

Action Plan for the Recovery and Conservation of  
Vultures on the Balkan Peninsula and Adjacent Regions



# Vulture Conservation in the Balkan Peninsula and Adjacent Regions

10 YEARS OF RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION



This publication gives an overview of the vulture conservation work done in the Balkan Peninsula and the adjacent regions during the last decade. Papers have been contributed from Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey, all by representatives attending the last Balkan Vulture Action Plan Workshop (11-13 May 2011, Vratsa, Bulgaria). Each article is followed by information on its author/s.

The main goal of this publication is to present the actual status and trends of the four European vulture species in each country and show the conservation work done over the last ten years.

Title: Vulture Conservation in the Balkan Peninsula and Adjacent Regions

Subtitle: 10 Years of Vulture Research and Conservation

Editor: Jovan Andevski, Vulture Conservation Foundation & Frankfurt Zoological Society

Publisher:  Vulture Conservation Foundation

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Scientific/Professional review: Michel Terrasse, Alvaro Camiña Cardenal and Wolfgang Fremuth

Design and Print: Apoloimages

Front cover page photo: Angel Sánchez

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација

Национална и универзитетска библиотека "Св. Климент Охридски", Скопје  
639.128:591.615(497)(062)

VULTURE conservation in the Balkan peninsula and adjacent regions:

10 year of vulture reserch and conservation /

[editor Jovan Andevski]. - Skopje : J. Andevski, 2013. - 40 стр. : илустр. ; 22 см

ISBN 978-9989-57-895-3

а) Мршојадци - Заштита - Акционен план - Балкан - Собири

COBISS.MK-ID 93007626



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## 10 YEARS OF RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION

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### ACRONYMS USED:

AECID - Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo  
B&H - Bosnia and Herzegovina  
BPPS - Birds of Prey Protection Society  
BSPB - Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds  
BVAP - Balkan Vulture Action Plan  
BVCF - Black Vulture Conservation Foundation  
CBNP - Central Balkan National Park  
EAZA - European Association of Zoos and Aquaria  
EC - European Commission  
EEP - European Endangered Species Programme  
EU - European Union SPAs - Special Protection Areas  
EVN - Energie Versorgung Niederösterreich  
FCBV - Foundation for Conservation of the Bearded Vulture  
FWFF - Fund for Wild Flora and Fauna  
FYR - Former Yugoslav Republic  
FZS - Frankfurt Zoological Society  
GIS - Geographic information system  
GPS - Global Positioning System

GREFA - Grupo de Rehabilitación de la Fauna Autóctona y su Hábitat  
GSM - Global System for Mobile Communications  
HOS - Hellenic Ornithological Society  
INCS - Institute of Nature Conservation in Serbia  
IUCN - International Union for Conservation of Nature  
LPO - Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux  
MES - Macedonian Ecological Society  
MoU - Memorandum of Understanding  
NGO - Non-governmental Organization  
ODNP - Ornithological Society "Nase Ptice" (Ornitolosko Društvo Nase Ptice)  
OKNV - Youth Club "New Wave" (Omladinski Klub "Novi Val")  
RSPB - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
SBS - Southern Blue Sky  
UNDP - United Nations Development Programme  
UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
VBNP - Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park  
VCF - Vulture Conservation Foundation  
VHF - Very High Frequency  
WWF - Worldwide Fund for Nature



Status of vultures in

# Greece

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The Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) has recently been lost from continental Greece, with the disappearance in 2004 of the last individual in the continental Balkans, from the mountains of Almopia in the Greece-FYR Macedonia border area. In Crete there are six to seven breeding pairs while the total population numbers are estimated 40-45 individuals.

The last breeding population of Black Vultures (*Aegypius monachus*) is still in the Dadia-Lefkimi-Soufli Forest National Park where 90 per cent of the nests are inside the strictly protected zone. The number of breeding pairs has shown a slight increase since 2005, from 19 to 28 breeding pairs but the total population remains stable due to mortality from poisoning,

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Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) / photo Angel Sánchez





Fitting a juvenile of Egyptian Vulture with satellite transmitter, Meteora / photo Haritakis Papaioannou - HOS



Observing the recently abandoned Egyptian vulture nest in Vikos gorge in the EuroBirdwatchIII organized by HOS and Northern Pindos National Park. October 2011 / photo Kalliopi Stara

electrocution and collisions with wind turbines. Irregular Black Vulture observations occur in other places in Thrace (Nestos Gorge and Kompsatos), and even in western Greece. The species is an irregular winter visitor to Crete (although for the last three years two immature individuals have been sedentary in the eastern mountain ranges where pine forests occur). The Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) population's sustained decline intensified after the beginning of the 21st century with the estimated 100-140 territories in the period 1994-2003 falling to 30-50 in 2005-2008. Since the implementation of "The Return of the Neophron" (LIFE10 NAT/BG/000152) in October 2011 fewer than 20 territories in the whole country have been confirmed as being occupied by pairs or individuals.

The plight of the Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) is similar, with several colonies having been wiped out in the last decade, e.g. Kalamas Gorge, Pineios Gorge, the Valtou Mountains and Nestos Gorge, invariably due to mass poisoning incidents, with the latest incident happening just at the beginning of 2012. The current population of Griffon Vultures barely exceeds 30 pairs in five colonies spread across western and north-eastern Greece. Three of the colonies host just one to three pairs and/or the birds breed only irregularly. In Crete the species exhibits positive population trends with over 700 individuals, including 240 breeding pairs. A small colony remains also in the island of Naxos.

The first vulture conservation efforts in continental Greece were initiated approximately 30 years ago with the establishment of the Dadia Forest Protected Area, where the continuing implementation of conservation

activities by WWF Greece over the past 20 years and the operation of a permanent feeding station by the local authorities have partly secured the local vulture populations.

In Crete eight vulture restaurants operate in which bones and medium-sized livestock extremities are left (mainly aimed at the conservation of the Bearded Vulture). Two of the sites are fenced and whole carcasses, slaughter-house remains and offal are provided to all scavengers.

Across the rest of the country, activities conducted so far, because of the lack of involvement of the local authorities and long-term engagement from the organizations, have, at best, included recording the status of the populations and identification of the key threats, mostly poisoning, electrocution and, recently, collisions with wind turbine blades. The activities of the Black Vulture Conservation Foundation/Frankfurt Zoological Society's Balkan Vulture Action Plan have provided, and still provide, baseline knowledge for wider conservation initiatives. Of the several vulture restaurants currently built, only the ones in Dadia-Lefkimi-Soufli Forest National Park, Nestos Gorge and the two on Crete are licensed, and only the first of these is systematically operational.

Unless effective conservation measures are firmly established in the next few years, the vulture populations of continental Greece are likely to fall below critically low numbers, and reintroduction will be the only means to their restoration in the distant future.





Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) on Nestos feeding site / photo Hans Jerrentrup

## Brief assessment of the progress of the implementation of the BVAP in Greece 2003–2011

The Action Plan for the Recovery and Conservation of Vultures on the Balkan Peninsula and Adjacent Regions (Balkan Vulture Action Plan - BVAP) was activated in Greece in 2003 with the local NGO, the Environmental Group of Almopia "Chrysaetos", through trans-boundary vulture conservation projects in the border mountain range of Greece and FYR Macedonia (the Kozuf, Tzena and Kaimaktsalan mountains). The main aims of the project on the Greek side were the operation of the Mount Pinovo feeding site for all four vulture species present in the area at that time, the identification of critical habitats for vultures in the wider mountain range and baseline monitoring of vultures, as well as public awareness activities and the galvanization of local authorities into acting against poisoning.

The project has achieved the successful operation of the feeding station over the years of its existence, and the information gathered on the presence of vultures in the mountains has contributed significantly to Protected Area designations and updating of the relevant Important Bird Areas. Several articles have been published in local media, and the members of the project have participated in and presented their work in a series of local and international workshops. The positive involvement of local authorities and forestry services has been achieved, culminating in a small workshop against illegal poisoning in 2005. Since then, a "vulture camp" has been organized every summer in order to familiarize the public with the vultures present in the mountains. However, it has not been possible to maintain the positive momentum established because of the lack of funds and the organization's capacity levels, especially as all of the active members of the NGO moved from the area after 2006.

After 2008, when the trans-boundary project was discontinued, the main activity of the BVAP in Greece was a monitoring project on Egyptian Vulture populations with associated localized public awareness events. The project was active until 2011 when the BVAP shifted its focus to monitoring

the Griffon Vulture populations in mainland Greece, and also tested potential feeding sites in two colonies in the western part of the country and briefly reactivated the feeding station at Nestos Gorge. A pilot project surveying the Golden Eagle population of the Rhodope Mountains was also briefly supported as this species uses the same habitat and faces similar conservation problems. All of the information collected over the years was used in drafting larger conservation initiatives (e.g. the "The Return of the Neophron" LIFE10 NAT/BG/000152).

Currently, the status of the vultures in continental Greece and Crete is pretty well known with the Egyptian Vulture population estimated at below 20 pairs, the Griffon Vulture population at around 30 pairs (plus 240 on Crete), the Black Vulture at 28 pairs (roughly 90-100 individuals) with a breeding success of 50-65 per cent and the Bearded Vulture at six to seven breeding pairs on Crete. The central and Southern Pindos Mountains range may hold hitherto unknown Egyptian Vulture territories, and therefore surveys in those areas should be a priority.

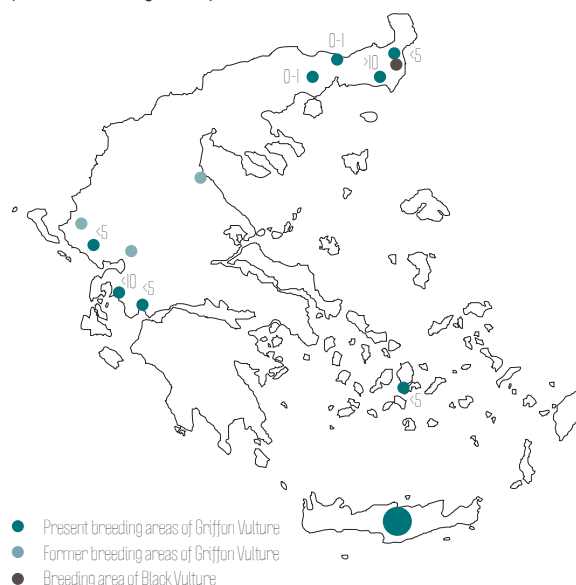
The widespread use of poison in the Greek countryside is undoubtedly the most important threat to vulture populations, having claimed the Nestos Gorge Griffon Vulture colony, one adult Egyptian Vulture in Meteora and one adult Black Vulture in Evros area as its latest victims in 2012, while the operation of artificial feeding sites in safe areas has been postponed several times due to funding problems. The level of other threats is not well known, but depending on the locality, electrocution, collisions with wind turbine blades, disturbance of breeding grounds, forest fires (for the Black Vulture) and lack of natural food/decline in extensive livestock numbers have been identified as problems.

More than 90 per cent of the funding for BVAP projects in Greece was provided by the Action Plan's resources, with partial contributions from the HOS and WWF Greece.

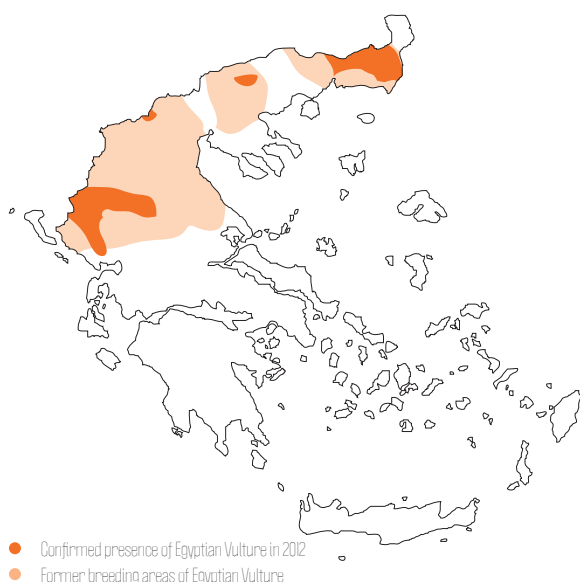
Immediate priorities should include:

- A sustained anti-poisoning campaign framework, both within the land-user communities (education and assistance of hunters and shepherds), the central government and decentralized services. Intensive lobbying, legislative development and capacity building (e.g. specialized poison detecting dog units, etc).
- Reopening of all of the disused feeding sites and the establishment of new ones, near all of the remaining Griffon Vulture colonies and Egyptian Vulture territories, after the necessary changes in legislation in order to meet the latest EU sanitary regulations, as well as the establishment of free on the spot carcase disposal zones in the relevant Special Protected Areas (SPAs).
- Identification of Griffon Vulture movements and critical foraging areas in western Greece through marking and tracking.
- Reviewing all SPAs with vulture populations and adjusting boundaries, data sheets, etc. according to the above findings and population sizes, in order to facilitate the prevention of harmful development (e.g. networks, roads and wind farms).

**map 1** Historical and present breeding areas of Griffon Vulture and present breeding area of Black Vulture



**map 2** Historical and present breeding areas of Egyptian Vulture in Greece



**map 3** Present distribution of Bearded Vulture in Greece and last observation of the species in continental Greece

