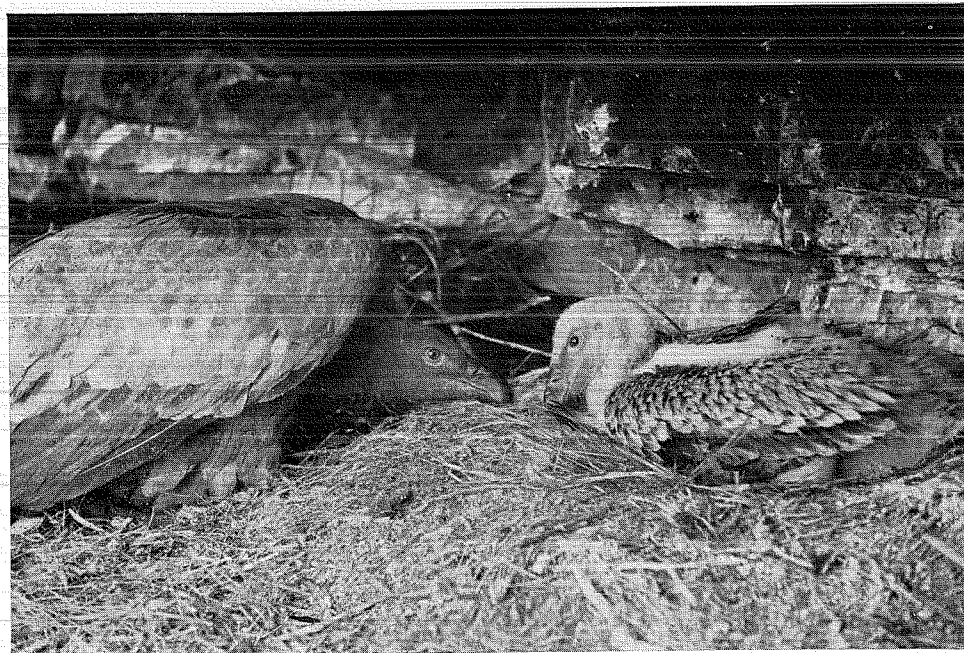


# Banding Cape Vultures on the Magaliesberg

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ON a cloudless day in early spring a party from the Witwatersrand Bird Club set out on their annual expedition to band vultures on the Magaliesberg, some 60 miles from Johannesburg. This venture, started in 1948, is part of the club's banding programme and by regular visits it is hoped to get interesting results.

While still about two miles from the nesting area we could see the krantzes to which we had to ascend, for the rock faces were whitened by the great birds' droppings, whilst over them a few dark forms were slowly circling. We began climbing up steep rocky slopes clothed with tough brown grass and scattered Protea bushes; then followed a belt of ferns, brambles and clumps of



(Photo by courtesy of "Rand Daily Mail")

*Adult Cape Vulture and young, Magaliesberg, Transvaal.*

yellow-flowered *Helichrysum* before we reached the base rock. After clambering through a defile where some Cape Rock Pigeons were sheltering, we negotiated a difficult traverse and came to a series of wider ledges where the nesting colony began. It was an amazing sight to one seeing it for the first time: an apparently endless succession of nests, anything from a yard to 10 feet apart, stretched before us. Each nest was about a foot across, built of grass and in the shape of a shallow cup. In each was a single white egg or a solitary buff-coloured downy chick. The eggs were enormous, measuring about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $2\frac{1}{4}$ , the weight of a single one was 8 ozs.—about four times as heavy as a large egg from a domestic fowl. The chicks varied in size from that of an adult bantam to something resembling a plucked turkey; all had a coat of down, whilst a few of the larger ones were developing dark wing quills.

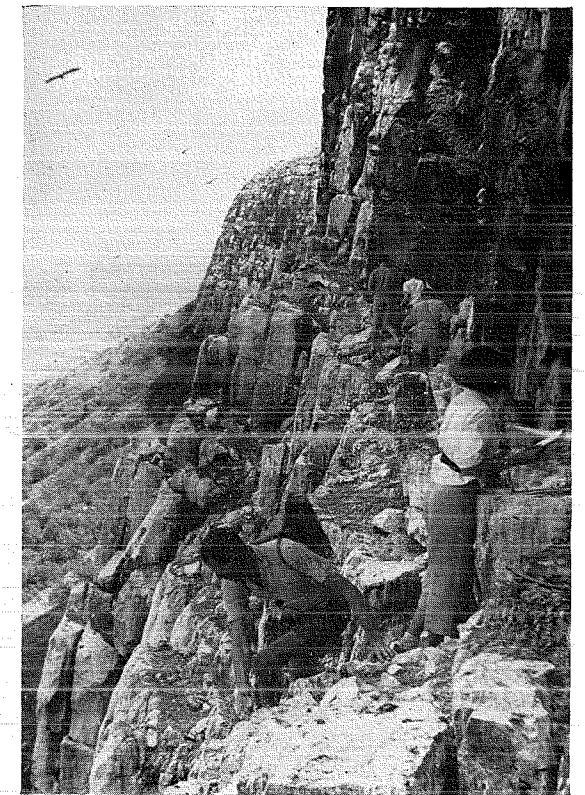
The whole impression of the colony was one of noise and filth. None of us will easily forget the lime-whitened ledges, the incredibly dirty nests (found to be alive with mites), the squawking young and their habit of vomiting half-digested food in their excitement, or the intense smell.

The aluminium bands used formed a ring of just under an inch in diameter, which was

found to fit the tarsus of an adult exactly. As we approached some chicks kept very still, seeming to feign death, but others pecked viciously as we grasped them. In their excitement several fell off their nests and we tried to replace them comfortably before moving on. We inspected many chicks for parasites but, surprisingly, found none: the young birds appeared remarkably clean-skinned and healthy.

All the time we were on the ledges the adult birds hovered over and out beyond the cliffs, slowly circling and only occasionally approaching. From time to time a few more would take off, wings beating loudly as they leaped into the air: others would come in to land, stretching out their long legs to grasp the rocks as they alighted near the nests. One pair seemed permanently to be keeping watch on a high pinnacle. A hen bird came in, sat on the edge of a nest and vomited up food for its offspring, which devoured it greedily. Only once did an adult remain on a nest as a member of the party approached: this bird was grabbed and banded, offering very little resistance.

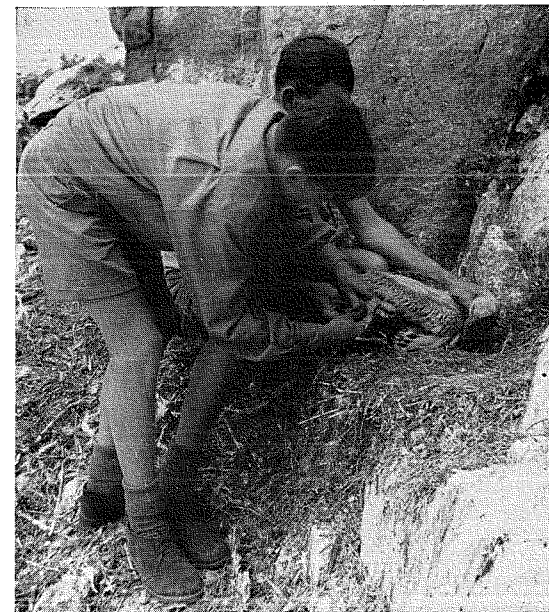
In all, 76 chicks were banded, about 20 chicks were considered too small for banding



*Approaching the nesting sites.*

and 12 eggs were recorded. There were many more nests on inaccessible ledges. It was estimated that there were always about 200 adults in the air in addition to those on the rocks.

The question arises as to how and where sufficient food to maintain such a large colony can be obtained. It is generally assumed that the food is carrion—but the area round the range is not ranching country, nor is it rich in wild life, so that the supply would appear to be very restricted. Examination of the food vomited by the young revealed no definite evidence of meat, although the colour of some of it was suggestive of blood. On the other hand, the adult we banded disgorged a piece of broken china and there was a strong suggestion of offal about some of the regurgitations of the young. Since the surrounding area is sparsely populated it is difficult to surmise the source of such material: perhaps others may be able to shed some light on this problem.



*Banding a chick.*