14 Hooded Vulture nests, 2 of which were on Grietjie (we used camera trap photos from a nest at Baluleni and direct observations from a nest at Mfubu).

We hope that this guide to Hooded Vulture nesting behaviour will be useful for researchers studying vultures, and we intend to use it for further analyses on Hooded Vulture activity budgets (how the vultures spend their time while at their nests). We are very grateful to the staff, management, and home-owners on Grietjie (particularly Elke and Evert, and Oli) for supporting our work over the years.

You can find a summary of the research paper here: <https://doi.org/10.2989/00306525.2022.2072965>
Alternatively, please email/WhatsApp Lindy if you would like a copy of the paper (LindyT@ewt.org.za, cell: 0722 414 611).



Above: A Hooded Vulture adult (top right) keeping a careful eye on its chick in nest 'HVn094'.

We thank Ian Nowak, Logan van Zyl, and the staff, home-owners and residents of Grietjie for kindly allowing us access to check vulture nests.



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