



## **Vulture updates No 14 – March 2021 - Around the World of Vultures & VSG activities**

Headlines from the past six months include the worst ever poison-baits incident for Andean Condor (AC), (in Bolivia), and the first confirmed vulture death caused by diclofenac in Europe, both of which VSG is responding to with letters to relevant authorities. Positive news comes from Oman, which became the first country in Arabia to formally ban veterinary diclofenac, and even better: Bangladesh is leading the way with a national ban of veterinary ketoprofen, another popular veterinary NSAID toxic to vultures – the first country to take this important step. From Africa, Griffon Vulture returned to Morocco after 40 years. More details and full regional round-ups below.

### **Regional Round-ups**

**Africa Round-up: North Africa** - A major two-day workshop 24-25 Mar 2021 on conservation action focused on the population of Rüppell's Vulture (RV) in the Mediterranean-region was organised by the IUCN Mediterranean office. [Nature Conservation Egypt](#) established a group of vulture specialists and researchers to advance conservation efforts of local populations in **Egypt**. In Jan 2021, thanks to the efforts of the Dept Water and Forests in partnership with [GREPOM/Birdlife Morocco](#), 8 rehabilitated Griffon vultures [reintroduced](#) into the wild were observed mating with other wild vultures for the first time in 40 years.

**West Africa-** The recently formed West African Vulture Working Group has engaged with the IUCN Conservation Planning SG and are making good progress on a response strategy specifically targeted at reducing the impact of belief-use trade on vultures in the region. There was at least one [poisoning incident of 46 HV](#) in **Guinea-Bissau** in Feb/Mar 2021, but this time at a location near the coast and some distance away from where the huge catalogue of incidents 2020 took place during 2020. In SW Nigeria, the coronavirus pandemic reduced market prices of vulture heads from US\$ 39 to US\$ 25 and for a whole body from 92 to US\$ 42 (S. Awoyemi unpub. data). A live vulture still reaches US\$ 210. [NCF](#) nominated 3 celebrity vulture ambassadors to actively advocate for vulture conservation, promoting positive messages about vultures and their important role in ecosystems. [SCF](#) continued to [support Nigerian schools](#) with a focus on wildlife and vulture conservation. **Burkina Faso** recorded (in *Malimbus* 43:1-8) its first observation of Cinereous Vulture (CV), apparently the 13th recent record in sub-Saharan West Africa, reinforcing suggestions of a change in the migratory status of this species. A tagged EV (from **Bulgaria**, since 2015) was [poisoned](#) in **Chad**. Awareness campaigns on the illegal killing and trade of vultures in **Niger** were held with both [hunters and traditional healers](#), and [environmental authorities](#) in the regions of Zinder and Maradi. A [booklet](#) on vultures of Niger, their role, threats and conservation was distributed.

**East Africa** - [An important MoU](#) was signed between the [Ethiopian Wildlife & Nat Hist Soc](#) (EWNHS), [Ethiopia Wildlife Conservation Authority](#), [Ethiopia Electricity Utility](#) and [Ethiopia Electric Power](#) instigating bird-safe energy practices. [BirdLife](#), EWNHS and EU NewLIFE [Egyptian Vulture Project](#) sponsored vulture messaging for the Total 2020 [Great Ethiopian Run](#) with 9,000 runners. The 2020 message was "Bird-safe Energy Infrastructure" with EV as the flagship, reaching 4 million through media outlets. HawkWatch Int. continues vulture research in **Ethiopia**, including monitoring of vulture abundance at abattoirs, monitoring of collision risk at Adama Wind Facility, and a camera trap project to evaluate carrion removal rates by vertebrate scavengers. A *J Anim Ecol*, paper (Beuchley et al.) evaluating mortality patterns of 220 satellite tracked EVs across Eurasia and Africa is due out this month. In **S Tanzania**, between Sept

2020 and Jan 2021, the North Carolina Zoo and WCS vulture telemetry study had 3 confirmed mortalities (1 a large-scale retaliatory poisoning killing nearly 60 vultures), 2 presumed mortalities, where neither bird nor unit was retrieved, but was suspected to be linked to human activity, and 1 unit drop. In Sept, 3 transmitters were deployed from Nyerere NP (formerly Selous GR). Two wet season monitoring surveys were conducted in Ruaha and Katavi NPs in 2021. NCZ, together with Grumeti Fund, is supporting a Tanzanian MSc student to study breeding success and nest site selection of **White-backed vultures** in N Tanzania, and NCZ continues to support a PhD student from Univ York (UK) analysing movements data. In northern **Kenya**, The Peregrine Fund's (TPF) [Coexistence Co-op](#) trained 180 people in improved livestock husbandry and poisoning prevention over the past Covid-affected year. Since the project onset being in 2018, 660 predator-proof bomas (corrals) have been built by communities. The Co-op was [featured by BBC](#) as part of World Wildlife Day celebrations. An MoU was signed between Kenya Power and National Museums of Kenya to address wildlife-energy issues and data collection, facilitated by TPF and TE Connectivity. In Nov 2020 8 vultures were poisoned in Laikipia, 4 died, 4 were rehabilitated, and 3 eventually released - one remains in rehab due to blindness in one eye. In early March there was a poisoning incident in the Queen Elizabeth Park, **Uganda** targeting lion for belief-based use purposes. It killed 6 lions and 11 vultures (6 WBV, 3 HV, 1 RV & 1 WHV). Six suspects were arrested, and animal parts confiscated by UWA within days of the incident being discovered.

**Southern Africa** - Aerial surveys of key sites for breeding vultures in Kruger NP, **South Africa**, were completed in Sept 2020 by Hawk Conservancy Trust/Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT). These repeated sample areas and methodology of 2014, with eagerly awaited results for breeding populations of WBV, LFFV and WHV populations. Annual monitoring of breeding LFFV in the **Namib**-Naukluft Park in Oct 2020 located 48 nests and 36 chicks were ringed and patagial tags fitted. The tracking programme was expanded by 5 birds and data can be viewed on Movebank "Namibia Lappet-faced Vultures". The EWT, working with African Parks, Lilongwe Wildlife Trust and **Malawi** DNPW successfully tagged and tracked the first 16 vultures in Malawi, Nov 2020. In March 2021, EWT also worked with Raptors **Botswana** to trap 8 vultures expanding their tracking sample. Two more Wildlife Poisoning Response Workshops were conducted in Tuli and Khutse Game Reserves in Botswana in Jan and Feb 2021 and virtual training sessions with BirdLife Africa partners in The **Gambia**, **Ghana** and **Ethiopia** went ahead in March 2021. EWT also conducted training with 90 newly appointed SANParks Environmental Monitors and 24 SA Police Service Endangered Species Unit members in Wildlife Poisoning Awareness, also in March. In **South Africa**'s Karoo Vulture Safe Zone, 487,367 ha (21% of the target 23,000 km<sup>2</sup>) is committed to becoming 'vulture safe'. The Dept. of Forest & Wildlife Mgmt at the National Univ Sci & Tech in **Zimbabwe** has recorded a significant increase in WBV breeding success at Debshan Ranch, Shangani over the past 5 years. This improvement is attributed to an increase in numbers of adult breeders, as compared to early surveys when nesting was largely by immatures. For 2020, 38 active nests with 76% nesting success were recorded at the ranch's southern side, and the northern side had 18 active nests were and 83% nesting success. VulPro together with the Max-Planck Institute published "Wing tags severely impair movement in African Cape Vultures," in *Animal Biotelemetry*, Curk et al. (2021). The study highlights concerns with certain wing tags which compromise survival rates of vultures. VulPro rescued 65 vultures since Sept 2020 and have successfully rehabilitated and released 35 over the same period. In southern Africa, expansion of Vulture Safe Zones and mainstreaming of rapid response mechanisms is ongoing through BirdLife partners in [Zambia](#), [Zimbabwe](#), [Botswana](#) and [South Africa](#). Most recently, in early Apr 2021, staff from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife arrested suspects near Mkhuze in Zululand, **South Africa**, confiscating carcasses/parts of at least 7 WBV and a Tawny Eagle.

**Asia Round-up: South Asia** -The most significant update comes from **Bangladesh** where the Government with facilitation of [IUCN Bangladesh](#) and the Bangladesh National Vulture Recovery Committee held a series of high level meetings in late 2020 which resulted in the Cabinet and Prime Minister agreeing in Feb 2021 to a [national veterinary ketoprofen ban](#). This is the first national ban of any toxic NSAID apart from diclofenac and sets a significant precedent within the region and globally. Ketoprofen has become the most popular veterinary NSAID in Bangladesh, so this is an important commitment as unfortunately it was proven to kill vultures over ten years ago. 16 rehabilitated Himalayan Griffon (HG) were released and ringed in early Apr which now appears to be an annual occurrence both in Singra NP Bangladesh and a further 21

were rehabilitated and released in West Bengal northern **India**, the latter mainly birds recovered by BNHS and local NGOs from a poisoning incident. In Apr 2021, the **Bangladesh** Forest Dept (Govt) confirmed funding for a new vulture conservation programme through IUCN Bangladesh. Covid restrictions have prevented overdue vulture road-transect surveys in **India**, as well as many Vulture Safe Zone activities and carcass sampling surveys in India and other neighbouring countries including **Myanmar**. Despite this, and related funding difficulties, breeding programmes in India, Pakistan & Nepal continued and there was new commitment and initial **Indian** government and Central Zoo Authority funding for planning additional vulture breeding centres in India - in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa. The Forest Dept. also released its detailed [5-year national vulture action plan](#) to 2025 in Nov 2020 with major Indian government commitment for effective regulation of veterinary drugs, expanding the Vulture Safe Zone programme to every state, as well as the breeding and release programme. Releases of the first 8 WRV in India [in Haryana](#), have been followed up by a further 10 WRV released in northern West Bengal at Buxa Tiger Reserve in Jan and Feb 2021, also by state government with [BNHS](#), on a trial basis, since results of undercover pharmacy surveys show higher levels of aceclofenac, diclofenac and nimesulide availability than appear vulture-safe. These releases – all birds were satellite-tagged - are important high-profile tests of the safety of the environment and for developing release methodology. There were two poison-baits vulture incidents, [one in E Assam](#) (36 died – SBV, WRV & HG) and one in West Bengal (10 HG, 1 WRV), although several more (13 from Assam) were successfully rescued and later released from each incident. In **Nepal**, vulture population trends remained positive and released birds continued to travel more widely, despite slightly lower survival rates so far than for tagged wild birds. A landmark for Nepal was 2 [released birds breeding in the wild](#) for the first time and hatching a chick was confirmed in March 2021 by [BCN](#). Pharmacy surveys in **Pakistan** by [WWF Pakistan](#) showed worrying trends (like India), with NSAIDs including meloxicam (safe), flunixin, ketoprofen & aceclofenac (toxic) and phenylbutazone (untested) being used at almost all the survey sites in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Illegal diclofenac use is still an issue in many parts of the country. The Pakistan government also took on the rotating chair (from Bangladesh) of the inter-governmental “Regional Steering Committee” for vultures and held a virtual review meeting in Dec 2020. **Cambodia** has now been formally included on the committee along with Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal. Also in Cambodia follow-up to the poison-response training has resulted in documentation of a number of poisoning events there, but thankfully not involving vultures so far. The report will shortly appear on the [SAVE](#) website. [Dr Ram Jakati](#), SAVE FACC member and chair for five years, was awarded the RSPB’s highly prestigious Medal for Outstanding Contribution to Nature Conservation for his services to vultures and to SAVE. The annual SAVE meeting was held online over 3 days in Nov/Dec 2020, including an open day plus working sessions to develop strategic concerns. There were also national pre-meetings for 5 of the 6 countries, but significantly, all presentations remain [available to watch on the SAVE website](#) for the first time. The full 130 page 10<sup>th</sup> Annual [SAVE report](#) and updated Regional [Blueprint recovery plan](#) are both now available as outputs from the meeting (along with a [SAVE ‘anthem’](#) to commemorate 10 years), and note the Blueprint has a revised more user-friendly format, country by country. The newly published list of protected animals in **China** (2021), uplisted CV to the highest level of national protected animals (it was formerly the second level) bringing heavy fines or up to a 10-year prison sentence for anyone harming the species. Surveys by [MaMing](#)’s team across 16 provinces (covering over half of the main Chinese vulture wintering areas during the winter months) identified 43 injured or weak vultures for rescue (35 CV, 8 HG). The coldest periods were the peak, suggesting food shortage/hunger as a factor. 16 were released, while the rest were sent to zoos or parks. Of the 43 birds, 74% were apparently hungry, 23% electrocution/collision, 3% poison bait.

**West Asia:** The biggest headline came from **Oman** where the Government formally announced the [banning of veterinary diclofenac](#) in Dec 2020. Oman becomes the first country in the Arabian Peninsula to take this important step with **Iran** being the only other Middle Eastern state to have done so. The [ban](#), put in place by the Min of Agriculture, Fisheries & Water Resources, and issued by Ministerial Decision No. 81/2020 was welcomed by the [Environment Society of Oman](#). A two-year study of LFV and EV was launched in Jan/Feb 2021 in **Oman**, to develop understanding of numbers and distribution of LFV and how waste management changes have affected vultures, and also learning more about electrocution risk. The waste management company, be’ah, is actively planning the establishment of vulture restaurants, and checks of the potential sources of food to confirm they have no toxic veterinary drugs. Satellite tracking of 7 adult EVs continued

over the past year in **Djibouti** where they appear largely territorial and resident. An [MoU was signed](#) between [RSCN](#) and the Irbid District Electricity Company aiming to decrease bird mortality caused by the electric power grid in **Jordan**. This resulted from a [survey on bird electrocution](#) in El Ekaider landfill site, along the EV flyway in northern Jordan. [An assessment of the risks of electrocution](#) along the flyway was carried out by [SSCW](#) in **Syria**. A series of regional webinars held by [Birdlife's Migratory Soaring Birds](#) project included [Agriculture & Conservation of Migratory Soaring Birds](#) along the Red Sea Flyway with a focus on poisoning. [Another](#) covered the [management of waste disposal sites](#) with respect to vultures. A [third](#) was on the principle of Sustainable Hunting Areas as a proposed way of tackling Illegal Killing of Birds. The final one covered the [Energy Task Force of CMS efforts to tackle the threat of electrocution](#) for migratory soaring birds, advocating and describing the implementation of safe practices at a regional level. They surveyed the coastal area and identified some lines that are not safe. SSCW also posted cases and background vulture information on its [Facebook](#) page and it has been advocating at the Syrian Min of Agriculture to take steps to prevent the use of veterinary diclofenac as well as highlighting where illegal bird killing occurred. One juvenile [EV from the Balkans programme was shot](#) in **Lebanon** but rescued by [SPNL](#). There was [publication](#) of the status and threats for migratory EVs along the southwest coast of **Saudi Arabia** in [Sandgrouse](#). Finally, a prominent [information board on EV](#) was erected beside the Beypazarı Tourism Information Office in **Turkey**.

**European Round-up:** [Recent headlines](#) have been [dominated](#) by the [publication](#) in Apr 2021 of confirmed diclofenac poisoning of a CV in **Spain**. The implications of this coupled with last year's confirmation that animal carcasses in the vulture food chain do sometimes contain NSAIDs including toxic NSAIDs (notably diclofenac and flunixin) despite the EU and Spanish Government claims that this wouldn't happen make this highly significant, and may hopefully lead to a veterinary diclofenac ban. Pressure and letters from BirdLife Europe, VCF and VSG among others are needed to prompt clear action, and this is also in line with the CMS resolution from 2020. In the Douro valley on the **Spain/Portugal** border, [reports](#) from the LIFE Rupis project summarised the positive outcomes (tracking of EVs, [poisoning summary and progress](#), CV information) at end of the 5-year funding. Poison baits remains the main cause of vulture mortality. The [results from the population monitoring](#) of breeding EVs in the **Balkans** in 2020 indicated a 6% increase in the number of occupied territories (from 52 to 55) and a 9% increase in the number of pairs (from 45 to 49) compared to 2019. The EV's autumn migration was monitored at [Antikythira Raptor Count](#) in **Greece** (5 EV out of ca. 6,500 raptors observed) and at [Sarimazi Raptor Count](#) in **Turkey** (268 EV out of ca. 7,000 raptors observed). In total 15 EV nests with 23 fledglings were [guarded](#), and a late hatched chick of a new-formed pair was [rescued](#) in **Bulgaria**. A network of 11 supplementary feeding stations was maintained in the Balkans to support the EV population (2 in [Albania](#); 2 in **North Macedonia**; 4 in [Greece](#) and 3 in [Bulgaria](#)). Comparing 3 [release methods](#) (delayed-release, fostering and hacking) for captive-bred birds to strengthen the Egyptian vulture population in the Balkans was [tested for a 3<sup>rd</sup>](#) consecutive year in **Bulgaria**. A new regional "[record](#)" of crossing 603 km of the Mediterranean Sea over 10h 30min was achieved by a tagged captive-bred EV from the Balkan restocking programme. The anti-poison programme in the Balkans is ongoing by [pilot testing of fladry fencing](#) in **Greece** to reduce the damage caused by wolves and thus suppress the incentive for the illegal use of poison baits. Patrolling with two [anti-poison canine teams](#) ([report](#)) was another measure. In **Albania**, [first-aid anti-poison kits and freezers](#) were [distributed to](#) the local network of stakeholders, legislative [analysis](#) on the VMPs in the country was [published](#), and [data regularly collected on poisoning](#) incidents. In **North Macedonia**, a [network of local caretakers](#) was set up, and [legislative analyses](#) on pesticides ([report](#)) and VMPs ([report](#)) were produced. A [handbook to prevent bird crime](#) was promoted to the relevant authorities in **Albania**, and the threat from electrocution and collision with energy infrastructure [was evaluated](#) in all EV territories in the country. An educational [webinar](#) "Giving Life to the Egyptian vulture: e-learning and conservation actions" was held in **Greece**, while a [campaign](#) to replace stuffed animals with photos of emblematic raptors and a [local-level running event](#) dedicated to vulture conservation took place in **Albania**. Albanian students were involved in various [vulture conservation activities](#) becoming [ambassadors of strong conservation messages](#) in the country. Note a more comprehensive European summary will appear in the next issue.

**North America Round-up:** The **California condor** (CC) [population update](#) as of end of 2020 is 504. This breaks down to 329 free flying, 10 wild chicks fledged in 2020, 28 captives released to the wild plus the total captive population of 175. There were 42 wild deaths in 2020, 34 of which occurred in California. Lead poisoning was responsible for at least 12 of these deaths, fire accounted for 9, and power lines for 2. Of all CC deaths with a known cause between 1992 and 2020, 50% have been due to lead poisoning. CC groups in California continue to refine release and recapture methodology. They report a tough year for the central California population, documenting deaths related to wildfires and lead poisoning. 2021 looks better so far as 3 wild eggs were laid in Feb, with more expected. The total number of CC in the wild in California, (central and S populations combined) was 186 by 2020 end and by end Mar 2021 the great news just received is that over 20 eggs have been laid in the wild! The Utah/Arizona flock is intensively monitored/managed and is 106 individuals. The [North American Non-Lead Partnership](#) continues to initiate conversations and establish partnerships with hunting/sporting groups and agencies, aiming to increase the use of non-lead ammunition throughout North America. They currently have over 30 partners. Collaboration continues between a [research non-profit](#), West Virginia USDA Wildlife Services, WV Air National Guard, and a cement manufacturer to better understand how **American Black Vultures** (ABVs) respond to management efforts intended to reduce aircraft collisions. The non-profit collects data on both GPS tagged and patagially tagged ABVs. In collaboration with Purdue University, researchers in Oct 2020 fitted 8 ABVs with GPS/GSM transmitters. They are being monitored to see how they utilise livestock production areas in Southern Indiana. The researchers will soon be sending out a survey to livestock producers aimed at ascertaining perceptions of livestock producers regarding ABV damage and to develop tools for reducing damage. This same team is working to test inflatable scarecrows as a potential tool for reducing vulture damage to property and to write an ABV home range paper using a 15+ years ABV tracking data set. They also recently published a [paper](#) on ABV damage trends and research needs. In Mississippi researchers have been exploring the movement ecology of ABVs and **Turkey Vultures** (TVs) through mark-and-recapture and GPS technology. They have wing-tagged 131 ABVs, 37 of which have also been fitted with GPS units. 45 TVs have been wing tagged, 15 of which also have GPS units. The team has measured lead in blood samples from 184 birds and have assessed blood chemistry in 55. Preliminary results show an unexpected increase in blood-lead concentrations outside of typical big-game hunting seasons in the south-eastern USA. They are also assessing the impact of plastic wing-tags in the flying behaviour of 6 GPS tagged ABVs and comparing movement parameters with those from other non-wing-tagged but GPS-tagged ABVs, and have applied fine resolution GPS data to assess the impact of Hurricane Zeta (Oct 2020) on the movement traits of ABVs and TVs. Focused mostly in Mississippi, this work is expanding to include sampling and tagging sites in Alabama and Tennessee, to evaluate mitigation practices for negative interactions between vultures and utility infrastructure. Finally, the movements of 13 TVs are being tracked by researchers in Pennsylvania.

**South America Round-up:** The headline was Feb 6, 2021 when the worst ever known **Andean condor** (AC) [poisoning event](#) took place in **Bolivia**. 34 ACs were poisoned in the one event, plus 1 BV, 5 TV, a Southern Caracara and 5 domestic dogs. [Evidence suggests this](#) is a case of 'poison baits' unintentionally poisoning avian scavengers with the apparent motive of eliminating either pumas or feral dogs that were attacking livestock in the area. The poison used was carbofuran. Earlier incidents in neighboring countries were the main driver of AC declines and the Red listing for the species by [IUCN in 2020 to 'Vulnerable'](#) to global extinction (Formally uplisted: 10 December 2020). Unfortunately, this incident and disturbing alert has come too late in this case, but this tragic incident underlines the urgency to take major action, and the VSG has drafted a letter for the Bolivian authorities to urge significant actions. Within a few km of the poisoning event, on March 12, 2021, one rehabilitated GPS-tagged AC was released. This is the 7th successfully rehabilitated and released AC in Bolivia. The satellite telemetry work, coupled with other tools such as the Bolivia's National Action Plan to conserve the species, will provide information to better understand AC habitat use and movements. Meanwhile there has been a new level of coordination between **Argentina** and **Chile** regarding the threat posed by wind-farms to AC and plans for one wind farm in Chile were stopped because of the threat posed to the species. Several more proposed windfarms are now under discussion in Argentina. In **Ecuador** in Nov 2020, Fundación Cóndor Andino and The Peregrine Fund conducted a population survey of AC in Pichincha, the province with the highest AC density in Ecuador, counting a total of 42 AC, corresponding to one third of the total estimated population for the country.

Additionally, both organizations, with the support of local governments, carried out awareness campaigns in 14 communities near key AC nesting and feeding sites, targeting more than 1200 people and simultaneously sterilizing about 1000 domestic dogs in order to mitigate their negative direct and indirect effects on AC. Otherwise, there is little other news available from the region, a consequence of severely limited fieldwork due to Covid-19.

We welcome Louis Phipps our new editor of the VSG peer reviewed journal *Vulture News* (not to be confused with this newsletter), who says he feels very privileged and excited to be taking on the role, 42 years after the publication of Volume 1 in March 1979, edited by Dr John Ledger. He thanks the VSG for the opportunity, and particularly Dr Campbell Murn for his committed work as editor over the past 10 years, a period of many positive developments for the journal along with the formation of the VSG in 2012. The journal has developed over time, but the main objectives remain aligned to those of the VSG: to further understanding of the ecology of vultures and condors, their interactions with man, the threats that they face and how to conserve or restore their populations. *Vulture News* is open access and publishes original articles, reports, literature reviews and other material relevant to the field of vulture and condor biology, research and conservation from across the world. It has three sections for contributors: Main articles, short communications (observations, opinion pieces, methods, field reports), and news and comments which includes literature reviews, announcements etc. More info on the [journal webpage](#), back issues freely [available](#) and send submissions please to Louis at [iucnvulturenews@gmail.com](mailto:iucnvulturenews@gmail.com).

Finally, a rather [lovely short song](#) by Indian artist Anisha Uppal was released, dedicated to saving vultures and [SAVE's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary](#). Also an [innovative cartoon](#) was produced in Karnataka conveying important diclofenac and vulture messaging.

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 by August.



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