

**AFRICAN WHITE-BACKED VULTURES (*Gyps africanus*) FEEDING ON
STRAW-COLOURED FRUIT BATS (*Eidolon helvum*)**

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Whilst undertaking biodiversity surveys in Kasanka National Park, north-eastern Zambia, observations were made on a seasonally present colony of some five million Straw-coloured Fruit Bats (Stuart & Stuart, in prep.). The study periods were November to January 2000/2001 and October to January 2001/2002. This is the time when the rainy season starts and the bats are present.

Kasanka extends over some 420 square kilometres and lies in northern Serenje District, Serenje Province of Zambia. It is located on the southern rim of the Bangweulu Basin.

The park is well watered with a mosaic of perennial rivers, swamps, lakelets and seasonal wetlands. Miombo and other woodland types cover much of the park.

No systematic notes were kept of raptor predation on the fruit bats at the roosting site but the following were frequently observed actively hunting the bats: up to two pairs of African Fish Eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*), a pair and one independent juvenile Martial Eagle (*Palemaetus bellicosus*) and a pair of Crowned Eagle (*Stephanoaetus coronatus*). Other raptors were regularly seen flying over, or perched in, the Fibwe bat forest but not observed directly hunting bats: Long-crested Eagle (*Lophaetus occipitalis*), Bateleur (*Terathopius ecaudatus*), Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) and Black Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter melanoleucus*).

In addition three species of vulture, Palm-nut (*Gypohierax angolensis*), Lappet-faced (*Torgos tracheliotus*) and African White-backed (*Gyps africanus*), were observed in and over the Fibwe bat roost. A single Palm-nut Vulture was seen on only one occasion circling over the bat roost for approximately 30 minutes. Although no direct observations were made of Lappet-faced Vultures feeding on bats, they were regularly seen (singles) over the bat roost. In the first season three pairs of African White-backed Vultures with flying young were seen in and around the Fibwe forest (of linear riverine type). Their nests were located at the edge

of a large clearing on the northern fringe of the forest but within the area of greatest bat concentration. During the second season just two pairs of white-backed and flying chicks were present.

From casual observations made during the course of our bat research it seemed that Straw-coloured Fruit Bats made up the bulk of this vultures diet. Although it is possible that they may have taken some bats on the wing by snatching them in the beak we never observed this. One of our camp attendants, Changwe, claimed to have seen a vulture seize a bat in its beak whilst flying. We think that it is most likely that the many bats that were injured and killed in the frequent branch-breaks (the sheer weight of the massed bats caused even large branches to break) were the main source of vulture food. Bats were also not infrequently caught in thorny creepers and offered easy prey to the range of aerial and terrestrial predators. Over the two seasons African White-backed Vultures were seen on several occasions tearing up bats on the ground following branch breaks. Parent birds were seen on numerous occasions regurgitating pieces of bats (easily identified through binoculars by bits of leathery wing) for their young.