

## **BLOUBERG VULTURE TRAIL GETS WINGS.**

From its early beginnings the vulture trail has “taken off” so to speak. The inaugural trail on 9 July 2012 was very much exploratory and very careful monitoring took place to ensure that there was no adverse effect on the vultures.

Two years later the trail continues to be a success. From the response of the vultures it would appear to be an adventure for them also. Below is an extract of the report from that first trail.

“Once above the cliffs, we sat quietly and as concealed as we could be to enjoy the spectacle. Is this playing in the wind just vulture fun, or is this some form of social interaction? Many were riding in tandem and some even in formations of up to 6. At times they raced along the cliff face with wings in dive mode, and at times they rode the wind motionless just above us intent on investigating our presence, and then there was all manner of flight behavior in between.

There were hundreds of vultures everywhere. Above us, below us and at eye level. They were so close at times that we could hear the wind through their feathers. It was the only disturbance in the otherwise complete silence. It was also unusual to see their beautiful colouring and wing patterns from above.

We had the sense that the vultures had invited us into their home and were entertaining us, and in return we seemed to be providing them with entertainment as well. It was amazing behavior, so different from the squabbling at a carcass and so much more intimate than following them as mere specks in the sky. We seemed to be part of their community. We sat and enjoyed it in amazement and after 2 hours of this absorbing experience we departed.”

But the adventure has continued. Trying to find new routes up the mountain has been interesting. Yes there are new routes but none of them eliminates the average 3 hour tough hike each way, up and down. I learned that if the mountain is in cloud, the cloud usually lifts once the top is reached. That was until on one particular trail the cloud did not lift and we had to come down again using a GPS! The guests were so keen to see the vultures that the next day we climbed the mountain again. Luckily they performed, as they always do. Each trip is its own experience.

While the vultures are an ICON of Blouberg, it has so much more to offer. The vulture trails are always part of a longer stay in a wilderness that is really great and with lots to enjoy.

If you have not had the privilege of joining me on a vulture trail, have a look at the photos taken from the top and you will understand what a really special experience it is. More than a 1000 breeding pairs deserves hats off to Johan and his team for a real conservation success story.

Johna Turner