



THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road





1. WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE PROJECT?	1
2. FLYWAY ACTION PLAN FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE BALKAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN POPULATIONS OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE (EVFAP)	1
3. EXPERTS FROM 33 COUNTRIES GATHERED IN SOFIA FOR A WORKSHOP DEDICATED TO THE PROTECTION OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE	3
4. THREE CAPTIVE-BRED EGYPTIAN VULTURES WERE RELEASED IN BULGARIA	7
5. IN 2016 WE CELEBRATED THE IVAD IN MADZHAROVO, HASKOVO AND RUSE	8
6. NEWS FILMS CRATED WITHIN THE PROJECT	9
7. THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE'S ODYSSEY	9
8. THE MAGICAL RING	10

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Editorial

WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE PROJECT?

Dear friends and colleagues,

The Egyptian Vulture is the only long-distance migrant among the four species of European vultures. It is probably not by chance that it is black and white as the adults from the Balkans spend half of the year on the breeding grounds and the other half in Africa. After the first migration juveniles stay in the wintering grounds for 1.5 – 3 years before returning to their natal areas. During migration Egyptian Vultures fly over 5,000 km in only one direction and the individual wintering home range can reach 90,000 sq. km. Along the flyway they face a number of threats such as poisoning, risk of electrocution from power lines, collision with the blades of wind turbines, poachers, and many others. This is why, the conservation of this emblematic species is impossible without the implementation of coordinated international programmes. The development of the Flyway Action Plan for the conservation of Balkan and Central Asian populations of the Egyptian Vulture is a key strategic step towards achievement of this goal. The current (seventh) issue of the newsletter 'The Return of the Neophron' is focused on this topic. I hope you will enjoy reading it!

Dr Stoyan Nikolov
Project Manager



FLYWAY ACTION PLAN FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE BALKAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN POPULATIONS OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE (EVFAP)



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The Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) is recognized as a globally 'Endangered' species by IUCN due to rapid population decline throughout most of its range, especially across Europe, Africa and India. The overall European population has decreased by 50% over the last 50 years while the Balkan population alone has declined by 80% over the last 30 years and is at serious risk of extinction.

Egyptian Vultures from the Balkans are long-distance migrant, wintering in the Sahel zone of Africa. These annual return journeys can be perilous and there is evidence to show that most mortality occurs along the flyway. In 2015, in an effort to halt this serious population decline, the EU LIFE+ Project 'The Return of the Neophron', in collaboration with the Coordinating Unit of the CMS Raptors MoU, initiated the development of a Flyway Action Plan (EVFAP). Considering the partial overlap of migration routes, huge knowledge gaps and a strong need for conservation actions to address declines in some of the neighboring populations, the scope of the EVFAP includes populations breeding across the

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Workshop

Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasian region. These populations migrate through the Middle East and spend the winter in Central and Eastern Africa.

The overall long-term goal of the EVFAP is to improve the conservation status of the Egyptian Vulture throughout the flyway, initially aiming at its down-listing to 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List of threatened species. The aim is to achieve, eventually, a favourable conservation status of the species across its range. More specific objectives include maintaining the current population level in those areas with stable numbers of breeding pairs and reversing negative population trends in those parts of the FAP range where large decline has been reported in recent years.

In July 2015 an Action Planning Workshop was held in Sofia, Bulgaria. Over 70 researchers, conservationists and representatives of authorities from 33 Range States attended. Participants identified the major threats along the flyway as poisoning (primarily via organic bait laced with toxic chemicals aimed at mammalian carnivores), electrocution and collisions with energy infrastructure and direct persecution. The drivers behind these threats are presented in the EVFAP together with a suite of conservation actions to address them. Additional needs are identified including long-term research and monitoring, designation of protected areas, building conservation capacity, improving exchange of information, enhanced coordination of NGO-driven initiatives, partnerships with industry (e.g. energy, agriculture) and improving awareness-raising and publicity.

It is envisaged that the EVFAP will be implemented over a 10-year period and formally reviewed after five years. It is proposed that an EVFAP Working Group be established to promote and support the implementation of the Plan within each of the Range States.



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Reference documents

[Draft EVFAP – English](#)

[Draft EVFAP – French](#)

[Draft EVFAP – Russian](#)

[Report of EVFAP Workshop \(July 2015\) – English](#)

[Report of EVFAP Workshop \(July 2015\) – French](#)

[Report of EVFAP Workshop \(July 2015\) – Russian](#)

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Workshop

EXPERTS FROM 33 COUNTRIES GATHERED IN SOFIA FOR A WORKSHOP DEDICATED TO THE PROTECTION OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE

A workshop dedicated to the conservation of the globally threatened Egyptian Vulture was held from 5 to 8 July 2015 in Sofia, Bulgaria. The main goal was to develop an international Egyptian Vulture Flyway Action Plan (EVFAP) to secure the survival of the Balkan, Caucasian and Central Asian populations as found along the flyway and in the wintering grounds.

Boris Barov - Conservation Partnerships Manager in BirdLife International



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"The workshop brought together over 70 government officials, scientists, researchers and specialists from 33 countries in which the vultures breed, pass through or spend the winter. Its aim was to find out what are the common threats to the species in all those countries and to decide what conservation activities should be carried out so that these threats can be reduced and eliminated and decide how we can better coordinate our efforts. The workshop was held in Bulgaria because BSPB is one of the organizations which has a good deal of experience in protecting of the Egyptian Vulture. BSPB manages an international project and has much to share with the other countries."

The seven participants in the workshop from different parts of the world, presented here, answered the following questions:

Dr Sergey Sklyarenko, Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK)



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Why is it necessary that so many countries make efforts to conserve the Egyptian Vulture?

The Egyptian Vulture is a migratory species with a wide flight range therefore it is pointless if only one or a few countries try to protect it. The efforts of all countries along its migratory route and wintering grounds are needed. Serious dangers are found in all the regions it passes through – in the breeding sites, wintering grounds and the places it stops for a rest during the migration. Very often the problem is to find out where exactly the danger is.

What are the most serious threats for the species and the most important conservation measures?

It is difficult to answer as in Kazakhstan additional research is critically needed. Major threats include shooting, the use of a number of chemicals in

agriculture that are not properly regulated and the risk of electrocution.

The most important conservation measure for Kazakhstan is to increase the awareness of people, especially farmers, of the status of the Egyptian Vulture and the other raptors. Furthermore adequate control on the usage of poisons and pesticides is crucial as is the proper insulation of electricity poles.

How do you see the future of this cooperation? What is the biggest challenge?

The workshop is an important step towards future cooperation but the biggest challenge is its implementation not only at the level of NGOs but also by institutions and governments.

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Workshop

Yilma Abebe, Ethiopian Wildlife & Natural History Society



Why is it necessary that so many countries make efforts to conserve the Egyptian Vulture?

The Egyptian Vulture uses so many countries as a bridge during its migration. All efforts for its conservation would be futile if there is no cooperation between all of them.

What are the most serious threats for the species and the most important conservation measures?

In Ethiopia there is no direct persecution of the species but there is a serious danger related to poisons ingested as a result of the poisoning of stray dogs. The second most important threat is the clash with electric power lines.

I believe that the most serious conservation activity is to raise the awareness among the local people about the Egyptian Vulture not only because it is endangered but because of its role in protecting human health. In Africa we

rely heavily on vultures to clean away dead animals and thus prevent the spread of disease. Realization of a project, which involves local people, would be extremely useful for the survival of the species.

How do you see the future of this cooperation? What is the biggest challenge?

My visit to Bulgaria was a great experience for me. During the workshop I met so many people from so many countries and all of them were concerned about the fate of the Egyptian Vulture. They are so different in many ways - economic, political, and social but one thing brings them together and makes them work together – the Egyptian vulture. I feel that this is a great start and that when there is a desire there is a way.

Sharif Jbour, BirdLife International, Middle East Division



Why is it necessary that so many countries make efforts to conserve the Egyptian Vulture?

The Egyptian Vulture is a migratory species and any territory they cross during migration can hide a danger to their survival. Therefore we need joint activity for the elimination of such perils to save the species.

What are the most serious threats for the species and the most important conservation measures?

The Egyptian Vulture's population that migrates through the Middle East from Europe to Africa is under great threat from shooting, poisoning and electrocution.

There are several priority conservation measures for the species that require adoption of best practices and guidelines based upon international

experience together with reforms, at a legislative level, in the region.

How do you see the future of this cooperation? What is the biggest challenge?

The biggest challenge is the real coordination and implementation of all priority conservation measures in different countries and regions as discussed during this workshop.

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Workshop

Waheed AlFazari, Office for Conservation of the Environment, Oman



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Why is it necessary that so many countries make efforts to conserve the Egyptian Vulture?

All countries, in which the Egyptian Vultures breed, visit or spend the winter, have to come together and discuss the future of the species, because it depends on each one of them.

What are the most serious threats for the species and the most important conservation measures?

In Oman we need many more studies, but we suspect several major threats to the species including electrocution, poisoning and hunting. Over the last few years we have started to work more systematically - counting wintering Egyptian Vultures in the country and the breeding population. We have primarily focused on one of the places where nearly 400 Egyptian Vultures

spend the winter.

How do you see the future of this cooperation? What is the biggest challenge?

The biggest challenge is to fill the gaps in the knowledge about all the threats that endanger Egyptian Vultures. We should determine the correct methods for its conservation and change the attitude of the people and the institutions to the species. In my country the biggest challenge is specifically to change the negative perception of the Egyptian Vulture. People do not consider it a beautiful bird and are not interested in its protection.

Dr. Shiiwua Manu, APLORI, Nigeria



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Why is it necessary that so many countries make efforts to conserve the Egyptian Vulture?

The Egyptian Vulture crosses so many areas during migration that its conservation methods must be applied along its entire flyway.

What are the most serious threats for the species and the most important conservation measures?

In Nigeria the biggest threats to the species are related to habitat loss, the methods of traditional medicine and voodoo practitioners who use body parts of Egyptian Vultures.

The most important activity for the conservation of the species should be to raise awareness of the Egyptian Vulture itself and of alternatives for traditional medicine practices that solve medical problems.

How do you see the future of this cooperation? What is the biggest challenge?

The biggest challenge comes from any government of the countries represented here, from the institutions and the local people. In Nigeria particularly this means from breeders and the practitioners of traditional medicine. Will they effectively stand on the side of the Egyptian Vulture and understand the importance of its protection not only for nature, but for people too?

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Workshop

Dr. Jose Tavares, Director of the Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF)



Why is it necessary that so many countries make efforts to conserve the Egyptian Vulture?

The Egyptian Vultures' range covers Europe, Asia, Middle East, central Asia and Africa. Therefore the fate of the species relies on all the countries in which it lives or through which it passes. And we need these joint collaborative efforts between all of us to eventually save this species from extinction.

What are the most serious threats for the species and the most important conservation measures?

The biggest threat, as for all other vultures, is poison. These birds are scavengers so they eat dead animals. Very often those dead animals are killed with poison, generally not directed at the vultures themselves but to predators – wolves, foxes and others. Vultures eat the dead animals and die

because of the poison. The poison is, without any doubt, the biggest threat worldwide. There are other threats, in particular collision with wind farms and electrocution. Birds die because they perch on poles which are not properly insulated or are not well designed for raptors to perch on.

Actions related to the three most important threats are crucial: authorities to prosecute the illegal use of poison; the location of wind farms to be considerate of the migration routes of the Egyptian Vulture; electrical poles to be so designed and insulated that they do not cause electrocution.

How do you see the future of this cooperation? What is the biggest challenge?

The biggest challenge is the effective coordination between people from more than 30 countries so that they carry out their work effectively. Another challenge is to create adequate legislation and regulation that favours the Egyptian Vulture.

Nick Williams, CMS / Raptors MoU



Why is it necessary that so many countries make efforts to conserve the Egyptian Vulture?

The Egyptian Vulture is largely a migratory species. A major part of its population breeds in Europe. Its migratory flyway passes across Asia and the wintering grounds are in Africa. This means that an individual raptor travels through many countries. No matter how well intentioned, how well resourced a country is, whatever actions it takes, it can be completely undermined unless all other countries along the flyway or in the wintering grounds do the same. It's imperative that we work together to conserve the species along the flyway and throughout the wintering grounds.

What are the most serious threats for the species and the most important conservation measures?

This workshop outlined the three biggest threats. First of all is the poisoning – poisoned baits, put illegally by people who want to protect their livestock from predators, or dead poisoned animals. The second issue relates to electrocution, particularly with medium voltage power grids and collision with wind farms. The third issue is land change and agricultural practices. Generally, more and more intensive agriculture means fewer safe habitats for the vultures.

What we need to do is to identify the drivers of these threats and to engage people in the protection of the Egyptian Vulture.

How do you see the future of this cooperation? What is the biggest challenge?

Next step is to finalize the Flyway Action Plan. Then we hope it will be endorsed as a plan of action to conserve the species for

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Conservation

a long-term of the next 10 years or so. The biggest challenge, I guess, is how to work together with a range of people, countries, cultures and states to develop this plan. But actually this is the easy part. The difficult part is turning this plan into practical actions and implementing it. Not just in the near future but over a period of 10 years. It's hard but I think we can do it.

THREE CAPTIVE-BRED EGYPTIAN VULTURES WERE RELEASED IN BULGARIA

On August 10, the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) put three young Egyptian Vultures in an artificial nest within the Nature Park, "Rusenski Lom", courtesy of the Department of the Park and Green Balkans. Two of the vultures were provided by the Vienna Zoo and the other one - by a zoo in Paris.

This experimental introduction, by adaptation, of young Egyptian Vultures bred in captivity among the local wild population was made for the first time, not only in Bulgaria but throughout Eastern Europe. In the long-run such actions will underline a program for active reinforcement of the wild population and the securing of its future in the country and the region.

Every one of the young Egyptian Vultures was tagged with a satellite transmitter and marked with a ring. Two of the vultures are female - Elodie and Regina, named after their zookeepers. The third bird is a male and was named Lom - the name of the park.

The vultures are provided by the Praha Zoo within the framework of the European Endangered Species Programmes (EEP) of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA), by courtesy of the Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF).

Two of the birds - Regina and Lom (brother and sister of Turkish origin) started migration in early September. They followed a very similar itinerary but few days apart, through Turkey and Cyprus and unfortunately have drowned in the sea. During their unsuccessful migration each of two birds flew over 1,500 km (out of which 500 km over the sea) over 8 days, with average run of circa. 200 km per day.



© Iordanka Goranova-Lukanova



© Iordanka Goranova-Lukanova

Elodie, the youngest captive-bred Egyptian Vulture, started migration later, at the end of September and probably due to her genetics (French origin), she started to migrate to the southwest, reaching the Peloponnese and facing the huge challenge of crossing the Mediterranean Sea. She flew 480 km, straight over the sea, for 12 hours and landed on the northeastern coast of Libya. This is the second documented case of a tagged juvenile Egyptian Vulture successfully crossing the Mediterranean Sea from the Balkans during migration. She is currently wintering on the border between Niger and Nigeria.

You can directly follow the movements of Elodie here.

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian culture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Communication

IN 2016 WE CELEBRATED THE IVAD IN MADZHAROVO, HASKOVO AND RUSE

On a given day, September 3, the Nature Conservation Center “Eastern Rhodopes” in Madzharovo was visited by 50 people who learned interesting facts about vultures. They also had the opportunity to observe them in their natural habitat and to watch a screening of the film “Flying Away”.

On September 9, we were in Haskovo. The program started with a screening of the film “Flying Away” and continued with workshop for children. They painted their faces as different vultures and other animals and created some of the animals that are included in the menu of the Egyptian Vultures. Everybody enjoyed taking funny pictures of each other as vultures. In the late afternoon the fun continued with a concert by Miryan Kostadinov, famous for the X-Factor TV show. He explained why protecting vultures is so important.

Our host in Ruse was the Rouse Regional Museum of History. The event was held on September 16 and attracted over 130 people who enjoyed both the travelling exhibition the display of award-winning pictures form the photo competition “The Egyptian Vulture’s Odyssey”. Later in the day children took part in a workshop where they created vulture masks and those for different animals such as snakes, tortoises and snails. Children also enjoyed a presentation dedicated to the Egyptian Vulture. Visitors to the event saw a model of a nest of an Egyptian Vulture with the figure of a young bird in real size.



© Mariana Valcheva



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© Rouse Regional Museum of History

We would like to thank to the Haskovo Municipality and the Regional Museum of History for their hospitality!

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



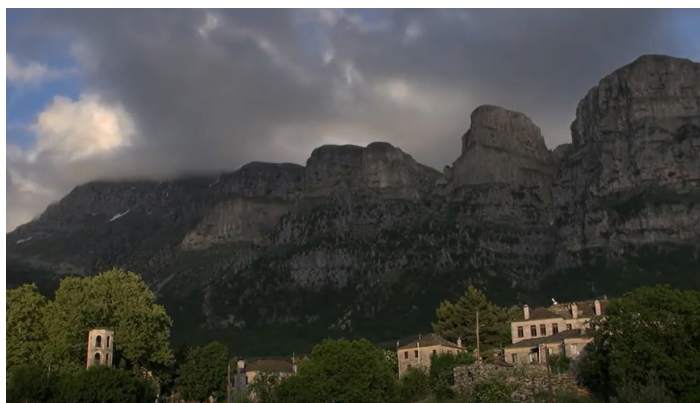
October 2016, Issue VII

Fun

NEWS FILMS CRATED WITHIN THE PROJECT

“Be one of us”: film dedicated to the fight against poisons in Greece:

<http://www.lifeneophron.eu/en/video-gallery/17/61.html>



“The White Father”: film made by Vladislava Ilieva for the creation of the huge graffiti in Madzharovo by 140 ideas:

<http://www.lifeneophron.eu/en/video-gallery/8/55.html>



“Life of the Egyptian vulture” - film with footage from the on line nest video camera:

<http://www.lifeneophron.eu/en/video-gallery/16/58.html>



The Mr Ross Case: film of Maria Salabasheva about a British egg collector convicted in Bulgaria:

<http://www.lifeneophron.eu/en/video-gallery/2/51.html>

THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE'S ODYSSEY

At the International Bird Day (1 April) the Project announced a photography competition, intended to promote the popularization and conservation of the Egyptian Vulture - one of the most endangered bird species on the planet. We received a wide variety of inspiring photographs. The winners were announced in September on International Vulture Awareness Day.

The first award won one of **Kalin Botev's** pictures.

The second award was for the photo of **Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang**, Thailand.

The public award was for **Hüseyin Dönmezoğlu**, Turkey, with his photo “The guardian of the ancient tomb”.

17 more photographs were chosen to be included in an exhibition which was presented in Haskovo and Ruse.

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road



October 2016, Issue VII

Fun



© Kalin Botev



© Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang



© Hüseyin Dönmezoğlu

A total of 14 photographers with 47 photos took part in the competition. The participants are from Bulgaria, Greece, France, Czech Republic, India, Izrael, Turkey and Thailand.

You can find all photos from the competition here.

THE MAGICAL RING

Illustrations by Yana Kazakova

THE MAGICAL RING

It was a hot summer day in 2008 and the young ornithologists were hiding beneath the nest. Vladi was clutching a small plastic green ring with initials B28. Few moments after he gently put it on the foot of the scared feeble chick. He put the young bird back in the recess, trying not to think of the troublesome statistics:
"...of every nine young Egyptian vultures, only one survives."
He glanced at the nestling on last time and said:

And don't forget to come back home

Just a few short months after her hatch in the heart of Rodopi Mountains, Maya (whose name was given to her years later) departed on the long and dangerous journey to Africa.

For three years no one of the team "The Return of the Neophron" had heard anything about her. Until they received a call about a bird in a bad condition with poisoning symptoms in Northern Bulgaria. Vladi recognized the ring right away.

Thanks to the local people (who gave the signal) and the quick action of the project's team, the bird was admitted in The Green Balkans Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Center. After two months of treatment and recuperation, Maya was once again released under her home skies in the Rodopi.

"Will she remain here, in spite of the dangers? Will she come back?" After another two years of waiting for an answer, the ring intervened once more. Maya was sighted and photographed, thanks to the skills and zealous efforts of one of the project's most experienced collaborators. Already an adult, Maya had returned and found a mate in Northern Bulgaria, 230 km from the nest she had hatched in. Unfortunately their attempts to breed were unsuccessful.

From that point on, the ring hasn't stopped supplying the team with information for the bird's whereabouts, every time she comes back in the spring. The distinctive markings "B28" helped Vladi find out about Maya's new mate and their new nesting territory.

Just a small plastic green ring that turned out to be anything but ordinary. And a bird, gifted with the extraordinary ability to cleanse the earth, protecting people and animals alike from diseases, to cross seas and continents, carrying on its wings the hope, that there will continue to be Egyptian vultures. Here, at home. Our common home.

www.LifeNeophron.eu

Illustrations: Yana Kazakova

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Logos: European Union, LIFE, A.G. Leventis Foundation, Oikos, KSPB, WWF, MAYA.



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