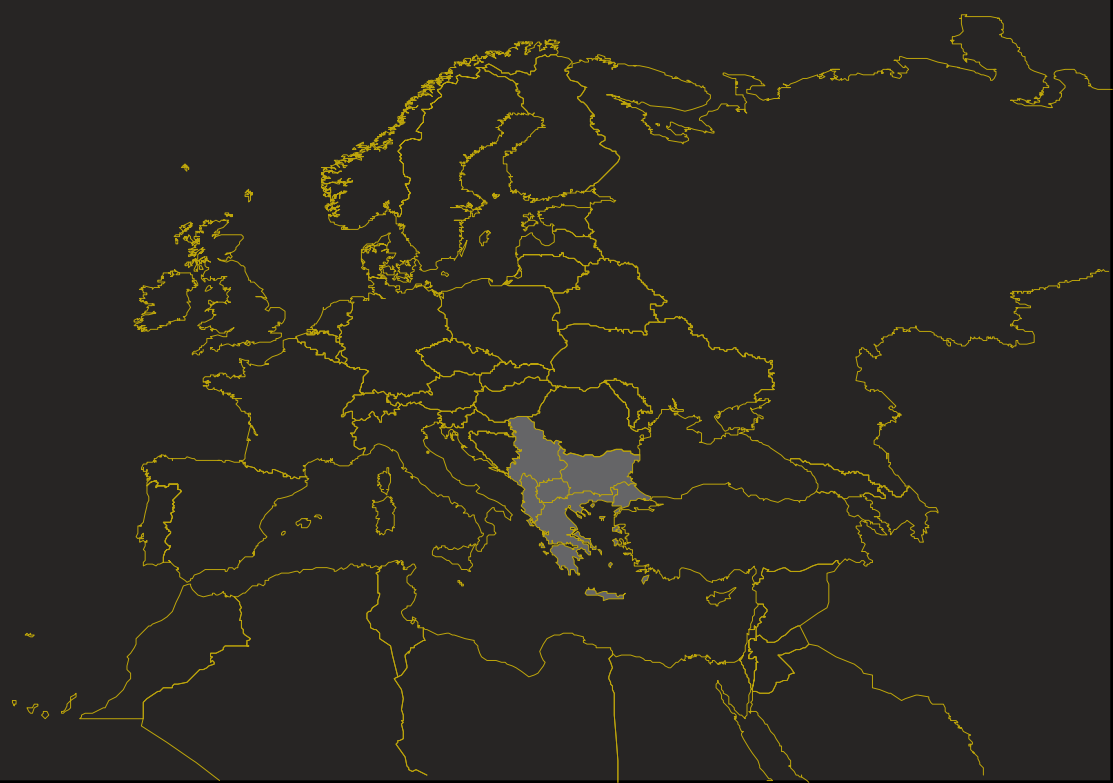




THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.





1. WOULD BE SPRING THE SAME WITHOUT THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE?	1
2. WATCH LIVE: EGYPTIAN VULTURE IN THEIR NEST	2
3. VIDEO GAME DEMONSTRATES HOW HARD IT IS FOR THE EGYPTIAN VULTURES TO SURVIVE	2
4. FROM ADDIS ABABA TO AFAR AND AMHARA: A STORY ABOUT VULTURES, PEOPLE AND ABYSSINIAN WILDERNESS	3
5. CURRENT STATUS OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURES ON THE BALKANS	4
6. YOU CANNOT FOOL DEATH TWICE	5
7. POISONED BAITS IN NATURE: A PROBLEM NOT ONLY IN GREECE	5
8. VULTURE 007: A BIRD OR A "SPY"	6
9. THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE FACIAL IDENTIFICATION	7
10.BEING A NESTGUARDIAN: KRASSIMIR MANEV, BULGARIA	8
11.BEING A NESTGUARDIAN: ALI APTOURACHMAN, GREECE	9
12.WHY ARE EGYPTIAN VULTURES BENEFICIAL FOR THE FARMERS?	10
13.SPA: PROVADIISKO-ROYAKSKO PLATEAU, BULGARIA	11
14.SPA: TYMFI MOUNTAIN, GREECE	11
15.EVENTS AND IMPORTANT DAYS	12
16.WHAT THE FIELD TEAM LAUGHS?	12

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.

July 2013, issue II

Editorial

WOULD SPRING BE THE SAME WITHOUT THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE?

The first rays of the sun reach out playfully under the heavy clouded sky. They caress the rocks and cliffs and make them blush from their tenderness. Tiny streams silently warble down the hills and carry away the water of the last melting snow. New sprouts and spring grass stretch their stems in expectation of the new day. A soft silence engulfs the valley – all living things seem to be expecting something special. And here it is – like a white vision a herald of spring appears on the horizon; it's the Egyptian Vulture. The bird of the Pharaohs arrives back from Africa; it has flown over 4000 km (2500 mi) through ordeals and dangers, and has come back to its nesting sites. Without even the slightest move of its wings, the Egyptian Vulture glides over the valley and turns to the cliff holding its cozy nest. The niche is marked with centuries-old white excrements and it shines on the sunrays like an ancient sanctuary. Many generations of Egyptian Vultures were raised here to serve humans and animals alike by keeping these lands clean and protecting them from epidemics. Today the bird is a last remaining soldier of a once numerous army of care takers. It still carries out its duty to Mother Earth, and comes back year after year to fulfill its destiny. Would spring in this breathtaking valley be the same if the Egyptian Vulture didn't return? Perhaps not; soon after its disappearance the voices of song birds will also go silent; then the buzz of bees will cease and the flowers will stop blossoming. In the end there will be only rocks left here... Rocks and people; people with hollow hearts – if they still have hearts, that is.

This story can have a sad or a happy ending. And it depends not on our imagination but on our actions. The story might seem like fiction to you but it is quite real. We managed to save one of the last vultures in Meteora from poisoning – after swallowing a deadly bait, Lazaros recovered, flew 8000 km (5000 mi) to its wintering site in Chad and back to Greece only to find its death – again by poison. We lost Icarus too – one of the six Egyptian Vultures hatched in Greece in 2012; he drowned in the waters of the Mediterranean because there were no adults with him to show him the right way to Africa. The harmful chemicals with which we treat the crops – the same crops we make our own bread from! – sealed the fate of the last remaining pairs of Egyptian Vultures in Nature Park Russenski Lom, North-East Bulgaria – the northernmost nesting location of the species in Eastern Europe.

At present in Bulgaria and Greece together there live about 40 pairs of the globally endangered species. That is about half of the Balkan population. Every year less and less birds come back to the nesting sites, and the survivors from the long migration have to face the risk of poisoning, electrocution, poaching and many other threats. Last year we launched one of the most large-scale LIFE+ projects in the region, aimed at the protection of the species in the hope that we will be able to take fast and efficient measures for its protection. But what happened? We monitor the vultures daily, we guard their nests, we provide safe and clean food for them; we study their health status, their migration and the threats... And still we lose them. Why? Because the fate of a species cannot be put in the hands of just a few people. As part of our natural heritage it depends on our society as a whole – on the authorities, on the municipalities, on the local schools, on the farmers and hunters... on everyone. How? This is what we will tell you in this issue of the Return of the Neophron Newsletter.



Stoyan Nikolov
(Project Manager)

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.

July 2013, issue II

Hot news

WATCH LIVE: EGYPTIAN VULTURES IN THEIR NEST

Last year, we were excited to have the opportunity to watch the occupants of an Egyptian Vulture nest in northern Bulgaria after we installed a webcam there. This year, the pair made us happy again – the two adult birds arrived successfully from their journey up Africa and chose the same niche. The first observation of the birds was on the 31st of March. We had to be patient if we wanted to know for sure if they will nest there again; on the 17th of April, we got our proof – the female laid her eggs. Everyone on the team, as well as all the viewers online, were delighted to witness the first chick hatching on the 29th of May. Five days later, on the BSPB's 25th anniversary, the second chick hatched.

We are eager to follow the progress of the new generation as they grow stronger under their parents' devoted care and get ready for their first flight. You can watch what is happening in the nest [here](#).



VIDEO GAME DEMONSTRATES HOW HARD IT IS FOR THE EGYPTIAN VULTURES TO SURVIVE



The original video game *Life of the Egyptian Vulture* demonstrates the challenges and the threats for the Egyptian Vultures – a species which is globally endangered and close to extinction.

The player takes the role of an Egyptian Vulture; his/her goal is to overcome the challenges and the threats which lie ahead and to survive until the end of the level. As the player progresses in the game, the Vulture's age, appearance, size and power change. Every level contains information about the species biology, ecology and conservation; thus, young people can learn interesting facts about these amazing birds and about nature as a whole through playing and also how certain actions of their hero determines whether it succeeds or fails.

The creators of the game hope to provoke the young generation's interest towards wildlife and to stimulate them to try and experience it first hand by spending more time outdoors rather than at home, stuck in front of their consoles. *Life of the Egyptian vulture* is foreseen to have four levels. The first level is already available to play, so gamers who can try their luck and find out whether they will survive in the wild. The remaining three levels will be released by the end of the next year.

The game was created as part of The Return of the Neophron LIFE + Project, run by BSPB. It was developed by Biogama. You can play online [here](#).

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.

July 2013, issue II

Expeditions

FROM ADDIS ABABA TO AFAR AND AMHARA: A STORY ABOUT VULTURES, PEOPLE AND ABYSSINIAN WILDERNESS *by Volen Arkumarev*

A two-week training seminar on research and conservation of one of the most endangered birds in the world – the Egyptian vulture – took place in Ethiopia in January 2013. The event was attended by representatives of conservation organisations and authorities of Ethiopia, Chad, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia.

The seminar was organized by the BSPB/Birdlife Bulgaria with the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS). It consisted of theoretical and practical training and presented a key step in building capacity to work with the species in these countries.

The two days of lectures in Addis Ababa aimed to demonstrate to the participants the status, ecology and threats to the species, methods for its study and how to determine the age of individuals. Special attention was paid to the newly created opportunities for cooperation with partners from African countries for the conservation of the species along its migratory route and in the wintering areas.

After the theoretical part, we headed east towards the Afar region. The area holds the largest known concentration of wintering Egyptian vultures in east Africa, thus providing a great opportunity for practical training on the census of the species. The training also allowed the team to collect valuable data about the number of wintering Egyptian vultures this year; a total of 1,082 birds were registered – about 300 individuals fewer than the records from the previous two censuses conducted in 2009 and 2010 by BSPB and EWNHS.

From the savannas and semi-deserts of the Afar, we went to the high plateaus of the Dill mountain to search for nesting Egyptian vultures. With dizzy heads, we couldn't believe our luck that we had in find a pair of Egyptian vultures at 3,500 m above sea level! We finished the training in the grand canyon of Debre Lebanos, where participants had the opportunity to be trained to identify active nests of Egyptian Vultures. In just one day we found two active nests. We also saw Rueppell's vultures, Lappet-faced vultures, Verreaux's eagles and other raptors.

We will never forget the sight of a Black kite snatching the lunch of the delegate from Sudan (literally under his nose!) and the face-to-face meeting with an irate male Gelada Baboon in the bushes! However, no matter how impressive the nature of Ethiopia is, perhaps the best feature there were its people with their big, warm smiles.

The seminar created an important 'bridge', not only between the Balkans and Africa but also between the African countries themselves. We hope to create an environmental network that will grow stronger in time. The seminar was entitled "Capacity Building to Support the Conservation of Migratory Egyptian Vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*) from the Western Palearctic on their Wintering Grounds in Ethiopia, Sudan and Chad" and was funded by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the LIFE+ project 'The Return of the Neophron' (LIFE10 NAT/BG/000152), which is funded by the European Commission and the "A. G. Leventis" Foundation.



THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.



July 2013, issue II

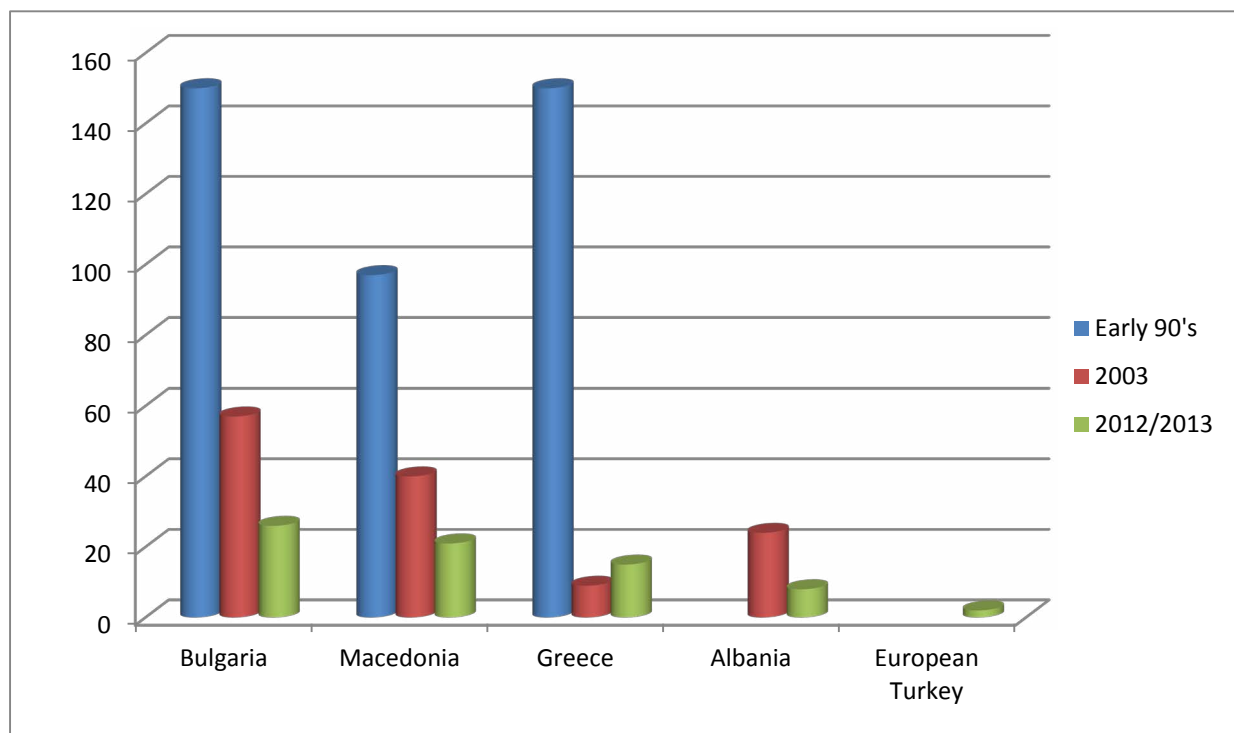
Research

CURRENT STATUS OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURES ON THE BALKANS *by Vladimir Dobrev*

In the past, nesting Egyptian Vultures were a regular sight on the hills within the city of Plovdiv, but today, the bird symbolises the long gone abundance of nature. The future of the species remains unclear, despite the efforts of many experts. In 2013, we lost the northernmost breeding pair on the Balkan peninsula. Over the last ten years, the Bulgarian population of the species has decreased by more than 50% - from 57 pairs in 2003 to 26 in 2013. The trend in neighbouring countries is similar. The Eastern Rhodope Mountains and FYROM, with 20 pairs, emerge as the two core areas for the species in the Balkans. The country of Eagles, Albania, is home to only eight pairs. In Greece, there are about fifteen pairs. A

few pairs survive in European Turkey too.

With no more than 80 pairs, the Balkans are the last fortress for the species in Eastern Europe. The reasons for its plight are complex – from poisoning to social-ethnic in Africa, but they all are the direct result of human activities. The future of this charming species depends to an ever greater extent on humanity. In the literature from a century ago, there is data about thousands of Egyptian Vultures flying over Istanbul on their way south to Africa from the Balkans. Today there are only dozens. The question of how many there will be tomorrow still remains...



THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.

July 2013, issue II

Conservation

YOU CANNOT FOOL DEATH TWICE *by Victoria Saravia*

They say cats have nine lives. Based on my short experience with the Egyptian vultures, I would say that unfortunately, they only have one... and in extraordinary circumstances, like in Lazaros' case, two. Lazaros and his mate formed one of the four Egyptian vulture pairs breeding in Meteora last year. **Only two weeks after their arrival in the area from their wintering grounds in eastern Africa, a local stockbreeder found Lazaros in agony next to a poisoned dog.** Thanks to the quick and altruistic intervention of the farmer Lazaros was taken to a vet and saved from a certain death. After the treatment, he was released back into the wild where it belonged, this time equipped with a satellite transmitter that enabled us to follow all his movements. Thus, when the time came, we saw him migrate to Africa to spend the winter (<http://www.lifeneophron.eu/en/Tagging.html>), and we waited eagerly for his return home in Greece in March this year. Indeed, Lazaros returned home after successfully overcoming all the perils on such a long and dangerous trip (more than 4000km over Chad, Sudan, Egypt, Israel, Syria and Turkey) only to die poisoned just 200km before reaching his nest in Meteora. Apparently, even having 'two lives' is not enough to survive in countryside full of poison baits. This is why we should all join our efforts together if we want to save the last remaining individuals of this incredible species.



POISON BITES IN NATURE: A SERIOUS PROBLEM IN GREECE *by Haritakis Papaioannou*

No one can evaluate accurately the actual dimensions of the illegal use of poisoned baits in the Greek countryside. The practice was widespread after the '50s but was finally banned in Greece in the 80s. PD 87/1981 clearly prohibits such practices involving the extermination of wild fauna; Ministerial decision 37338/1807/E.103 (B 1495/06.09.2010) sets penalties for related offences reaching as high as a 1000€ fine and up to one year of imprisonment.

However, the sad practice of illegal wildlife poisoning is still a reality. In fact, taking into account just a few of the recent recorded incidents,

namely the poisoning of Griffon Vultures, Golden Eagles and Great Spotted Eagles in Nestos, as well as the tragic story with the 2 Egyptian Vultures in Amphipolis, the practice seems to continue unabated.

The persistence of some people who apply these illegal practices without considering the implications for wildlife or public health is a major problem. This is exemplified when it is coupled with the ease of procuring poisonous substances, loopholes in the law, the substantial lack of policing, the ignorance and inability of government agencies to play their role and the lack of a properly staffed and equipped government laboratory that would quickly identify poisonous chemicals and certify their use in incidents in due time. These are some of the serious issues that we try to solve together with patience and perseverance.



THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.



July 2013, issue II

Vulture stories

VULTURE 007: A BIRD OR A 'SPY' by Stoyan Nikolov

In the beginning of 2013 the Sudanese Wildlife Society carried out research on the Egyptian Vultures in South-West Sudan – one of the main wintering sites for the Balkan population. The research is part of a project to build a capacity of local experts for the protection of the Egyptian Vultures during their migration to their wintering sites in East Sahel. It included gathering data about the types of habitats, the land use, the numbers of livestock and the potential threats for this globally endangered bird species. **The discovery that tagged birds are being killed because of the devices they carry came as a shock.** Local people aim at the 'strange' birds, they kill them and then they bring the devices for inspection to special forces units. The SWS has information that two Egyptian Vultures died in this manner; both had rings, and one had a satellite transmitter too.

Unfortunately such deliberate killings of birds with transmitters are not a precedent. In 2010 Spartak, the first Egyptian Vulture, fitted with a transmitter by the BSPB, lost its life in Chad for the same reason. In Sudan there are reports for dead Griffon Vultures and White Storks too; a Spotted Eagle, a globally endangered species, was shot in Montenegro, in the Balkans, for similar reasons!

Even though telemetry presents immense opportunities for researchers of the birds' ecology and the data gathered can be used for their effective protection, there obviously are instances when fitting a bird with a transmitter can increase the risks for it. This urgent issue clearly demonstrates the need for cooperation with local people and the respective administrative organs and services in Sudan.



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THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

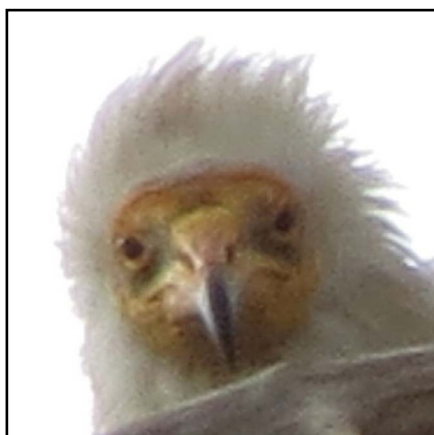
The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.



July 2013, issue II

Vulture stories

THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE FACIAL IDENTIFICATION *by Jose M. Rodriguez*

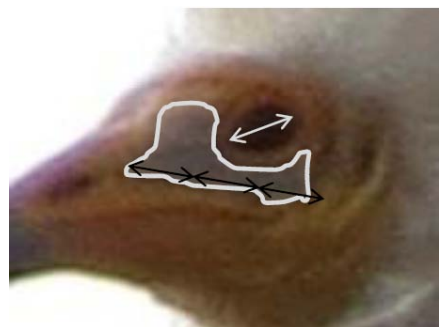


Last year the WWF team started applying an identification method of adult Egyptian vultures based on photographing their faces. Individuals are distinguished from one another mainly by the specific dark facial spots. The correct identification of individuals may help in relating pairs to each territory and monitoring of the species territory use through the years. Moreover, the ability to recognize the local breeding population will enable us to estimate the survival rate of adult birds.

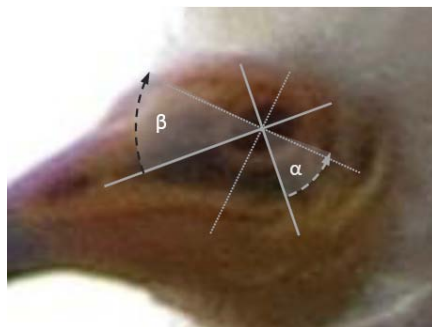
The photographs were taken from a hide near the Dadia feeding station during feeding time for the Egyptian vultures. Afterwards an identification of individuals and an estimation of the total number of Egyptian vultures during the whole period of photographing were carried out. Lastly, each individual was provided with an index-identity card. As a result, eleven individuals were identified for the considered period.

The trail camera might prove to be a good tool for taking the photographs and the subsequent individuals' identification. In 2012, a trail camera was installed in one Egyptian vulture nest far from Dadia. Although the pair finally chose to nest in another niche, they visited the nest with the camera several times during the breeding season. Consequently, we were able to issue index-identity cards for them as well.

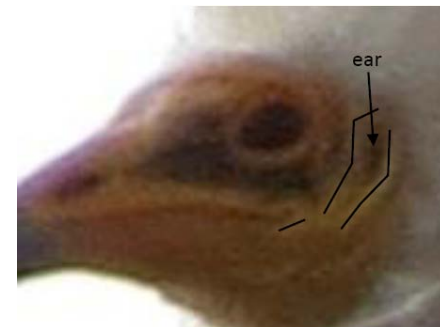
This year we continue our efforts to increase the number of Egyptian vulture index-identity cards and to connect each individual with a breeding territory by taking photographs from the hide at the feeding station, in the field and with the trail camera.



The longest length is almost the triple in comparison with the eye. Height < Width ($W \approx 1,5H$), covering the half of the face around the eye.



α : in the back of the vertical axis, ≈ 45 degrees;
 β : over the horizontal axis, ≈ 45 degrees.



Two marked wrinkles around the ear going down.
Another visible wrinkle in front.

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.



July 2013, issue II

Living with the Egyptian Vultures

BEING A NESTGUARDIAN: KRASSIMIR MANEV, RUSSE REGION, BULGARIA

I remember that about fifty years ago in the valley near my village there nested dozens of Egyptian Vultures. The political changes of 1989 brought along the liquidation of many animal farms – for sheep, swine and cattle. In my opinion this is one of the major factors for the disappearance of the Egyptian Vulture. And this is why we have to persevere in what we do, namely monitoring, guarding and feeding the Egyptian Vultures that still remain in Bulgaria. After all, they're like the lungs of our nature!

I have been working with the vultures for two years now and my work changed a lot the way I look at these beautiful birds. I am amazed by their intellect, by their behaviour and their way of life. They can serve as an example how to survive with dignity in turbulent times. I regard them as friends and I miss them when they go away. I was really excited to see them arrive for the first time this spring and I decided to dedicate a short poem to them:



The Vultures

*They brought the spring along
the spring with colour and promise.*

*To the blossom of willows it won't be too long,
my soul flutters excitedly like a robin.*

Last year I wrote many poems. I also started my first novel which is mainly about the work I do, as well as about the relations between birds and humans, birds and birds, humans and humans. About love and parting – in their world and in ours. But I will tell you more about that and about the poems another time.

People from my village are really interested in the life and fate of the birds. And this is exactly why we guards are important – we have to explain to them the present situation of the vultures – in formal and informal meetings. And the situation is not good, alas. The birds disappear. Is it because of the pesticides used in agriculture, is it because of poaching? I don't know but it's a fact. And a deeply disturbing one too.

And what is our role? To help the birds with everything that we do. To explain to local people the problems and the threats for the species. To fight with poachers and raiders who readily can kill or enslave these wonderful lords of the skies for an amount of money. The vultures belong with us; they are a necessity and we need them – in order to live a better life...

© Personal archive

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.



July 2013, issue II

Living with the Egyptian Vultures

BEING A NESTGUARDIAN: ALI APTOURACHMAN, FILIOURI VALLEY, GREECE

My name is Ali Aptourachman. I was born in the Pomak village of Evros; I come from a family of livestock breeders and I studied forestry. Last year I worked as a guard of an Egyptian vulture nest in the Filiouri valley SPA.

Why should we perform these activities (nest guarding / feeding vultures)?

We should learn more about the survival of the Egyptian vulture, about the reasons of breeding failure which is related to how much food they bring to the chicks and how much the supplementary feeding helps the survival of the chicks. That is why we guard nests.

Did your work make any difference to your attitude towards vultures?



This wasn't the first time for me to work for the protection of the birds. I have been involved in several ornithological raptor studies before with a lot of field work. However, I learned many things about their daily life inside and around the nest that I didn't know – this was the first time for me to spend so many hours observing a nest.

What is the role of the nest guard in forming a positive attitude in local people towards these endangered birds?

Particularly for the area where I worked, which is far away from Dadia Forest, I believe that attitudes will change with continuous and persistent work on several levels, not only through guarding. Still, we as guards participate in many discussions in the local cafe and this is a start.

Tell us an interesting story of your life near the vultures.

I was impressed with the persistence adult Egyptian vultures showed in mobbing ravens when they approached the nesting area of the Egyptian vultures.

What is our role for a brighter future for the vultures?

We should implement environmental education in schools and organise more campaigns for all the people who live near the nesting areas in order to make them realise that the vultures do not cause damage to the environment as they feed on carcasses.

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.



July 2013, issue II

Agro-ecology

WHY ARE EGYPTIAN VULTURES BENEFICIAL FOR THE FARMERS? *by Edita Difova*

Agricultural lands serve as breeding and feeding sites for many species of birds, as well as for many other animals and plants. A large percentage of the protected bird species and their habitats depend on the agricultural practices implemented in the areas where the species breed and feed.

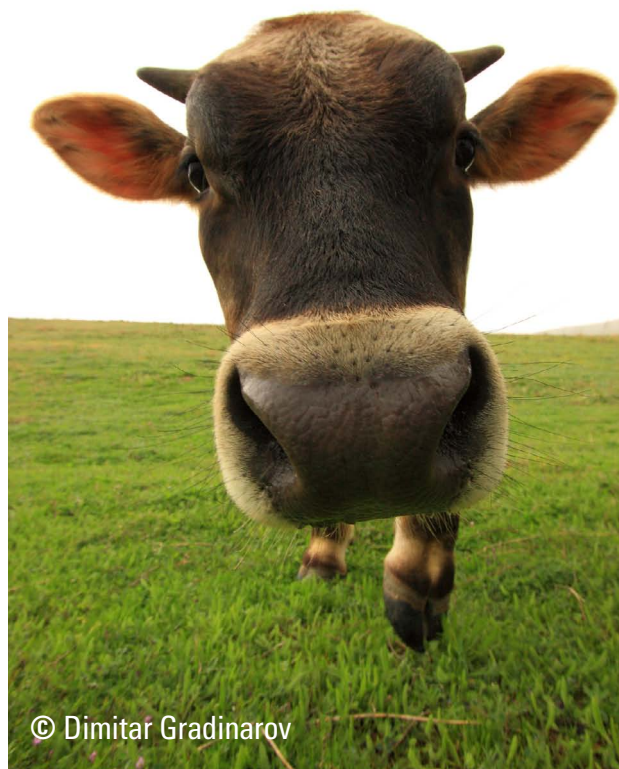
In order to prevent, or at least diminish the loss of biodiversity due to agricultural practices, the EU introduced compensatory payments for those agricultural farmers who choose to implement practices with lower productivity but that are beneficial for the conservation and protection of the environment. The payments are known as agri-environmental payments (Measure 214) of Axis 2 of the Rural Development Programme (RDP).

Together with the conservation of globally endangered species, the developed agri-environmental activities also support the livelihood of local people in areas within the Natura 2000 Ecological Network, as well as in underdeveloped areas with a high level of biological diversity.

The ploughing of grasslands is among the major threats for habitat destruction of the globally endangered Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*).

In 2012 new agri-environmental activities aimed at habitat protection for the Egyptian Vulture in Bulgaria were developed in accordance with measure 214. When managing activities for the Egyptian Vulture, the agricultural farmers are required to transform arable land into pastures, which serve as habitats for the Egyptian Vulture and then to maintain the

pastures extensively through grazing or mowing. Farmers are required to sow the whole area with a grass wheat seed blend no later than 30th September in the first year of the activities. The compensatory payment is 324€ per hectare.



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THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.



July 2013, issue II

SPA

SPA: PROVADIISKO-ROYAKSKO PLATEAU, BULGARIA *by Medzhnun Ademov*



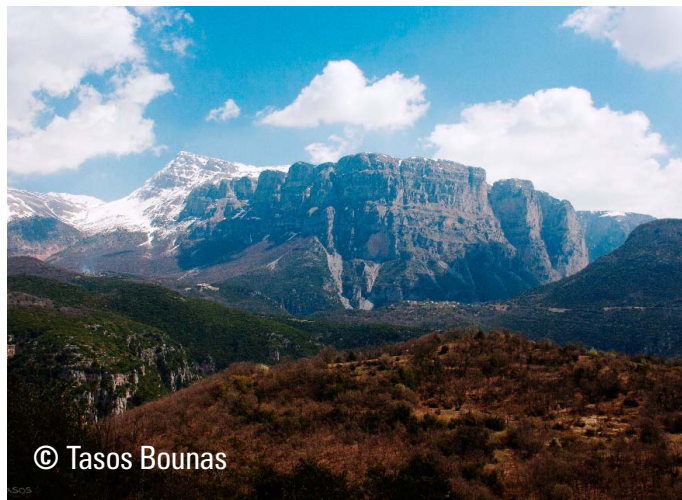
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The Provadiisko-Royaksko Plateau is a part of the Misia Platform. It is an amazing place hidden in the Bulgarian North-East, resembling a huge horseshoe open to the east. Archaeological evidence from many important historical ages is preserved among the sediment and limestone rocks. East of the town of Provadiya is the stone fortress Ovech, used by many of the peoples that lived here – Thracians, Romans, Byzantines, Bulgarians, and Ottomans. The steep cliffs are also the site chosen by Christians for a rock monastery; it has five interconnecting cells, and five individual ones.

The rock niches give shelter to the symbol of the ancient Pharaohs – the Egyptian Vulture, depicted on the walls of the impressive Giza pyramids as the guardian of the family hearth. The charismatic species is a precious addition to the natural treasure of the region.

SPA: TYMFI (GAMILA) MOUNTAIN, GREECE *by Tasos Bounas*

Tymfi (or Gamila) is one of the highest mountains in Greece, reaching an altitude of 2497 m. The massif is a combination of two morphologically different reliefs: at the north and the west the Aoos valley and the Vikos gorge are dominated by cliffs and steep slopes, densely covered with pine trees; the south face, on the other hand, is characterized by smooth slopes forming extensive pasturelands up to the Zagori villages. The area is important for raptors such as the Golden Eagle, as well as for woodland birds and species that are limited to alpine habitats. Apart from birds the area is also special for its rare flora and the unique geological formations. In the past Gamila was regarded as the most important site for the nomadic livestock breeders of the area and large herds gathered on its slopes. Nowadays the abandonment of traditional practices leads to the gradual degradation of the existing habitats.



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THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.



July 2013, issue II

Fun

EVENTS AND IMPORTANT DAYS:

28 July - 3 August 2013 International training seminar on Egyptian Vulture field survey techniques organized under the LIFE+ project "The return of the Neophron" and "Capacity Building to Support the Conservation of Migratory Egyptian Vultures from the Western Palearctic on their Wintering Grounds in Ethiopia, Sudan and Chad" funded by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

7 September 2013 International vulture awareness day

WHAT THE FIELD TEAM LAUGHS?



Do you really believe that vultures are uglier than people???

www.LifeNeophron.eu



LIFE+ Project **"THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON"** LIFE10 NAT/BG/000152



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