

## WHAT IS A “TURKEY BUZZARD”?

*Adrian Koopman writes:*

**M**IKE Crampton, writing about the 1950s in the Boston, Impendle, Dargle area of the KZN Midlands,<sup>1</sup> says,

Back in those days, the green cancer of pine and gum plantations had only just begun to suck water from the soil of KwaZulu-Natal. Grasses grew thick between the rocks on the hills, streams of clear water flowed out from the indigenous bush, groups of Black Buzzards strutted and trumpeted in family groups, country roads were either muddy or dusty gashes in the veld.

One might wonder what exactly these “Black Buzzards” are that strut around and trumpet instead of circling around in the sky like any other kind of buzzard. Presumably what Crampton has in mind here are Ground Hornbills, and while “Black Buzzards” is a new one for me as a reference to these birds, the moniker “Turkey Buzzards” has been around for a very long time. While not a name used by ornithologists, it appears to be the common term used by colonists in Natal. The Woodward brothers, in their 1899 *Natal Birds*, have this entry:

**Ground Hornbill** (*Bucorax caffer*<sup>2</sup>)

This is a ground bird, and not generally recognised as a Hornbill – being known among colonists as the “Turkey Buzzard”.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the material in Woodward and Woodward, especially the vernacular name given to birds by “colonists”, appeared a few years later in the four volumes of Stark and Sclater’s *The Birds of South Africa*.<sup>4</sup> Stark and Sclater give the “official” or “book” names of this bird as “*Bucorax caffer* Brom-vogel”,<sup>5</sup> and acknowledge that “other authors” use the name “Ground Hornbill”, that English

“Colonists” use the name “Turkey Buzzard” and that Dutch colonists use the name “Brom-vogel”. Despite this being a Dutch name, Stark and Sclater use “brom-vogel” in their English text, as in “The Brom-vogel is only found in the Eastern half of the Colony.”

Jean Branford modernises the earlier “brom-vogel” as “bromvoël” in her entry:

“**bromvoël** ... Usu. the Turkey Buzzard or ground hornbill *Bucorvus leadbeateri*, so named because of its loud, booming call.”<sup>6</sup>

Woodward and Woodward give the “native name” of this bird as “Insingisi”, and it would seem that this name was as well-known as the name “Turkey Buzzard”. R.C.A. Samuelson in his 1923 *King Cetywayo Zulu-English Dictionary* has the following entry:<sup>7</sup>

**inTsingizi**: the turkey-buzzard.

*N.B.* – This bird is a great snake hunter and destroyer, it is held sacred and not killed by the Zulus; if it sits on a hut it is taken to be a bad omen by the owner....

The Turkey Buzzard appears again in L.H. Samuelson’s<sup>8</sup> retelling of the Zulu folktale about the election of the king of the birds:

All the handsome and trustworthy birds turned up in great numbers, such as the harrier-eagle, bateleur eagle, the vulture, **Turkey Buzzard**, yellow-billed kite, the hawks and owls....

Robert Godfrey, in his book on the bird lore of the Eastern Cape,<sup>9</sup> states that “the Ground Hornbill, or Turkey Buzzard, is known in the Ciskei as *intsinkizi* [...] The form that persists into Natal and Zululand is *intsingizi*.” And in a chapter on Zulu bird calls, well-known Zulu linguist Harry Lugg<sup>10</sup> uses the alternative

terms “*insingizi* Hornbill” and “Turkey Buzzard” for this bird:

One of the first birds to attract attention must have been the *insingizi* hornbill or Turkey Buzzard, often seen wandering across the veldt in troops of six or eight in search of snakes, small game and insects. They are large birds about the size of a turkey, and regarded as of ill omen, the killing of which may disturb the elements and cause the destruction of a house by lightning.

Lugg rather confuses issues when he talks earlier about “the wild turkey or *nkondlo*”,<sup>11</sup> but from the description he gives of a bird similar to the “hadedah” but with a bald red patch on its head, it is clear that he has the Bald Ibis in mind. Similar confusion about what is a turkey and what is not can be seen in Stark and Sclater<sup>12</sup> when they give *kalkoentje* (“little turkey”) as a name the Dutch colonists used for the Orange-throated Longclaw, a bird generally considered to be within the wider grouping of larks.

It should be clear then, that the term “Turkey Buzzard” was in regular use in colonial Natal. The question is: why should this be so?

Had the colonists referred to the Ground Hornbill as the “Turkey *Bustard*” as opposed to the “Turkey *Buzzard*”, then this would be quite understandable. Where buzzards are raptors that soar and glide high in the air, bustards are large long-legged birds that walk in parties over the ground. Philip Clancey, in his 1964 *Birds of Natal and Zululand*,<sup>13</sup> gives no fewer than six species of bustard occurring in KwaZulu-Natal. These were known to the colonists by the terms “Pauw” (with various spellings) and “Korhaan” (with various spelling, including “Koran”). Hence Bertram Mitford, travelling through Zululand just after the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War, is able to refer to “the pauw and the

korhaan – both ‘leery’ birds – whom you may stalk at early morn”.<sup>14</sup>

Jo Oliver brings us back to the notion of the turkey, as well as bringing us back to Mike Crampton’s “Black Buzzards”, when she writes,<sup>15</sup>

GROUND HORNBILL: These large birds, looking rather like black turkeys, are often seen in family groups or small parties waddling slowly over the veld.

Doke and Vilakazi’s dictionary also returns us to the notion of a Black Buzzard and how this can be confused with a Black Bustard. The Zulu words *ufumba* and *unofunjwa* may seem quite different, but in fact they are morphological variants of the same word: the syllable /no/ in the second word can be included or excluded with no difference of meaning, and – *funjwa* is the passive form of the verb – *fumba*. Doke and Vilakazi gloss *ufumba* as “Black Buzzard” (i.e. the term Mike Crampton uses in the introductory quote to this note), and they gloss *unofunjwa* as “Black Bustard”.<sup>16</sup> It appears though that these two words refer to the Black-bellied Korhaan (*Eupodotis melanogaster*)<sup>17</sup> rather than the Gound Hornbill.

But again, why Turkey Buzzard for the Ground Hornbill? The answer may lie in the American use of the term “Turkey Buzzard”, a reference to the bird species *Cathartes aura*, a species of American vulture known by the English vernacular name Turkey Vulture, and just as frequently as “Turkey Buzzard”.<sup>18</sup> There is no problem with this term, as the bird has a bald red head (very much like the South African Bald Ibis) – hence “turkey”, and vultures soar in the upper air just as eagles and buzzards do. Reference to the “turkey vulture” makes an early appearance in an entry from the *Oxford Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*. Here we find

an 1853 reference which is the earliest I have come across<sup>19</sup> for both “Turkey Buzzard” and “Brom Vogel”: “The Broem Vogel, so called from the curious noise it makes, somewhat like a double repetition ‘Broem Broem’, is the... Turkey buzzard or Turkey vulture.”<sup>20</sup>

I can find no evidence of this, but my hypothesis is that long before the early colonists knew the correct term “Ground Hornbill” they recognised this bird as being similar to the various bustards (ko-rhaans, pauws, etc) in their size and their ground habits, and recognised the facial features as being similar to the turkey. The birds were possibly early identified as “Turkey Bustards”,<sup>21</sup> and then, somehow or other, through the influence of the American usage of the term “Turkey Buzzard”, the same name was used for the South African Ground Hornbill.

Helping this confusion between bustards, buzzards and vultures was a cavalier use of bird names in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with Woodward and Woodward and Stark and Sclater recording such usages as “Mud-Lark” for the Hamerkop (distinctly not a lark), “Berg-Zwaluw” (“mountain swallow”) for the European Bee-Eater, and “Witte Kraai” (“white crow”) for the Egyptian Vulture.

The hypothesis is a tenuous one, however, and I am yet to come across the term “Turkey Bustard” in early colonial writing. If any reader of *Natalia* does happen to come across this usage, I would be grateful if they would contact me at [koopman@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:koopman@ukzn.ac.za).

**NOTES**

- 1 In *The Witness*, 11 Dec 2015, p. 8, under the title “The vision that vanished”.
- 2 Now *Bucorvus leadbeateri*.
- 3 Woodward, R.B. and J.D.S. Woodward, *Natal Birds* (Pietermaritzburg, P. Davis and Sons, 1899), p. 97.

- 4 Stark, A. and W.L. Sclater, *The Birds of South Africa* (London, R.H. Porter, vols I–III, 1903, vol IV, 1906).
- 5 Stark and Sclater, *Birds*, III, 102.
- 6 Branford, Jean, *A Dictionary of South African English* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 42.
- 7 Samuelson, R.C.A., *The King Cetywayo Zulu Dictionary* (Durban, The Commercial Printing Co., 1923), p. 471.
- 8 Samuelson, L. H., *Zululand: Its Traditions, Legends, Customs and Folklore* (Durban, T.W. Griggs & Co., 1974), p. 80. Levine Henrietta Samuelson (Zulu name uNomleti) was presumably the wife of R.C.A. Samuelson. Her book was originally published, date unknown, by the Mariannhill Missionary Press.
- 9 Godfrey, Robert, *Bird-Lore of the Eastern Cape* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1941), p. 65.
- 10 Lugg, H.C., *A Natal Family Looks Back* (Durban, T.W. Griggs & Co., 1970) Appendix, p.16. (The appendix is separately numbered from page 1.)
- 11 Lugg, *Natal Family*, p. 32.
- 12 Stark and Sclater, *Birds*, I, p. 238.
- 13 Clancey, P.A., *The Birds of Natal and Zululand* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1964).
- 14 Mitford, Bertram, *Through the Zulu Country* (Durban, T.W. Griggs & Co.), p. 310. (Originally published in 1883.)
- 15 Oliver, Jo, *A Beginner’s Guide to Our Birds* (Durban, The Wildlife Society of Southern Africa, 1991), p. 93.
- 16 Doke, C.M. and B.W. Vilakazi, *Zulu-English Dictionary* (Johannesburg, University of Witwatersrand Press, 1958), p. 217.
- 17 Maclean, G.L., *Roberts’ Birds of South Africa* (Cape Town, The John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, 1985), p. 212.
- 18 And to add to the confusion, in some areas of the Caribbean this bird is known as “John Crow” or “Carrion Crow”. (Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkey\\_vulture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkey_vulture) accessed 15.02.2016).
- 19 I am grateful to Prof Elwyn Jenkins for pointing out this reference to me.
- 20 Fleming, Francis, *Kaffaria, and Its Inhabitants* (London, 1853), p. 77.
- 21 *Chambers English Dictionary* allows for the association of “turkey” and “bustard”. Under the entry for **turkey**, we find “a domestic breed of the pheasant family; extended to various big birds, as bustard, ibis, brush-turkey ...”