



## **Vulture updates No 10 - March 2019 - Around the World of Vultures & VSG activities**

This biannual newsletter of the IUCN Vulture Specialist Group features the key vulture updates we're aware of by region, plus activities of VSG. We are aware that we all need to do much more. Implementation of the CMS [Multi-Species Action plan](#) (MsAP) is central for conserving old world vultures, download free if you haven't done so already. The challenge to implement and coordinate the agreed actions remains as great as ever, and an editorial summary was published this month by the compilers, and is available [free as a BCI download - access here](#) but hurry! Its only free until 31<sup>st</sup> March. Raising awareness is one important action we can all take, and do plan, register and participate in September's [International Vulture Awareness Day](#) and make use of the resources available.

Read on for updates from around the globe...

**Africa Round-up:** The Raptor Research Foundation [Annual Conference](#) was held for the first time in Africa, at Skukuza in the Kruger NP, South Africa - in Nov 2018, attended by 275 delegates from 41 countries. There was major focus on vultures with two symposia and two round-table discussions featuring more than 30 presentations plus posters. The Univ. Maryland, Annapolis, USA held its 4<sup>th</sup> and final SESYNC workshop with strong African representation in March, discussing innovative and cross-disciplinary approaches as well as sourcing funds to conserve Africa's vultures – we look forward to the outputs. A workshop hosted by BirdLife South Africa, drafted a baseline strategy to assess and address the threat of **lead poisoning** to vultures and other wildlife in South Africa. Outputs are being shared with a wider stakeholder group including various hunting and other relevant sectors over the coming months.

[Wildlife Poisoning Response Training](#) was delivered to 190 more delegates in key poisoning hotspots over recent months. These included Gt. Limpopo Trans-frontier Cons. Area, Mozambique, 3 locations in Namibia, and at Grumeti in Tanzania. The latter is the first such training for N Tanzania, and was a joint Endangered Wildlife Trust & Peregrine Fund event. 2019 training plans include Botswana, Zambia, Namibia, South Africa and Mozambique. Greater emphasis is being placed on developing a core team of trainers in the SADC region for improving the long term impact.

Together with Birdlife and EWT, the **Botswana** Government and others are developing a Vulture Safe Zone concept adapted for Botswana, to directly address local threats to vultures. Raptors Botswana community engagement team is now established in SW Botswana, carrying out vulture work with communities in the Tswapong Hills and the CL Woolcott Vulture Restaurant in Ghanzi. Despite supplementary bone provisioning for Cape Vultures in the Tswapong Hills, fledged chicks still show bone deformities due to a lack of calcium, so there are plans to increase bone provisioning in 2019. Raptors Botswana also recruited a Mopswana masters student, registered for vulture work at the FitzPatrick Inst., SA. BirdWatch **Zambia** has conducted surveys, research, mitigation and awareness work for the [93,000ha Vulture Safe Zone](#) initiative. Nest surveys in 2017/2018 recorded the Kafue Flats IBA as a major breeding site with an average density of 5 vulture nests/km<sup>2</sup>. Wing tags have been fitted on 13 vultures (1 Hooded and 12 White-backed) to help understand movements as well as a few GSM tracking units to identify new sites.

North Carolina Zoo's Southern **Tanzania** Vulture Project (partnered with WCS and FZS) expanded activities in 2018 to include road surveys and tagging in Selous Game Reserve with plans for ranger training to address poisoning later in 2019. So far, tagged White-backed vultures have moved into Mozambique and

N Tanzania. The project currently has 17 tagged birds (white-backed, hooded and white-headed vultures) across S Tanzania and covers 750 km of regularly monitored transects in the key protected area network (150,000km<sup>2</sup>). Eric Ole Reson has identified five high risk poisoning areas in S **Kenya**, and with Whitley Fund for Nature support, five Vulture Liaison Officers have been deployed to these locations and since Nov 2018 they have conducted Wildlife Poisoning Intervention Training and awareness work targeting over 600 people. The Peregrine Fund's Coexistence Co-op Project has trained 1000 people in N Kenya in poisoning awareness and building predator-proof bomas (corrals), with involvement of the Laikipia County government. In coordination with Nature Kenya, 30 scientists and vets from the Kenya Wildlife Service have been trained. Four aerial surveys of Rüppell's Vulture breeding cliffs have also been carried out. Developing laboratory capacity and training with regard to poison-testing in East Africa are two key components of the project. In **Uganda**, road raptor counts were completed with continuing monthly counts of Hooded Vultures at the four major feeding sites in the Kampala area.

[1,644 roosting Egyptian Vultures were counted](#) by a [Neophron LIFE](#) team, at Afar, Oromia in **Ethiopia** in late Jan 2019, the highest compared to previous surveys (2009, 2010 & 2013). Over 180 km of dangerous power lines (medium and low voltage) were surveyed - White-backed, Rüppell's, Hooded vultures were all victims of electrocution and collision. Also, [7 EVs \(2 adults + 5 immatures\) were trapped and tagged with GPS-GSM transmitters](#) to help assess the impact of threats and gather ecological data.

Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) has received support from US Fish & Wildlife Service for work to address the Illegal Wildlife Trade in Vultures, for which **Nigeria** is the main regional hub. NCF have already found substantial trade in vultures and their body parts in local markets, with a market value of around \$500,000. They will be working closely with the Traditional Healers Association and the Hunter's Association, as well as other key stakeholders, to tackle this belief-based use issue. A video documentary is being produced on vultures' role, threats and best practices to adopt in vulture conservation issue in **Burkina Faso**. It will be produced in French with English subtitles and made available in neighbouring countries.

**Recent Africa poison baits incidents:** For southern Africa, thankfully a lull in late 2018, but then a recent spate of incidents from Botswana (1 incident, poisoned carcass, 56 vultures, 2 lion, 2 Jackal) and Namibia (2 incidents, unknown source of poison, at least 10 dead vultures). [20 vultures died](#) during a poisoning event bordering the Maasai Mara in Kenya in Jan. Swift actions following the National Wildlife Poisoning Incidents Response Protocol successfully saved many vultures and other wildlife. Two vultures (Lappet-faced and Rüppell's) were rehabilitated and re-released.

**Asia Round-up:** The **SAVE** report (now [available here](#), and [summary](#)) from the 8<sup>th</sup> **SAVE meeting** held in Kathmandu late Nov. 2018, details many of the following updates:

Veterinary NSAIDs remain the highest priority threat to South Asian vultures, among the revised priorities, with diclofenac, nimesulide, ketoprofen the most prominent. 5 new cases of nimesulide poisoning in **NW India** are especially worrying, as tests are so difficult and this suggests a growing hidden threat from this increasingly popular veterinary drug, and adds urgency to the formal safety-testing programme by the Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI) for this and others - it is among drugs like ketoprofen and aceclofenac (already known to be unsafe for vultures) that remain in legal use across the region. An exception is **Bangladesh** where regional bans of ketoprofen and aceclofenac in both Vulture Safe Zones are setting an important example and have started to reduce their availability in pharmacies. One more localised restriction of these two drugs was [earlier formalised in Sindh, Pakistan](#) and is equally welcome. Many Indian states (but not all) have at least stopped supplying their Government vet services with untested veterinary drugs, ie other than meloxicam which is safe, as an initial step. Note that the safety-testing in India by the IVRI has progressed for tolfenamic acid, with preliminary optimism it could be a second safe drug in addition to meloxicam, so results of the further testing are awaited with great interest. Far less welcome news came from both **Cambodia** and **Myanmar**, where veterinary diclofenac (imported from Vietnam) was [found to](#)

[be available and in use by vets](#). The Cambodia Vulture Working Group has approached Government with support of the Environment Ministry, to request a national ban.

A series of [meetings hosted by BANCA in Yangon, Myanmar](#), have resulted in the formation of the Myanmar Vulture Working Group – a consortium of seven organisations including Govt, which [was formalised as a new key SAVE Partner](#), and which is meeting again in April to develop a set national vulture actions. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC, **Nepal** Govt) was also [formally welcomed as a new SAVE Partner](#) at the meeting. This formalises the strong engagement of DNPWC in vulture conservation, with the ongoing releases progressing near Chitwan NP, a further 12 birds [released in Sept. 2018](#), and now a total of 20 wild white rumped vultures are being tracked. [Summaries here](#).

Meanwhile the breeding programme in **India** is progressing well, with over 600 birds. State Governments of Haryana and West Bengal have substantially increased their support in 2018, and both [held key meetings recently](#), in preparation for initial releases in the near future.

There were mortality incidents reported - again Assam NE India had the highest single incident (probably poison-baits, targeting dogs) of 30 Himalayan Griffons (erroneously reported as slender-billed vultures), of which three recovered and were re-released. Ten immature Himalayans were rehabilitated from across Bangladesh this winter, up to 40/year in recent years) – most of these 10 will be released shortly. There were other mortalities reported at Jorbeer, Rajasthan, India, where incidentally, a peak Egyptian Vulture count in Dec 2018 was 1,740 birds.

The report from the Jan. 2018 [South India vultures meeting](#) in Ooty, Tamil Nadu is now [available here](#), and has established an interstate network of state focal points and there have already been some followup meetings.

Note the SAVE Report also contains the updated Blueprint for Recovery of Asia's Globally threatened vultures, which can be [downloaded as a separate document here](#). It has a number of updates and forms a key component of the MSAP for Asia.

In **China**: Reports of 19 rescued vultures (Himalayan, Bearded & Cinereous) distributed between Yunnan, Liaoning, Jilin, Hebei, Henan, Gansu, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. 11 of these were in Xinjiang (8 Himalayans), three of which have been re-released. Although food shortage appears to be behind this, other risks associated with visiting more urban environments such as collision, electrocution, poisoning and hunting are all factors. One Bearded vulture was badly injured after fighting with a golden eagle over food.

**Middle East:** While studying Steppe eagles wintering in **Oman** in Jan. 2019, researchers visited a veterinary pharmacy and found diclofenac (and meloxicam) for sale. A short discussion with the person attending the pharmacy suggested that diclofenac was a popular medicine for camels (at least). This discovery has opened up a discussion amongst government, waste management, and NGO stakeholders, and there are efforts by all to learn more and plot a constructive way forward. This process is in its early stages and is progressing. We look forward to a solution that will ensure that dangerous NSAIDs do not become available to vultures and eagles. Oman is a stronghold for Lappet-faced and Egyptian vultures that are resident there and is a winter destination for Steppe and other Aquila eagles. In **Saudi Arabia** there is an ongoing process requesting a ban of veterinary diclofenac, which can will hopefully get approval soon and build towards a regional effort. Two Egyptian Vultures were confiscated by [RSCN](#) in **Jordan** and after rehabilitation, released into the wild in Dana Reserve. One had been [for sale in a shop](#) and the other [at a local market](#). Apart of the illegal trade, [electrocution](#) also featured for Egyptian Vulture in Jordan.

**European Round-up:** A major [European vulture conference](#) will take place in Portugal 1-4 October 2019 – do not miss this one! The **poison baits** threat remains prominent, from [Spain](#) to [North Macedonia](#), with numerous incidents. A study by the [VCF](#) for the Balkans estimated [at least 2300 vultures died poisoned in that region](#) in the last 20 years and much conservation effort remains focused on fighting this major threat. A

[Balkan-wide anti-poisoning project](#) for example is producing excellent results in countries such as [Serbia](#), [Greece](#), [Croatia](#), [North Macedonia](#), [Albania](#) and [Bosnia-Herzegovina](#).

A [Griffon killed by a wind farm in NE Greece](#) triggered an international request to the Greek government for more vigilance when approving windfarms in the Thrace region, where doubling of the capacity is currently planned. **Electrocution** also remains prominent for Europe and the Middle East, eg [this Egyptian Vulture killed in Jordan](#). Mitigation and training is tackling the issue: see outputs and valuable resources [here](#) from a meeting in Andalucía. **Lead** is also of growing concern, and [more evidence from Switzerland](#) suggests that 4 scavenger species, including Bearded Vultures, had high lead levels on their body tissues, from the ingestion of lead ammunition from hunting. (See also South America update below). And although **illegal shooting** of vultures is mostly a thing of the past in Europe, a [Griffon Vulture was still shot in Montenegro](#). Meanwhile in the Middle East this is still a big problem – as for the [killing of this Cinereous Vulture in Lebanon](#).

The impact of **veterinary drugs** (NSAIDs) on vultures has also been discussed widely at a [recent \(February 19\) workshop](#) in Dadia National Park (Greece), but unfortunately [the Portuguese parliament refused to ban outright the usage of veterinary diclofenac](#). One important step to determine mortality cause [is to perform an adequate post-mortem](#), but unfortunately this is not sufficiently part of standard protocols for many countries.

**Bearded Vultures** continue to increase in the Alps - [last summer registered a new record with 52 breeding pairs](#), but for the first time the number of fledged young did not increase, and thus productivity was lower than usual. The breeding season 2018-2019 is now under way, [with the first laying in the Italian Alps on the 10<sup>th</sup> December](#) 2018 – [breeding is generally going well](#) across the mountain chain. In Corsica only 1 young fledged last year from the 5 breeding pairs there. The species is generally very well monitored in Europe, but elsewhere there is little information, for example [from countries like Turkey](#) – so [a young Bearded Vulture seen migrating across the Bosphorus](#) in the end of September (the first ever such observation) excited birdwatchers and conservationists alike – where did it come from?

On the 6<sup>th</sup> Oct 2018 almost one thousand people participated in a simultaneous count of Bearded Vulture in the Alps – the [year before more than 900 people logged more than 500 observations of Bearded Vultures](#), that after some analysis allowed experts to estimate between 208-251 birds in this growing (originally reintroduced) population. In Andalusia, [a third breeding pair has started to breed](#), another milestone for the project that began only in 2006. In Nov. 150 people from 14 countries met there for the annual Bearded Vulture meeting – see conclusions [here](#). The first Bearded Vultures [reintroduced last year to the Maestrazgo massif in southern Spain](#) [also continue to do well](#). Less positive was the observation of [an adult bird in France with mysteriously missing toes and talons](#). Meanwhile the project to try to link the alpine and the Pyrenean populations – [GYPCONNECT](#) continues, and news that [one of the released birds in the Massif Central has returned to its hacking place](#) after visiting the Pyrenees raising hopes that the link can be established sooner. To strengthen the Bearded Vulture captive breeding network, [17 captive Bearded Vultures were moved across Europe](#) last Fall. This was made possible by generous public [crowdfunding campaign](#). Innovative veterinary methods have been used, including a world first - [an artificial limb for an injured Bearded Vulture](#). In the meantime a pair in the Guadalentín Bearded Vulture captive breeding centre [laid the first egg of the season on the 7th Dec.](#) – this [chick hatched on the 29<sup>th</sup> Jan.](#). Many pairs [now breed within the captive breeding network](#). It is hoped [to release between 15 and 20 birds this spring across Europe](#)

**Eurasian Griffon Vultures** continue to do well in Europe. In Spain the results of a full national census are not out yet, but in strongholds like Andalusia, [population have increased by 11% since 2014. Increases were also reported in Sardinia \(50 pairs in 2018 up from 45 in 2017\)](#) – boosted by [supplementation of 11 Griffons. With more releases planned](#). Also in [Maiorca](#), where the species is a recent coloniser. In the [Kresna Gorge, Bulgaria](#), the population is recovering from the major poisoning incident there in 2017, the national Bulgarian population of the species, together with Eastern Rhodopes is almost 150 pairs. [A total of 1873 Griffons were counted last summer in the Alps](#), confirming that the expanding western Europe populations are now exporting Griffons each summer to the alpine chain. The species is a partial migrant, with



fascinating movements – such as the story of ‘Kvarner’, [a Croatian Griffon that overflowed the Adriatic Sea](#), or the migrations of ‘Arda’ and ‘Kaya’ from Bulgaria to Saudi Arabia, and one [22 year old Griffon photographed in Portugal](#).

The three **Cinereous Vultures** reintroduced in **Bulgaria** in 2018 as part of the [Vultures Back to LIFE project](#) left Bulgaria in the autumn, [with two reaching Greece](#), and [one going further to winter on the Iraq-Iran border](#). ‘Ostrava’, wintering in south Peloponnese, Greece, [died there, poisoned in Feb 2019](#). 12 more are due for release in March-April 2019, when two tagged birds hopefully return from their wintering grounds. Another was [poisoned in Dadia NP, Greece in Feb](#). In **France** there were [37 breeding pairs last year](#), and [5 more birds were reintroduced in the Gorges du Verdon in November](#), but unfortunately one of them died at sea – [clouded in a mystery](#). ‘Abricot’, a wandering Cinereous Vulture, released in France that travelled widely across Europe, [was photographed in Dec. in Portugal](#). [Three rehabilitated birds](#) were also tagged and released back to the wild in Portugal. Meanwhile, the [LIFE Re Vultures](#) project hopes to attract birds to breed in the only colony in the Balkans in nearby Dadia in Greece and [have been constructing artificial nests on the Bulgarian side](#). In the captive-breeding network for this species, [birds are trying to find love in dating aviaries](#). In **Spain** the species continues to increase – last year [was another record year in Andalucía](#) for example, with 354 pairs – a growth rate of 5% per year over 20 years.

Results from the [experimental release of captive-bred Egyptian Vultures](#) (7 birds) in **Bulgaria** in 2018 using three different methods (hacking, fostering and delayed release) can be seen [here](#), results [were mixed](#) with [4 of the 8 birds reaching Africa](#). Updating the status of the **Egyptian Vulture** in the Balkans in 2018, [nine active territories](#) were found in **Albania**, [14](#) in **Northern Macedonia**, [six](#) in **Greece** (a single individual, one non-breeding and four breeding pairs with five successful fledglings), and [26](#) in **Bulgaria** (17 of which raised a total of 21 fledglings that successfully left the nests due to [nest guarding support](#)). Birds tagged in the [LIFE RUPIS](#) project left their European breeding grounds in late Sept., and [reached wintering grounds in Mali and Senegal](#) in mid-Oct.,. Last autumn a team from the New LIFE project counted a staggering [800 Egyptian Vultures at a migration bottleneck in Turkey](#). The project is [looking for skilled volunteers](#) to help with 2019 counts. Most of these birds [are now back in Europe](#).

‘A Mile for the Egyptian Vulture’ is an international campaign supporting Egyptian Vultures in their difficult migration journey through running events. So far, it took place in **Greece** (Alexandroupoli Marathon [2017](#) and [2018](#)) and **Bulgaria** ([Sofia Marathon 2018](#); [video](#)), with over 10,000 people reached for this cause. Other major public events dedicated to vulture conservation in Bulgaria took place in [Sofia Zoo](#) (over 4,000 attended), [Sofia Children's Day Festival](#) (4,500) and [Sofia Familaton Feast](#) (4,000 attended). Finally, [there is a report from the French national vulture conference](#), Oct. 2018. This year’s Champions of the Flyway – a Birdlife -organised bird race in Israel, will raise money for vultures in Africa.

**South America Round-up:** A [partial ban of Carbofuran and other pesticides](#) was obtained following the death of 34 condors at one carcass in **Argentina**. But 2018 has seen at [least 90 individual Andean Condors](#) poisoned in Argentina alone. This represents almost 1% of the crudely estimated world population of 10,000. Other poison baits events in other South American countries suggest this is a growing problem for the species. At least 12 condors were received for rehabilitation at Buenos Aires Zoo during the year. In Santiago city, **Chile**, some condors have started roosting [on buildings](#) which coupled with a growing trend for people [feeding them](#), from city apartments, has led to cases condors [stealing meat from barbeques](#)., something that may lead to more conflict issues if more birds learn such behaviour. It is possible that food shortage is making condors feed in more urban environments, including at open rubbish dumps, and combined with threats of persecution, lead contamination etc. may mean the IUCN threat category needs revisiting.

A [recent review](#) (for South America and globally) shows that lead poisoning needs greater consideration as a threat in the red-listing process for vultures and condors, and that this problem is more prevalent than previously thought. A [study](#) of Black Vulture from Patagonia shows that birds feeding at rubbish dumps may be exposed to zoonotic pathogens (eg., *Salmonella enterica* serotypes Typhi).

*Vulture News* has received a steady flow of submissions over recent months and we encourage VSG members and their collaborators to submit their reports, manuscripts, sightings, etc. The November 2018 volume (No. 75) is running slightly behind schedule but will be released soon. It seems only very recently that the journal went online open access with a new website, but it was nearly four years ago! As part of the ongoing development of *Vulture News* and its role as the journal of the IUCN Vulture Specialist Group, we have started the process of migrating *Vulture News* to a new website that will be the online home of the specialist group itself. The new Vulture Specialist Group website will be the central point for all resources related to the Vulture Specialist Group, including *Vulture News*. During the process of transition to the new website, the old journal website will not be updated. However, *Vulture News* can [still be accessed here](#).

Please feel free to contact the editor Campbell Murn [campbell@hawkconservancy.org](mailto:campbell@hawkconservancy.org) with any queries about submissions, back issues or other points related to the journal.

Let us know if you receive this newsletter indirectly and wish to be added to the circulation list.

Do send items for inclusion ahead of the next edition in September. Or submit longer articles [to the editor](#) of the VSG journal, *Vulture News*. Reminder that [Vulture News including back copies is available free](#) online – do read it!



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