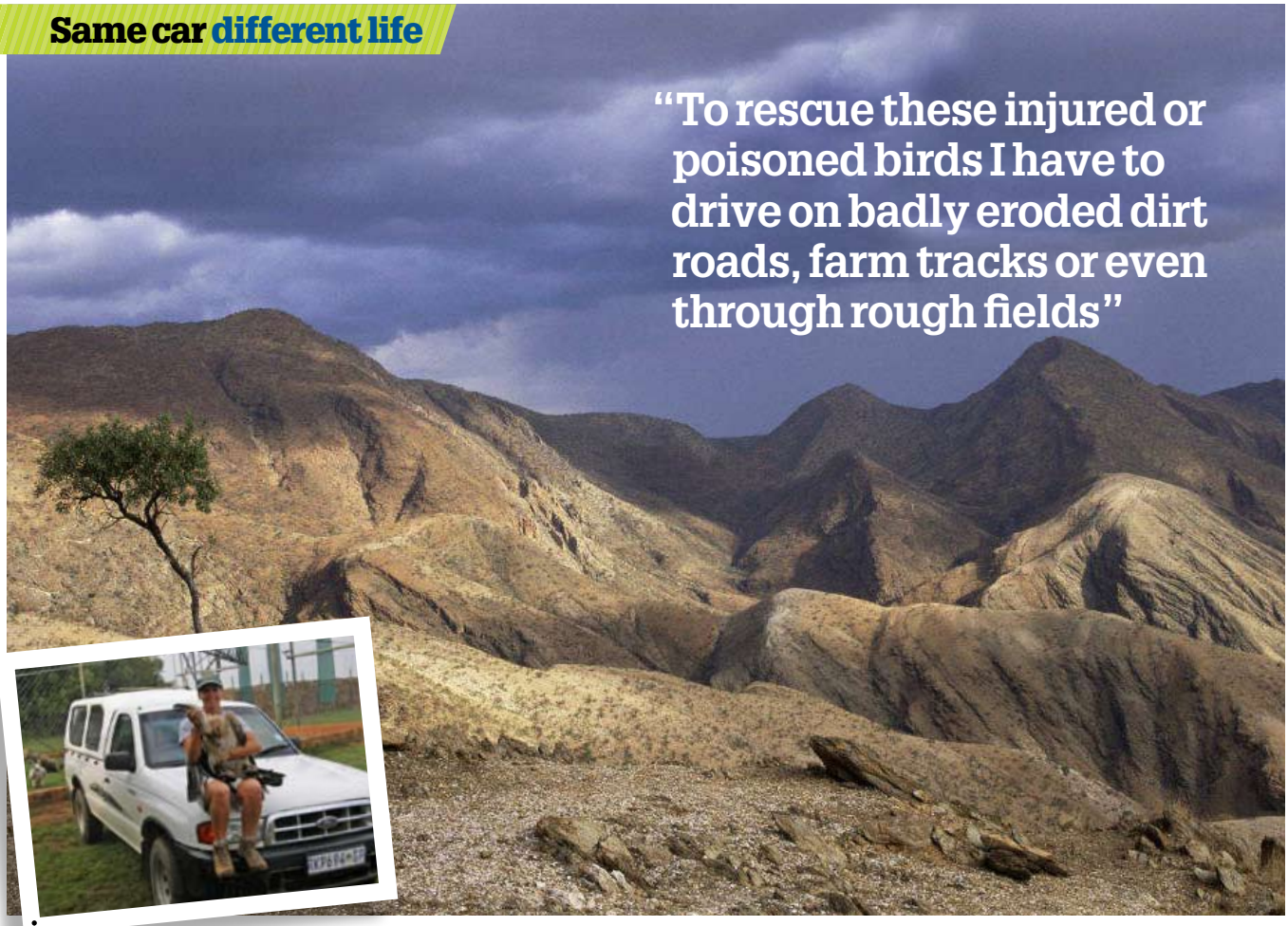

Name
Kerri Wolter
Lives
Magaliesberg, South Africa
Job
Vulture conservationist and researcher
Organisation
Rhino & Lion Wildlife Conservation NPO: Vulture Programme
Drives
Ford Ranger Single Cab

"Vultures suffer from a seriously bad brand image. Everybody is always grossed out by them and thinks they are ugly and smelly and there's no reason to conserve them. But vultures play a vital role in the ecosystem by cleaning up the bigger predators' scraps, and by doing so they prevent diseases or pests like blowflies from becoming a problem.

"These enormous birds are amazing creatures and they're absolutely built for their place in the circle of life. For example, did you know to digest its special diet a vulture's stomach acid is 1pH? That's the same as battery acid! Also, their necks are bare for clean feeding and they bath after every meal, so to think of them as dirty is really quite off the mark. I feel it is my role to change these misconceptions – almost like backing the misunderstood ugly duckling.

"Despite all the good they do in the ecosystem, however, vultures are shot by farmers, get poisoned and are frequently injured by electricity pylons that cut through their habitat. To rescue these injured or poisoned birds I have to drive on badly eroded dirt roads, farm tracks or even through rough fields.

"Once I had to do a rescue in a very mountainous area. The vulture was injured under a power line and to get to it was very tricky. There was no road and the large rocks were wet and slippery. I don't think any other car would have been able to get there, and to be honest, I don't even know how the Ranger managed. But even though it is only a 4x2, it got us there and back without any problems.

"I also really like the Ranger's large load bay, which is big enough for three or even four vulture crates (my previous pick-up could only hold one!). This is very handy when I do field monitoring or scientific research, which sometimes involves long road trips to Namibia. And it's still spacious enough inside that two other people could ride in the front with me.

"It was quite by chance that I wound up in vulture research and conservation, but looking back I wouldn't change it for the world."

PHOTOGRAPHY: NATUREPL.COM