

## Fire damage to an African White-backed Vulture nest tree

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During the course of the 2014 year I have been locating and monitoring African White-backed Vulture nests (*Gyps africanus*) on Pidwa Wilderness Reserve, Gravelotte, Limpopo, South Africa. This particular nest has been active for the past three years that I know of. The female laid her egg in the middle of May 2014. I was unable to see the contents of the nest, but judging by the females' cautious movements on the nest, the chick was presumed to

have hatched in the beginning of July. At least once every two weeks, I made an effort to observe the nest and the chick's progress. On October 1<sup>st</sup> 2014, as part of the veld management, the veld was burnt. The following day I checked up on all the nests in my study population and could no longer see the large Knobthorn tree (*Acacia nigrescens*) that contained the nest. An adult was seen sitting in a smaller neighbouring tree, and flew off when I approached.



The African White-backed Vulture nest tree, seen from the road.

Upon closer inspection, I discovered that the base of the tree had been burnt through, causing the tree to fall over. The chick was found lying on

the floor in the ash, still alive and seemingly unharmed from the fall.



The chick aged 94 days old, found lying on the floor in the ash.

Simoné Marshall-Smith and I decided to try and replace the nest back into the tree; although it would be only 5m off the ground, as opposed to the

previous 17m high nest. Using a ladder I climbed up the tree and made a sturdy base for the nest.



Broken branches were used as a strong base structure.

The old nest on the floor was dismantled and used to weave together a new nest. The new nest was a little larger than the chick itself. The chick seemed a little dehydrated, and after the nest was completed, it was given a few drops of water into

its beak and allowed to swallow. The chick was placed back onto the nest, where it settled down straight away. The following day a camera trap was placed into an adjacent tree to follow the progress of the chick over the next few months.



The chick, aged 94 days old, once placed back onto the nest.

The following day, the adults were seen again in the neighbouring tree. After three days a camera trap picture reassured us that the adults were feeding the chick once more. The nest is now checked on a regular basis, to make sure all is fine with the chick. Although the chick does not move at all when I am around, the camera trap shows the chick constantly moving around and stretching its wings. At

the time of writing the chick is around 127 days old and is beginning to flap more regularly; thankfully the nest is situated in an open system of branches. Had the nest been too enclosed, the chick would not be able to stretch and flap at all. Within the next few weeks it will be time for this African White-backed Vulture to fledge the nest. As the photos show, he is starting to make his move.



The chick, aged 105 days old, boasting a full crop and stretching the wings out.



The chick, aged 127 days old, is starting to lift off.

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