



THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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

December 2012, issue I





1. ONE YEAR HELPING THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE
2. THE MIGARATION ROUTES OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURES
3. JOURNEY TO THE EAGLES' COUNTRY: IN SEARCH OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE ILYAZ
4. LIVING WITH THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE
5. SEEKING FOR NEOPHRON BY ELZBIETA KRET
6. THE LOM RIVERS
7. DADIA SPA
8. WHAT DID I LEARN ABOUT THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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

December 2012, issue I

ONE YEAR HELPING THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE

Dear friends,

Welcome to our first e-newsletter on the Return of the Neophron project. Twice a year we will give you updates on our efforts to prevent the extinction of the globally threatened Egyptian vulture in Bulgaria and Greece. Happy reading!

The project started in October 2011 between the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (the Bulgarian partner of BirdLife International), the Hellenic Ornithological Society (the Greek partner of BirdLife International), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF-Greece) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (the British partner of Birdlife International). The project is funded by the LIFE + Programme of the European Union and the A. G. Leventis Foundation.

The Egyptian vulture is among the most threatened species of birds of prey in the world. At first sight some might unfairly say it as an ugly creature, but often these people find themselves warming to its special charisma later on. The typical yellow bare skin on its head - often regarded as a 'face', and the erect feathers on its crest - which resemble hair, make many liken its expression to that of a human. Its wrinkled forehead and the penetrating gaze seem to be the result of some universal wisdom. Indeed, it is a very intelligent bird: one of the few birds to use tools. Egyptian vultures are known to use rocks to break open abandoned ostrich eggs during their wintering period in Africa. The species has a key role in keeping the natural balance as it is nature's cleaner and an environment indicator species. Perhaps this is why it was highly revered in ancient times. But does our respect for the vulture survive to the present day? In the past the bird was numerous and widely distributed but today it is becoming rarer and rarer. Over the last fifty years it has become extinct in many countries, including our neighbours: Romania, Croatia and Serbia. Bulgaria, Greece, FYROM, Albania and Turkey are the last strongholds of the species on the Balkans. So, it is up to us to secure its survival here.

What did we accomplish in the first year? The project team invested a lot of energy into monitoring all 45 pairs that nest in 27 Natura 2000 areas in Bulgaria and Greece with the hope that they will be able to successfully raise their offspring. Ten of the highest risk nests were monitored daily, and feeding was carried out by our team for twelve pairs. The constant observation of the nests and the cooperation with wildlife rescue centres enabled us to save the lives of several young Egyptian vultures which were found in bad state. We launched in-depth research on the reasons for the decline in numbers on the territories of Bulgaria and Greece. This research includes gathering data on its diet, physiology, the specifics of nesting and the anthropogenic factors (poisoning, electrocution, disturbance, poaching etc.). We fitted nine birds with satellite transmitters which will enable us to establish the migration routes of the Bulgarian and Greek populations. We initiated a plan of action for the species conservation in Greece, and we started building a public network to prevent the use of poisons. We collaborated with local communities, partnering organizations and institutions. Also, we offered our expertise and support to other Balkan countries where the species still survives in an ambitious effort to start building capacity and to train people to work for the species conservation locally. We created a project website (www.LifeNeophron.eu) where any interested party can gather information about our activities. All our activities were open for the public so that we could enlist support of enthusiasts and followers. We installed a video camera in a wild nest of vultures so that the public could witness their reproduction process first-hand. We created an online map of the routes of the satellite-tagged vultures so that people could 'fly' with them and thus experience the marvel of migration and appreciate the difficulties faced by the vultures. We are planning much more special work which we hope to tell you about soon. Visit our site and show concern about the future of the Egyptian vulture, they do rely on all of our support!

Stoyan Nikolov
(Project Manager)

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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



December 2012, issue I

THE MIGARATION ROUTES OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURES

This summer, we have been following the first migration of nine Egyptian vultures as they set out on the greatest adventure of their lives. We will see which routes they use and ultimately find out their over-wintering grounds. The birds have been tagged with satellite transmitters in Bulgaria and Greece, as part of a LIFE+ project called "The Return of the Neophron". The young Egyptian vultures are called Svetlina, Arda, Ilyaz, Dobri, Volen, Ikaros, Lefkipos and Odysseus, and there was one adult bird called Lazaros. Their trip is a risky one! They must travel over three continents, above land and water, high mountains and endless sands to reach the "winter quarters" in Central Africa.

The first young bird to set off was Ikaros, who set off south from Greece. He flew over Athens, crossed the Peloponnese and reached the Southern coast of Greece - Crete. As an unexperienced bird, he then took the wrong turning and tried to fly more than 300 km cross the sea to the Egyptian coast. Exhausted, Ikaros perched on a ship and stayed there for 6 days. His last coordinates are 70 km from the coast and his fate for the moment remains unknown.

Lazaros, the adult bird, decided to take a very different route. His journey began in central Greece, he then flew over the Dardanelles and across Turkey and then headed South across the Middle East. On the 10th of September he entered Africa and a few hours later crossed the River Nile. From here, he face a huge challenge - the Sahara Desert. It took him took days of flying to reach Chad. But overall he flew fast, more than 4 000 kilometers in just 14 days. He arrived safely in Central Africa to overwinter.

The juvenile Egyptian vulture Odysseus was found dead a week after it was released on the feeding station in Dadia National Park / Greece. We are still seeking the causes of its death. His story can be read here.

The other Egyptian vultures can be traced on the web site. Follow their flight and be part of their lives!

We wish them a good tailwind and safe journey!



Arda
Volen
Dobromir
Icarus
Ilyaz
Lazaros
Lefkipos
Svetlina

© Y. Hristov

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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



December 2012, issue I

JOURNEY TO THE EAGLES' COUNTRY: IN SEARCH OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE



Balkan Peninsula harbours fewer than 90 pairs of this rare species, the Egyptian vulture. Its last shelters are in Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Turkey and Albania. In search of the last Egyptian vultures, teams of BSPB and HOS staff conducted an expedition in Albania, often called 'the Eagles' country'. The aim was to update the current status of the breeding population of the species.

Full of energy and enthusiasm, the joint Bulgarian-Greek team had the ambitious goal of confirming as many as possible occupied territories of Egyptian vultures in just one week. We started our journey close to the lake Ohrid where we visited a former breeding territory with a series of large cliffs complex in eastern Albania. More than 2 hours observation didn't yield any sightings, so we headed south, to the core of the vanishing Albanian population.

We passed through some perfect habitats for birds of prey but, to our surprise, in the first 150km we saw only one pair of short-toed eagles (*Circaetus gallicus*) and a solitary kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*). Before dusk we reached the southernmost part of the country, where the first Albanian Egyptian vulture greeted us from its roosting place on the cliffs. With the first light of dawn came a flock of small falcons, hunting in the field and perching on nearby electricity pylons. We immediately realised that these were our first Albanian Lesser Kestrels (*Falco naumanni*) of many on our trip.

In the Eagles' country, we had a close meeting with golden, booted, short-toed and lesser spotted eagles but observations of Egyptian vultures were scarce. Some locals regarded our presence with a sense of curiosity and thought that we were treasure hunters - even the Bulgarian-Albanian dictionary didn't help us to convince them otherwise!

During the expedition, we visited more than 20 breeding territories of Egyptian vultures but only seven were confirmed as occupied. We observed pairs in three of them and only single birds in the others. These results gave us some clarification the current status of this endangered species in Albania and will help to give guidelines for future research and conservation measures. The main threat (which also led to this catastrophic decrease in numbers) is the usage of poisoned traps against carnivores. It is most common closer to the Greek border. Another probable significant threat is direct persecution of the vultures, sometimes for taxidermy purposes.

A second expedition will be conducted next spring with the participation of Albanian conservationists. We will follow the Egyptian vultures again searching for the reasons for it's decrease and revealing more of the secrets of this magnificent and mythological country.



THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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



December 2012, issue I

LIVING WITH THE EGYPTIAN VULTURES

Vladimir Dobrev - BSPB



My name is Vladimir Dobrev and I am currently working as a conservation officer for the Life+ project 'Urgent measures to secure the survival of the Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) in Bulgaria and Greece'. Ever since I was a child, I have been inspired by nature and my most clear memory from my childhood was an Egyptian vulture flying above my village. I'm not sure what it was about the bird I liked so much but it stuck with me.

About 10 years later, I found myself in the kingdom of the vultures – Madzharovo. I am now 25 and when I go back in the years in my head, to my very first memory of Madzharovo, I see the Egyptian vulture perching on an electricity pylon. I decided that this was my destiny – to work for the conservation of the Egyptian vulture.

As the years have passed, we've been through many things – some of them bad, some of them great. Life with the vultures is an adventure. Monitoring sends you to hidden distant places, untouched by humans. Climbing the cliffs, taking samples from the vultures, talking with people in the mountains, taking part in expeditions in the most distant places on the planet are greatly inspiring, especially when you know that you give a helping hand to a very threatened and vulnerable species – the Egyptian vulture.

Even though there are only a few of us, I know that this really matters and our efforts will be successful in saving the vulture and nature as a whole. There is nothing easy in this life, especially when we are talking about saving a single species, but sometimes in life it's more important to do things precisely because they are hard.



Dimitris Vavylis - HOS



I grew up in Trikala, a town near the rocks of Meteora. And here, one of the first birds I saw when I started birdwatching was the Egyptian vulture. Back then it was quite easy to observe the species, you could just go to the illegal rubbish dump of Kalabaka and success was guaranteed...

Now I am a field ornithologist for the LIFE+ Project "The return of the Neophron". Unfortunately, things have changed in the world, and those early days of easy observation of the Egyptian vultures seem like a dream to me.

This March I started field work with many hopes for the following Spring. But as the days passed I did not have a single sighting. Finally I saw my first birds (a pair from a known nest) only on the 10th of April. My hope started to come back but the joy didn't last long. Almost a week after my first sightings, a local shepherd found a poisoned vulture at a village near the nest! Fortunately the bird survived and later released back to wild. Its mate did not have the same luck.

After this incident I realized that my job would be a hard one. Nevertheless, many good things did happen during this long summer of field work. New nests were found, supplementary feeding of the vultures was successful, and satellite transmitters were fitted. But every morning I had the same fears: would all the chicks be safe and alive in the nest, would all the adults be in their "place". And my biggest dread was my mobile phone ringing with bad news of more poisoned or dead birds. I was so worried I did not turn my phone off at all over the last few months!

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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



December 2012, issue 1

SEEKING FOR NEOPHRON BY ELZBIETA KRET

Elzbieta Kret - WWF



I have had some amazing and sometimes bizarre experiences with the Egyptian Vulture in the first year of the LIFE+ project – The return of Nephron. I've had these in my role of field researcher for WWF Greece.

When I describe one part of my field work to people, they think that I am quite lucky, as it seems easy to walk in the mountains and search for the Egyptian vulture. I have to say that it is not that simple and here is why.

So, in order to find it's nest you need to spend a lot of hours in the field, scanning the sky, mountains, valleys and rocks to spot the Egyptian vulture

itself. When you succeed, then it is the time to track the bird as it approaches the nest, and here the game begins! It is a matter of a few seconds to see the bird at lightning speed going to a fissure which may be a nest or a simple roosting place.

The most important observation which may result in detecting the nest is when the bird is carrying nest material or food. Nothing could be more wrong than thinking that the bird is easily distinguishable while it roosts on the rock, as Mother Nature bestowed the Egyptian vulture with feather color that does not help the spotter! And at long last, when the nest is discovered, you take delight in this moment and every other moment you spend in their presence. It is a pleasure to observe the parents laying the eggs, bringing up the chicks and afterwards watching the young Egyptian vultures flying around the nest.

Now expectantly, I am waiting for the spring and the first Egyptian vultures coming back from their winter grounds in Africa. Good luck my "feathery" friends!



THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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



December 2012, issue I

CAN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRENDS CONTRIBUTE SUBSTANTIALLY TO THE PROTECTION OF VULTURES? A CASE STUDY IN GREECE SHOWS THAT THEY CAN.



The Dadia National Park was one of the first Greek sites in Greece to achieve protection status 30 years ago. This was at a time when socio-economic conditions led to the intensification of forest management by replacing the mature oak forests of the Evros region with pine plantations and by over-logging mature trees to increase production of industrial wood and firewood.

It has remained one of the unique mature forests of Evros, important as a nesting site for both raptors and vultures. The logging in the strict protection zone was fully controlled, while in the remaining National Park, the retention of mature trees was taken account during the logging implementation.

An important factor for the conservation of raptors was the practice of free-range farming, which has retained the forest's openings and offered food. By 1980, livestock numbers were reduced and have plateaued since. Recently, there has been a tendency to reduce the number of livestock held because of the advanced age of shepherds (being unable to sustain large herds) and a move by younger generations to other professions in the public or third sector in the cities.

These factors have led to a drain on the number of young people in the region and an aging population has been left behind. This is despite the fact that many had a job where they were. This has resulted in an aging population and has further weakened the region. Many public services have either merged or disappeared and the economic crisis has expedited this change. The same measures have also devastated the agricultural sector, with high production costs and low selling prices. Many livestock breeders remain unpaid by dairy companies for an entire year and the ecotourism that the region had developed quickly fell away. It is therefore hard to see a return to agriculture any time soon.

The conservation of vultures and raptors may face further difficulties in the future, although there has been important success in the protection of vultures. The farmers maintain the raptors and vulture foraging habitats and secure their food.

There is a need for conservation measures to be supplemented by state policy in specific key sectors of the local economy in order to encourage sustainable growth, development and promote 'good practice'.

THE LOM RIVERS

Rising from ancient sources, the Lom Rivers constantly challenges the pace of time. The rivers race through the Danubian Plain and flow into the great European river – the mighty Danube. The canyons of the Lom Rivers are like arteries bursting with life. Nature's pulse can be felt here in all seasons. It's the pulse of our beautiful Bulgarian nature. The cliffs of the canyons hold caves, churches, and monasteries.

The Lom Rivers: Mali, Beli, Cherni, Russenski... Lesser, White, Black, Russe... The depths of their waters hide myths and legends from the past. Like merry children they hop from rock to rock in the rapids. Like snakes they weave their silent way between willows and elms. The Lom Rivers. Down there, low, their waters are observed by the sharp eyes of Egyptian vultures, buzzards and golden eagles. They reflect the songs of many other species of birds. The Loms will not cease to draw their eternal path across the map of time. Because they are there. Because they must be there.

Krassimir Manev

THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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



December 2012, issue I

WHAT DID I LEARN ABOUT THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE

This is how the young Rada from Sofia begins her story. This summer, unexpectedly for her, she has observed with big interest the birth and growth of young Egyptian vultures under the care of devoted parents. Only 8 years old, the girl decided to describe the story of her new friends. And this story we share with you today. We hope Rada will keep drawing inspiration from the wild nature, as we do.



A family of vultures lives in Provadiya. They come to stay only for the summer, and they spend the winter in Egypt, or in Turkey. They are migratory birds – they arrive together with the storks and they leave with them, too. Here, in Bulgaria, they find a nest (in a hole on a cliff), and they lay their eggs there – just one or two.

From the window of my room in our flat where I live with Granny and Grandpa I can see one nest; it is that of one of the thirty families of Egyptian vultures. And they are globally threatened. We call them 'the cleaners of nature' because they feed on dead animals.

When we came to Provadiya for our summer vacation, the vultures were already in their nest, and the mother was laying the eggs. Meanwhile the father brought food from far away – it took him a long time to fly there and back.

They took painstaking care of their young. When a large bird approached the nest, they chased it away, picking at it with their beaks until it went away. The two vultures were protecting the nest at all times. The family laid two eggs but unfortunately one of the chicks didn't survive.

Grandpa and Granny have binoculars and they often give them to me and to my brother so that we can also look at the vultures. They have a very beautiful flight. They spread their huge wings and let the wind carry them. It's a lovely sight. Two weeks ago the chick also flew, at last. It's mom and dad were close by but at one moment it strayed a bit too far but his dad immediately flew after it. The vulture got tired and landed on a rock. Then it flew back to the nest in the hole.

So every day it flies a little because autumn is coming and it has to fly away with its parents soon. The grown-up birds have white on the underside of the wings but the chick is dark all over. It is hard for them to find food now but a nice man started bringing them food. He is feeding them. It's a pity we will not be in Provadiya when the family flies away but Granny and Grandpa will tell us when they do. I was very happy to observe the Egyptian vultures because they are very beautiful.

*24 August 2012
Provadiya, Bulgaria
Rada Yonkova Hristova, 8 years old*



© S. Spasov

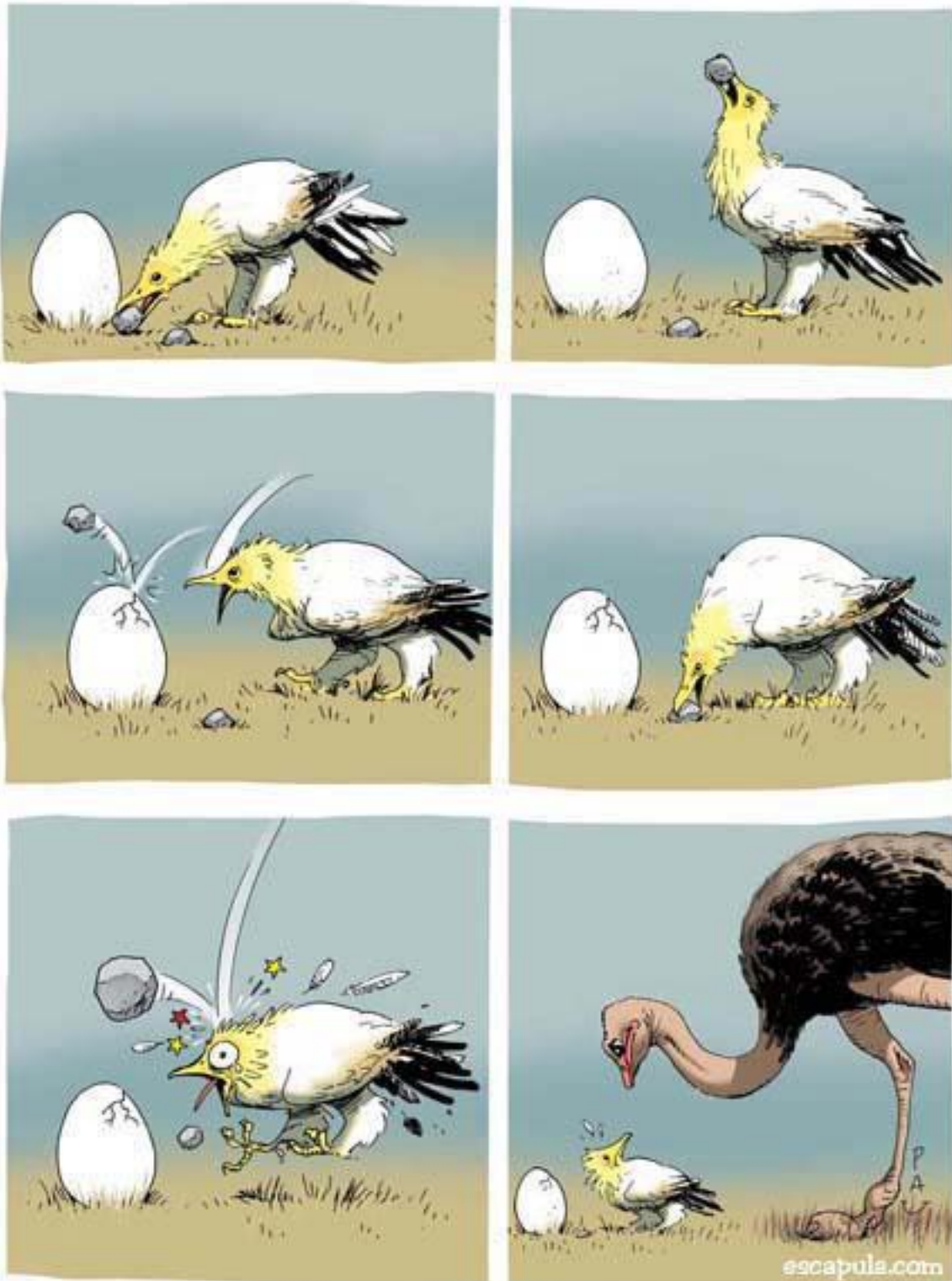
THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

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



December 2012, issue I

WHAT THE FIELD TEAM LAUGHS?





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

