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## Conservationists warn Africa's vultures are sliding towards extinction

Six of Africa's 11 vulture species – the continent's largest and most recognisable birds of prey – are now at a higher risk of extinction, according to the latest assessment of birds carried out by BirdLife International for the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™.

The main causes of the drop in African vulture populations are thought to be indiscriminate poisonings, where the birds are drawn to poisoned baits, use of vulture body parts in traditional medicine, and deliberate targeting by poachers, as the presence of vultures can alert authorities to illegally killed big game carcasses.

Dr Julius Arinaitwe, BirdLife International's Africa Programme Director, said: "As well as robbing the African skies of one of their most iconic and spectacular groups of birds, the rapid decline of the continent's vultures has profound consequences for its people – as vultures help stop the spread of diseases by cleaning up rotting carcasses."

"However, now we are becoming aware of the sheer scale of the declines involved, there is still just enough time for conservationists to work with law-makers, faith-based organisations, government agencies and local people, to make sure there is a future for these magnificent scavengers."

Worldwide, 40 more bird species are now classified as having a higher risk of extinction in the 2015 Red List. Besides the vultures, these include many wading shorebirds, and other iconic species like Helmeted Hornbill, Swift Parrot, Atlantic Puffin, and European Turtle-dove.

Conversely, 23 species of birds have been downgraded to lower threat categories. In some cases, this reflects a better understanding of how they are faring, but some species have undergone remarkable recoveries as a result of conservation action, including Seychelles Warbler and Chatham Petrel.

"Vultures and other birds play a critical role in maintaining healthy ecosystems," said Simon Stuart, Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission. "Their decline can have serious knock-on effects on other species and the many benefits provided by nature. While it is encouraging to see some positive outcomes of conservation action, this update is an important wake-up call, showing that urgent efforts need to be taken to protect these species."

The IUCN Red List is the world's most comprehensive information source on the conservation status of plant and animal species, and BirdLife International is the official authority for birds. **ENDS**

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A selection of images of the species affected is available here: <http://bit.ly/1hWdrhh>

Further details about BirdLife's African Vulture Campaign are available here:  
[www.birdlife.org/save-africas-vultures](http://www.birdlife.org/save-africas-vultures)

## NOTES TO THE EDITOR:

### **Red List changes – summary in numbers**

24 species are now classified as having a higher risk of extinction (either Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered) in the 2015 Red List update, with seven species being upgraded to Critically Endangered. Another 16 species have seen their status change from Least Concern (the lowest level of threat) to Near Threatened. 23 species have been downgraded to lower threat categories.

### **7 species uplisted to Critically Endangered**

- **Hooded Vulture** (*Necrosyrtes monachus*): Endangered to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED
- **White-backed Vulture** (*Gyps africanus*): Endangered to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED
- **White-headed Vulture** (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*): Vulnerable to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED
- **Rüppell's Vulture** (*Gyps rueppellii*): Endangered to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED
- **Helmeted Hornbill** *Rhinoplax vigil*: Near Threatened to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED.

As well as severe loss of its South-East Asian forest habitat, the species is known to be targeted by hunters for its feathers and for its solid 'ivory' casque, which is used to produce handicrafts and traded with China. Previously, it was thought that capture rates may be relatively low as a result of the species becoming shy over centuries of hunting. However, recent reports suggest that the species is currently being traded on a large scale.

- **Swift Parrot** *Lathamus discolor*: Endangered to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED. Breeds on Tasmania before migrating to the Australian mainland for the winter. Affected by extensive habitat loss (both breeding and wintering areas) and, in 2014, it was reported that the species is also facing a severe threat from the introduced Sugar Glider *Petaurus breviceps* – a small possum – in its breeding areas.
- **Chestnut-capped Piha** *Lipaugus weberi*: Endangered to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED.

There are fewer than 250 individuals of this grey songbird, which is restricted to a few fragmented forest populations on the northern slope of the Central Andes of Colombia. Continued forest degradation and clearance for construction, agriculture and commercial plantations in the region are having profound and long-term environmental impacts on the species.

### **Wader/Shorebird species declines**

Eight wader/shorebird species have seen their threat status upgraded, including Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* and Far Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*. Both species,

which have gone up from Vulnerable to Endangered, use the East Asian-Australasian Flyway and are under intense pressure from the loss of intertidal stopover habitat in the Yellow Sea region of East Asia. Up to 65% of intertidal habitat in the Yellow Sea has been lost over the past 50 years, and the remaining habitat is currently disappearing at a rate of more than 1% annually, owing to reclamation for agriculture, aquaculture and other development.

Several other more widespread species of wading bird have seen their status raised from Least Concern to Near Threatened. Populations of the Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, Red Knot *Calidris canutus* and Curlew Sandpiper *C. ferruginea* are declining in East Asia and Australasia for the same reasons as above – but also in some other parts of their large world ranges, from Africa to the Americas.

Two other well-known waterbirds concentrated in Europe, Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, have also been uplisted to Near Threatened, owing to factors including the loss of breeding meadow habitat and overharvesting of shellfish, respectively.

For more information on the loss of important intertidal habitat in East Asia see:

- **Amano, T., T. Szekely, K. Koyama, H. Amano, and W. J. Sutherland.** 2010. *A framework for monitoring the status of populations: An example from wader populations in the East Asian-Australasian flyway.* Biological Conservation 143:2238-2247.
- **Yang, H. Y., B. Chen, M. Barter, T. Piersma, C. F. Zhou, F. S. Li, and Z. W. Zhang.** 2011. *Impacts of tidal land reclamation in Bohai Bay, China: ongoing losses of critical Yellow Sea waterbird staging and wintering sites.* Bird Conservation International 21: 241-259

### **Iconic species in Europe**

European Turtle-dove *Streptopelia turtur*, formerly a familiar summer visitor to much of western Eurasia and North Africa, sees its status rise from Least Concern to Vulnerable. Its population has declined widely, by more than 30% over the past 16 years alone, and its range has also contracted strongly, especially in northern Europe. These declines are thought to reflect habitat change and loss through agricultural intensification, illegal killing, legal hunting and possibly disease.

Another species concentrated in Europe to see its threat level rise is Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica*, which is now also listed as Vulnerable. Although its global population remains in the millions, breeding failures at some key colonies over recent years have been worryingly high, with many fewer young birds appearing to be recruited into the breeding population – a situation thought perhaps to be due to depleted fish stocks.

### **More on vultures**

Six species of African vultures have seen their status worsen:

- **Hooded Vulture** (*Necrosyrtes monachus*): Endangered to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED
- **White-backed Vulture** (*Gyps africanus*): Endangered to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED
- **White-headed Vulture** (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*): Vulnerable to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED
- **Rüppell's Vulture** (*Gyps rueppellii*): Endangered to CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

- **Cape Vulture** (*Gyps coprotheres*): Vulnerable to ENDANGERED
- **Lappet-faced Vulture** (*Torgos tracheliotos*): Vulnerable to ENDANGERED

Five other species of vulture are found in Africa, and one of these is already classified as Endangered (Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*), with two others Near Threatened (Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus* and Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*).

Just two species that occur in Africa, the Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*, a predominantly Southern European and Central Asian species, and the mainly vegetarian Palm-nut Vulture *Gypohierax angolensis*, are still regarded as Least Concern, though numbers of Griffon vulture in Africa are also thought to be declining.

In Africa, the situation is not attributable to a single issue – unlike in South Asia, where the three previously most common vulture species have seen numbers decline by 98% in recent years as a result of feeding on carcasses of livestock treated with the veterinary drug diclofenac (a medicine used to treat cattle and highly toxic to vultures).

In Africa, the main causes of a drop in vulture populations appears to be threefold, primarily the indiscriminate poisoning of vultures – a by-product of people trying to deliberately eradicate mammalian predators of livestock (and in some areas feral dogs), with the poisoned carcasses or baits inadvertently attracting vultures.

Another major issue is the use of vulture body parts in traditional medicine – a recent scientific paper found that 29% of the vulture deaths recorded continent-wide could be attributed to this secretive trade. These practices are thought to be widespread in West Africa, as well as Southern Africa. Body parts of vultures are used by the traditional medicine industry for a number of purposes.

The third most significant threat to African vultures appears to be poachers deliberately targeting the birds to avoid them giving away the presence of their illegally killed big game carcasses, such as rhinos or elephants. Between July 2011 and 2014, at least ten such poisoning incidents were discovered, which resulted in the deaths of at least 1,500 vultures across six southern African countries.

Other factors thought to play a role in the declines include habitat loss, human disturbance and collisions with wind turbines and electricity pylons.

Many of the figures that have helped towards the reassessments of African vultures come from a recent report lead-authored by Dr Darcy Ogada of the Peregrine Fund:

- **Ogada, Shaw, Beyers *et al.*** (2015). *Another continental vulture crisis: Africa's vultures collapsing towards extinction*. Conservation Letters. DOI: 10.1111/conl.12182

### **Main successes**

A total of 23 species have been downlisted to a lower level of threat. However, not all of these changes are down to actual improvements in the species' plights, with many of the downlistings due to a better knowledge of individual populations and a more accurate revised picture of how the species in question are faring.

However, one particular conservation success story is **Seychelles Warbler** *Acrocephalus sechellensis*. Once one of the world's rarest songbirds, it was present on a number of Seychelles islands until human disturbance reduced it to a single population of just 26 birds on the tiny (0.3 km<sup>2</sup>) Cousin Island in 1968. The island was purchased by the International

Council for Bird Preservation (the forerunner to BirdLife International) in that year.

Subsequent intensive conservation management, such as the clearance of coconut plantations, which allowed the warbler's woodland to regenerate, and translocations to four other Seychelles islands, means that the population reached 2,800 individuals in 2014, with conservationists expecting it to rise to a capacity of around 7,000 birds in future. As a result the species has been downlisted from Vulnerable to Near Threatened.

In addition, **Audouin's Gull** *Larus audouinii*, formerly one of the world's rarest breeding seabirds, with just 1,000 pairs in 1975, has seen its status improve from Near Threatened to Least Concern, due largely to the protection of its breeding colonies in the Ebro Delta in north-east Spain. There are now more than 20,000 pairs in the western Mediterranean.

**Chatham Petrel** *Pterodroma axillaris* breeds only in the remote Chatham Islands, c. 400 miles south-east of New Zealand. Historically, like many Pacific seabirds, its numbers were significantly impacted by invasive introduced mammalian predators, such as cats and brown rats. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chatham Petrel faced another threat in the form of nest-site competition with a much commoner seabird, Broad-billed Prion *Pachyptila vittata*. This led to a reduction in the Chatham Petrel population at a rate of approximately 1% a year, and in 1995 the population stood at a low of around 600-800 birds; the species was consequently listed as Endangered. However, following conservation measures, such as the installation of burrow flaps (which allow Chatham Petrels access to their nest sites, but exclude the prions) and the translocation of the petrels to two predator-free islands in the group, the species has been downlisted to Vulnerable.

**For a full list of all the changes, see:**

**<http://www.birdlife.org/globally-threatened-bird-forums/>**

**For the new Red List assessments and factsheets, go to:**

**<http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/species/search>**

### **General notes**

BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation Partnership. Together we are 120 BirdLife Partners worldwide – one per country – and growing, with almost 13 million supporters, 7,000 local conservation groups and 7,400 staff.

The BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme is counteracting an increasingly diverse array of threats to birds by delivering conservation action – underpinned by science – where it is most needed. <http://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/programmes/preventing-extinctions>

BirdLife is the Red List Authority for birds for the IUCN Red List. As part of a new scientific collaboration announced in 2015, BirdLife's Red List assessments are now sponsored by Carl Zeiss Sports Optics.

The *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*<sup>™</sup> (or the IUCN Red List) is the world's most comprehensive information source on the global conservation status of plant and animal species. It is based on an objective system for assessing the risk of extinction of a species should no conservation action be taken. [www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org). The IUCN Red List is a joint effort between IUCN and its Species Survival Commission, working with its Red List partners: BirdLife International; Botanic Gardens Conservation International; Conservation International; Microsoft; NatureServe; Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; Sapienza University of Rome; Texas A&M University; Wildscreen; and Zoological Society of London.

Species are assigned to one of eight IUCN Red List categories of threat based on whether they meet criteria linked to population trend, population size and structure, and geographic

range. Categories include: Critically Endangered (facing an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild), Endangered (facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild), Vulnerable (facing a high risk of extinction in the wild), Near Threatened (close to qualifying for Vulnerable) and Least Concern (species not qualifying for the other categories, including widespread and abundant species). Species are assigned to categories using criteria with quantitative thresholds for population size, population trend, range size and other parameters. For more information visit: <http://www.iucnredlist.org>. Species listed as Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable are collectively described as 'Threatened'.

IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges by supporting scientific research; managing field projects all over the world; and bringing governments, NGOs, the UN, international conventions and companies together to develop policy, laws and best practice. [www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)