



VULTURE VANGUARDS

I love vultures! If there are no vultures, many of us will get sick. They are very important to all of us, because they clean up carcasses and prevent the spread of disease. They help keep nature in balance and we must co-exist with vultures.'

These impassioned words belong to 18-year-old Fikile Makhubele, a student at Shobiyane High School in Acornhoek, the Greater Kruger Area.

South Africa's vultures are rapidly heading towards extinction. Four out of this country's six most familiar species have been declared Critically Endangered. The plummeting numbers are accelerated by catastrophic mass poisonings by poachers; just last year, two major events in the Greater Kruger Area claimed hundreds of victims.

So how do we reach South Africa's young people and inspire them to care about vultures? A unique collaborative approach is trying to address this in the Greater Kruger Area. The spark was ignited when Rifumo Mathebula, the programme director of Wild Shots Outreach, spent a day in the field with Endangered Wildlife Trust vulture researchers. The video he made that day about why vultures must be saved went viral, reaching 1.7 million South Africans.

Wild Shots Outreach, an award-winning NGO, works to connect, inspire and uplift young South Africans through photography. By giving local students and job seekers the chance to see wildlife for themselves – often for the very first time – the NGO aims to build the next generation of conservation storytellers.

At Shobiyane High School, art teacher Walter Sibuya has taken this mission into his classroom. A group of students from the school participated in the Wild Shots Outreach photography workshops, which included their first-ever game drive on a local game reserve. Then, to celebrate International Vulture Awareness Day on 6 September, these students spent an afternoon at Moholoholo Wildlife & Rehabilitation Centre. Here they took superb photos of wild vultures feeding at Moholoholo's vulture restaurant.

In addition, Sibuya led a vulture-themed art class for these students. One student, Fikile Makhubele, painted a striking composition that won a coveted prize at the Mpumalanga Arts Festival.

Reflecting on the experience, Makhubele said, 'It was amazing seeing wild vultures up close and watching their behaviour. I want young people like me to learn to love vultures and understand how important they are to

ABOVE Rifumo Mathebula, the programme director of Wild Shots Outreach, in the field with vulture researchers. His video went viral, attracting 1.7 million views.

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT Shobiyane High School students practise their camera skills by photographing wild vultures; Fikile Makhubele with her prize-winning vulture artwork; Shobiyane High School students with vulture photographs, accompanied by their art teacher Walter (left) and Wild Shots Outreach photography teacher Nathi (front right).

humans. We cannot have a healthy environment without these majestic birds.'

These young conservationists are proving that storytelling, art and photography can change how people see wildlife.

HARRIET NIMMO, WILD SHOTS OUTREACH