

# The Egyptian Vulture - What's going on in Africa?

## Title

Since 2003 BSPB (BirdLife Partner in Bulgaria) has been working to conserve the Egyptian Vulture in Bulgaria. The gained knowledge during these years firmly shows that the main reason for the species decline is the increased adult mortality due to various anthropogenic threats. A significant part of the loss of birds is happening outside Bulgaria during the migration and non-breeding period. In the last seven years probably more than 20 adult birds did not return from their wintering areas. In 2009 BSPB started an initiative for creating of partnerships with the countries from the Middle East and East Africa aiming to survey the threats and and propose conservation measures s for the Egyptian Vulture along its migration route and in the wintering areas. Three expeditions were held-two in Ethiopia (2009 and 2010) and one in Sudan (2010) together with the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS/BirdLife in Ethiopia) and the Sudanese Wildlife Society. **Ethiopia** The Ethiopian expeditions were implemented in December 2009 and November-December 2010 by a BSPB team together with colleagues from EWNHS. The main study areas was the Afar triangle, where is located the biggest known congregation of Egyptian Vultures from the Palearctic, wintering in East Africa. The work also included parts of South Ethiopia and the Highlands., The team members were Ivaylo Angelov, Tsvetomira Yotsova, Vladimir Dobrev Nikolay Terziev (BSPB), Bruktawit Abdu, Yilma Dellelegn Abebe and Tesfaye Bikilla-driver)(EWNHS), Alazar Daka (WildCODE) and Samson Zelleke. **Results:** In both years of the study, for one and the same transect in the Afar triangle respectively 1358 and 1400 Egyptian Vultures were counted. The vultures were recorded in a semi-desert area at an altitude between 140 and 1230 m. a. s. l. The vultures were recorded through counting of the individuals roosting on electricity poles along the main road in the region from the southwestern corner of the Afar triangle to the Djibouti border and in the region of Dire Dawa town (only in 2009). The count was implemented before sunset between 16:30 and 18:00. The data gathered by interviewing local people shows that nowadays the Afar triangle is a relatively safe wintering place for the Egyptian Vultures. The use of poisons against carnivores seems to be not practiced, the electrocution is probably a very minor threat (no electrocuted birds were found) and the local people traditionally do not harm the vultures. Given the huge importance of Afar for the wintering birds from big parts of Asia, long-term work on the species needs to be initiated and the limiting factors closely monitored. However, the developing and expanding medium voltage electricity network in Ethiopia, which is built mainly by dangerous for the birds pylons gives a strong alert for the future of the large birds of prey. We recorded electrocuted White-backed Vulture and the local people on a number of sites mentioned the deadly impact of the power lines on vultures. Another issue is the practice for control of the stray dogs, which was recorded to exist at least in the municipalities of Negele, Awassa and Addis Ababa. We

collected information that poison is regularly used for control on the populations of stray dogs and in two sites we found poisoned Hooded Vultures. A very interesting observation was the first in Africa record of an individual from the Indian subspecies of the Egyptian Vulture (*N. p. ercnopterus ginginianus*). This observation enlarges the supposed area of origin of the vultures wintering in Afar to Pakistan and India to the east. **Sudan** In Sudan a joint expedition of BSPB and Sudanese Wildlife Society (September-October 2010) has found 17 electrocuted Egyptian Vultures. The main study area of the was the Red Sea coast in North-Eastern Sudan. The finding of the dead birds under a particular power line in the surroundings of Port Sudan confirms a threat there which is known to cause the death of many birds since many years and continues to take victims. Still in 1982-83 the German ornithologist Gerhard Nikolaus found under the same power line almost 55 electrocuted Egyptian Vultures and during next visit in the area 21 years later, he found another 5 dead birds. With the new data until now there are found almost 80 electrocuted Egyptian Vultures but this is only the tip of the iceberg since the power line is built in the 50's and probably has caused the death of many hundreds Egyptian Vultures. Not only the Egyptian Vultures were found to be electrocuted by this particular dangerous power line, but also Lappet-faced Vulture, Steppe Eagles and Bonelli's Eagle which was not found to breed in Sudan previously. The probable high mortality during the non-breeding period is considered to be one of the main reasons in the complex of threats leading to the fast decline of the Egyptian Vultures in the Balkans. We assume that the decades of impact on the species by side of this dangerous power line may have caused the extinction the population of Egyptian Vultures which traditionally migrates along the western Red Sea coasts and breed in Eastern Europe and Asia. Following the results from the expedition, a huge priority in the species conservation will be the insulation of the dangerous power line near by Port Sudan and convincing the Sudanese Electricity Company to use a safe model of poles. The results from the three African expeditions (Ethiopia 2009 and 2010 and Sudan 2010) will be published in a report which will mark the priorities for future conservation work for the Egyptian Vulture and the other scavenging birds of prey in Ethiopia and Sudan. The report will be available on BSPB's website by the end of February 2011. The work on the Egyptian Vulture in Africa was funded by Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Program, African Bird Club, Stitching Vulture Conservation Foundation and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, to which we express our gratitude.

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