

Bearded Vulture Recovery

Introduction

Back in September 2021 *The Times* reported that the threatened Bearded Vulture “soar to record breeding season”. The short article, by Isambard Wilkinson in Madrid, stated that:

The Bearded vultures, among the largest raptors in Europe (wingspan 2.8m) vanished from Andalusia in 1986 owing to hunting, poison, and human disturbance of their nests. A reintroduction programme was set up at a centre in Guadalentin in 1996. The site set a record this year with ten chicks.”¹

The Times went on to say that there were about 200 pairs of Bearded Vultures living in Europe, of which 100 are based in Spain.

About Bearded Vultures

Background

The Bearded Vulture is essentially a scavenger which feeds on the remains of dead mammals, birds and reptiles. Their preference is for bone marrow (and to get at this, they are adept at smashing bones from height, by dropping the larger ones on rocks); but during the mating season, they mainly feed on carrion.

The Bearded Vulture is one of the most endangered species in Europe. The website Animalia states:

“Over the last century, its abundance and breeding range have drastically declined due to the increase in human population and infrastructure. The increase of infrastructure includes the building of houses, roads, and power lines. Therefore, the major threats to the Bearded vulture include a decrease in habitat space, fatal collisions with energy infrastructure, reduced food availability, poisons left out for carnivores, and direct persecution in the form of trophy hunting.”²

Within Europe, the Bearded Vulture can be found in limited numbers in the mountainous areas of Spain and France (Pyrennes), the Alpine regions of Italy, Switzerland and Austria; and in the Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Romania and Bulgaria); and in Greece. Just beyond Europe, it is also native in Turkey and Armenia.³

As regards the bird numbers, despite what the Times reports above, the Birdlife Data Zone indicates that there are 580-790 pairs living in Europe, though that figure dates from 2015.⁴ Within Europe, the VCF records that there are around 1,200-1,600 mature individual Bearded Vultures, with some 2,000-10,000 individuals globally.⁵ For obvious reasons as indicated above, the Bearded Vulture has “Near Threatened” conservation status.

¹ Source: The Times, Thursday, 2 September 2021, page 33.

² Source: <https://animalia.bio/bearded-vulture>

³ Source: <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/bearded-vulture-gypaetus-barbatus>

⁴ Source: as above. The Vulture Conservation Foundation reports similar numbers.

⁵ Source: <https://4vultures.org/vultures/bearded-vulture/>

Sortie over Britain

In October 2020, the BBC reported that birdwatchers had spotted a Bearded Vulture over the Lincolnshire Fens; as well as parts of Norfolk. The BBC reported that:

“The rare raptor was captured on film by Mark Hawkes at Moulton West Fen earlier after news of its arrival circulated on social media.”⁶

Subsequent follow up reporting by the BBC revealed that an unnamed Yorkshire birder had found two small feathers from the Bearded Vulture at a location in the Peak District, Derbyshire. Using genetic tests on these feathers, the VCF was able to confirm that Bearded Vulture was a female, hatched in 2019, in a wild nest in the Haute-Savoie, in South Eastern France (an area close to the Alps)⁷.

The website birdguides.com also reported that on its way to the Peak District, this Bearded Vulture had also been seen in Northern France and had then visited Alderney, thereafter The Netherlands and Belgium, before making a successful Channel crossing.⁸ It would be interesting to know when the bird returned to the Haute-Savoie, but that information is not recorded.

Conservation

The Swiss based Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF) works to support Europe’s four species of vultures: Bearded, Cinereous, Egyptian and Griffon. The VCF’s “about us” statement says, amongst other things:

“Over the last century the populations of Bearded, Cinereous, Egyptian and Griffon Vulture have declined dramatically and seen their distribution ranges across the continent severely restricted.

We are working towards reversing this and our conservation initiative to return the Bearded Vulture to the Alps Mountain range, one of the most remarkable wildlife comeback stories of the last 50 years, shows vulture conservation can work.”⁹

The VCF provides further information on the conservation efforts to restore the Bearded Vulture to territory where it once was present. The VCF has helped support three initiatives:

- The Alpine reintroduction project, which began in the late 1970s, which, over the past 40 years has helped firmly to re-establish the Bearded Vulture into the Alps;
- In Spain, the Andalucía region reintroduction projects, which started in 1996; and
- Again, in Spain, the Valencia reintroduction projects, which date from 2018.

The VCF reports a degree of good progress with these projects, given that the Bearded Vulture can now be seen in the Pyrennes, Sierra Nevada the Alpine Mountain ranges, as well as in Corsica and Crete. However, the numbers are significantly lower than they were 200 years ago: they were once found in all mountain ranges from Spain eastwards through to the Balkans. Persecution and loss of habitat and food sources during the 19th and 20th centuries brought about the major decline in the population.¹⁰

⁶ Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-54465297>

⁷ Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-54525499>

⁸ Source: <https://www.birdguides.com/articles/bearded-vulture-historic-vagrancy-and-current-european-status/>

⁹ Source: <https://4vultures.org/about-us/>

¹⁰ Source: <https://4vultures.org/vultures/bearded-vulture/>

The Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) on Stamps

Since this article started out in Spain, with the piece from The Times, I thought that it would be interesting to see just how many stamps (if any) Correos Spain had issued over the years showcasing the Bearded Vulture. There are a couple, including this one from 1993, which was one of a joint issue by the members of the UPAEP, the Union of Postal Authorities of the Americas (of which Spain and Portugal are also members)¹¹:

1993 Spain – UPAEP - Birds



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

This stamp was from a set of two; the other stamp (also 65Pta) illustrated the Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*).

Fast forward now to 2019 and the Europa issue which was based on national birds. Spain issued one stamp for this issue, featuring a profile of the head of the Bearded Vulture:



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

Correos issued 210,000 of this stamp. The commentary on this stamp from Correos states that:

*"The bearded vulture is a bird of prey found in the Pyrennes of Aragón, Catalunya and Navarre in Spain."*¹²

Other European countries that have issued stamps showing the Bearded Vulture are shown below:

¹¹ Source: <https://www.upaep.int/upaep/paises-miembros>. The UPAEP celebrated 100 years in 2019.

¹² Source: <https://www.posteurop.org/StampCollections?selectedStampYear=2019&selectedStampCountry=>

1937 Andorra (Correos Spain)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

1962 Hungary – Birds of Prey (18 November)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

1965 East Germany – Birds of Prey (8 December)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

1987 Austria – Endangered Animals (25 September)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

1992 Monaco – Mercantour National Park (20 October)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

1996 France – Mercantour National Park (20 April)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

2001 Greece – Birds and Nature (27 June)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

2008 Andorra (Correos Spain) – Birds (24 January)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

2013 Italy – Birds (4 December)

Image source: www.birdtheme.org

2013 Israel – Vultures (2 April)

Image source: www.birdtheme.org

The VCF website helpfully provides the common name for the Bearded Vulture in other languages: the German Bartgeier; French Gypaète Barbu; Spanish Quebrantahuesos; Portuguese Brita-ossos; and the Swedish Skäggam.¹³

Back in February 2017, the World Land Trust (WLT) included a news item from Armenia on Lammergeiers, which is apparently another common name for the Bearded Vulture. The WLT summarised the findings from a bird count conducted by the Armenian Bird Census Council (ABCC) which the ABCC had published in its “National Atlas Book – The State of Breeding Birds in Armenia”. The ABCC found that:

“There are only 11-12 breeding pairs of Bearded Vultures (also known as Lammergeiers) in Armenia. The population in Armenia appears to have been stable over the past ten years. This is attributed to sufficient food supply over the species’ range, and a breeding success of around 1 fledgling per nest each year.”¹⁴

Conservation in Armenia

The WLT also reports that the Bearded Vulture is threatened in Armenia by trophy hunting, poaching for the pet trade and poisoning from waste metals. Notwithstanding these threats, the WLT reports that the breeding sites of the Bearded Vulture are protected, either in state reserves (Khosrov Nature Reserve and Dilijan National Park) or in

¹³ Source: <https://4vultures.org/vultures/bearded-vulture/>

¹⁴ Source: <https://www.worldlandtrust.org/news/2017/02/201702survey-reports-11-12-lammergeier-nests-armenia/>

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privately protected reserves, including the Caucasus Wildlife Refuge, which is a project supported by the WLT's Armenian-based partner, the Foundation for the Preservation of Wildlife and Cultural Assets (FPWC).

The FPWC reports that the Caucasus Wildlife Refuge is the only privately managed protected area in the South-Caucasus, covering 20,000 hectares close to the Khosrov Nature Reserve. Amongst other endangered wildlife, the Refuge provides a protected territory for the Black Eurasian Vulture as well as the Bearded Vulture. Wildlife activity in the Refuge is monitored by four rangers and trap cameras. Back in 2010, wildlife in the area now covered by the Refuge was almost non-existent; today it is an effective home to the wildlife it was seeking to protect.¹⁵

Unfortunately, the Armenian postal authority (Haypost) has yet to include a stamp featuring the Bearded Vulture in its annual programme of bird stamps. However, Haypost has issued two stamps marking two of the species that are the focus of the VCF: the Cinerous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) and the Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*). In the absence of a stamp from Armenia illustrating the Bearded Vulture, I have included below these other two stamps, not least because they are colourful, as well as being VCF target species:

2007 Armenia – Cinerous Vulture (27 October)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

2016 Armenia - Egyptian Vulture (29 December)



Image source: www.birdtheme.org

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to www.birdtheme.org for the source of images as well as the various other websites consulted for and cited for this article, as referenced in the footnotes.

¹⁵ Source: <https://www.fpwc.org/projects/>. The targeted wildlife to protect: Armenian Mouflon, Syrian Brown bear, Bezoar goat, Black Eurasian vulture, Bearded vulture, Caucasian Leopard, Caucasian Lynx and Armenian viper.