

BREEDING BEHAVIOUR OF A PAIR OF CAPE VULTURES IN CAPTIVITY

By C. T. STUART

At the Predator Control Research Farm "Vrolijkheid", a branch of the Cape Department of Nature Conservation, a pair of Cape Vultures *Gyps coprotheres* is kept in captivity. The female of this pair has produced eggs on two different occasions; first at the beginning of September, 1968, when one egg was laid in a nest which the birds constructed of twigs, on the floor of the cage. This the birds broke and ate. The female then laid again on 24th June 1969, and a second egg was found on 26th June.

Copulation was noted for the first time on 24th March, and occurred frequently until the laying of the first egg on 24th June. The male bird has a metal ring on its right leg, thus distinguishing him from the female. After a nesting platform had been erected in one corner of the cage, the birds started on 26th March to construct a nest. Twigs varying in size from a few centimetres to nearly a metre, plus straw, were thrown into the cage. The smaller twigs were selected by the birds in preference to the other sizes, but once the twig was in the bird's bill, it pressed its bill against the ground, probably to make sure the twig was firmly held. These were then added to the nest. Both birds took part in the nest building, but the female placed most of the material in position, often altering the material which had been positioned by the male. Very little nest building activity took place until 3rd April, when a quantity of straw was added to the bowl of the nest. Then on 8th April they began to add larger twigs to the nest, chiefly around its perimeter.

On 24th April the vultures were moved to a new cage and this disturbed them. However, on 17th May they started to reconstruct the nest. As fresh building material was placed in the cage, it was soon taken and added to the nest.

By 10th June they had completed the nest save for the lining. This was then added over the next few days, and consisted of straw and dry reeds. Green plant material, which was being fed to several tortoises in the same camp, was added to the perimeter of the nest, together with several quill feathers.

On 24th June a chalky white egg was laid, a second egg was laid on 26th June, but by the 2nd July one of the eggs was smashed and eaten, and the female was seen actually eating the shell. The remaining egg was found on the perimeter of the nest, undamaged, and was placed under the male who was by then sitting

on the nest. While the egg was being placed the female attacked aggressively, flapping her wings and hissing, with neck outstretched.

By 21st July the whole of the nesting platform was covered in green plant material. Up to 3rd August one of the birds was always present on the nest, but on that day both birds perched away from the nest. After this the male occasionally brought material but, after having brought it to the nesting platform, just dropped it onto the ground.

On 16th August the remaining egg was smashed and eaten, having been incubated for seven weeks and five days. Only a few small pieces of shell were found after this episode, making it impossible to determine whether the egg had been fertilised. After this the birds showed very little interest in the nest.

The following observations were made during incubation: The bird was seen to feed the female with pieces of meat while she was sitting, but the female was never seen feeding the male. Neither of the birds ever defaecated in the nest, but moved to the edge of the nesting platform.



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