



**Vulture updates No 4. - March 2016 - around the world of vultures & VSG activities**

*Updates include the latest on the CMS Multi-Species Action plan, the upcoming Africa meeting, further poisoning incidents, NSAIDs in Asia and elsewhere, and even using vultures to detect rubbish dumps!*

**Multi-species Action Plan:** The VSG, together with a range of partners, submitted a successful proposal to the second meeting of signatories of the Convention of Migratory Species (CMS) Raptors MoU held in Trondheim, Norway in Oct. 2015. This is to establish a Vulture Working Group within CMS Technical Advisory Group whose primary focus will be the establishment of a **Multi-species Action Plan (MSAP)** for African-Eurasian Vultures. This will be for all Old World vultures (except Palm-nut vulture) across their entire range in Africa, Europe and Asia and VSG members participation (including through PAVS below) will be key to its successful drafting and implementation of this Plan. Several vulture motions have been submitted to the **IUCN World Conservation Congress** to be held later this year in Hawaii. Poisoning motions were also submitted directly relating to vultures as well as proposals for other vulture events. If any VSG members plan to attend the meeting, do please contact the chairs, as it would be good to involve you more directly (we are unlikely to be there ourselves).

**African roundup:** The eagerly awaited second **Pan-African Vulture Summit** is on track to be held during the Pan-African Ornithological Congress in Dakar, Senegal 16-21 October 2016. Although the details are still being finalized, the Summit will run over 4 days with the first day dedicated to updates from across the continent. Days 2-4 will review the existing strategy, matching this with current initiatives to highlight where any gaps can be addressed. [Details here](#) to submit abstracts and register but further payment details are awaited. We'd certainly like to see as many VSG members as possible! A side event on African vultures has been submitted by BirdLife International to UNEP for the **UN Environment Assembly (UNEA 2)** to be held in Nairobi May 2016, with the theme 'Saving African Vultures for a healthy environmental and healthy people'. Conserving Africa's vultures is put forward as addressing Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and their targets. Aiming for high-level panel representation from Botswana (Min of Env't.) and Kenya (Min of Agriculture).

**New work:** A project entitled 'Saving Africa's Vultures' supported by the Segre Foundation will focus on reducing the illegal use of agro-chemicals and other toxic compounds known to poison vultures in Chobe District in Botswana, Masai Mara National Reserve and its surroundings in Kenya, and Hwange National Park and its surroundings in Zimbabwe. Activities include supporting law enforcement, influencing policy, and initiating awareness campaigns.

**Major events/mortalities:** The following catalogue of poisoning incidents has been reported:

- Senegal - Mid-December 34 vultures of 3 species.
- Laikipia County, north-central Kenya - January 36 White-backed and Rüppell's vultures & 3 Tawny Eagles in two separate incidents.
- Matabeleland SW Zimbabwe - late Jan 43 vultures were killed feeding on a poisoned lion

The above incidents were seemingly aimed at mammalian predators subsequent to livestock losses.

- Phongolo NR, Zululand, RSA - 13 Feb – 4 White-backed – probably muthi-related
- Letaba Ranch bordering Kruger, RSA - 26 Feb – 2 White-backed – poaching-related
- Northern Kruger NP, RSA - 28 Feb – 110 White-backed – elephant poaching related, also killed 2 Lion and 2 Black-backed Jackal

**North Africa:** A significant population of Egyptian Vulture was recently found in Morocco ([in Ostrich](#))

**More key publications:** 'Vultures are revolting: here's why we need to save them!' was a feature published in [the January issue of National Geographic Magazine](#) attracting major media attention.

‘Ivory poachers and poison: Drivers of Africa’s declining vulture populations’ [published in Oryx](#). And ‘Using Africa’s protected area network to estimate the global population of a threatened and declining species: a case study of the Critically Endangered White-headed Vulture’ [in Ecology and Evolution](#). Finally, a meeting held at Vulpro in October gathered many southern African vulture experts and produced regional recommendations. These are summarised together with a number of further regional updates in Vulpro’s Dec [Newsletter](#).

**Asian roundup:** the SAVE partnership met in Kathmandu in November, producing [updated regional priorities](#), changes partly reflecting the progress with removal of diclofenac and the growing prospect of first releases back to the wild in Nepal and India. The Blueprint Recovery Plan for the South Asia region was also updated and this [version is now available](#). Unfortunately, one Indian pharmaceutical company (‘Laborate’) is challenging in court the latest ban of multi-dose vials of the human formulations, which if upheld would be a serious setback to vulture conservation, as it is clear that most diclofenac use in livestock has come from such convenient veterinary-sized bottles. Other NSAIDs such as ketoprofen, nimesulide and aceclofenac are meanwhile becoming more widely used, awaiting formal safety testing to be established. A paper demonstrating that aceclofenac (a pro-drug to diclofenac) is indeed metabolised directly to diclofenac in cattle has been [published this month, highlighting](#) the urgent need for a veterinary ban. There was a national vulture action planning [workshop for Cambodian vultures](#), held in Phnom Pehn in January, and excellent news from [Iran that veterinary diclofenac has been banned](#) there in September, and more recently similar steps have been taken in Kazakhstan.

**Middle East:** 2 unrelated cases of mortality of Eurasian Griffon in Israel from flunixin meglumine which has [previously killed Spanish birds](#) evidently being consumed through cattle treated with the drug – this raises a further alarm bells regarding flunixin which like most NSAIDs has never been safety-tested on vultures. Traces of the drug were found together with gout symptoms. Tracking of four Egyptian vultures since 2014 in Jebel Hafeet Mountains in UAE is showing that these birds regularly move between UAE and Oman and are apparently one population. Another ‘arrest’, this time in Lebanon of a satellite tagged Eurasian Griffon ‘suspected of spying!’, although thankfully this time [it ended happily](#), but it does raise concerns for tagging birds with highly visible devices that pass through the region.

**Americas: North America:** Low-altitude soaring flight has been explained ‘scientifically’ in Turkey Vultures. Originally described over a hundred years ago as something “whose cause is at present beyond our comprehension” was studied by Julie Mallon of West Virginia University. Described as “Contorted soaring” the paper shows this form of low-cost, non-flapping flight, is enabled by Turkey Vultures’ “V”shaped, dihedral-wing profile, allowing it to twist, turn, and pirouette in tiny pockets of rising air close to the ground. The findings were published in the AUK (2016) “Inflight turbulence benefits soaring birds. Auk 133: 79-85).

Nearly every bird in the Arizona population of **California condors** has been trapped and tested for lead poisoning over the winter months. Trends of exposure remain similar to previous years but new efforts to reduce lead are continuing to be developed and implemented. Also do have a look at some great school [curriculum materials \(free!\)](#) here on many aspects of condor ecology thanks to USFWS.

**South America:** A workshop held in Colombia in November 2015 updated the National Conservation Plan for **Andean Condor**. The meeting involved researchers from Columbia, Ecuador, Perú, Chile, Argentina and USA and significantly progressed a final Action Plan document.

Also in November, three pairs of Andean condors were brought from Chile to Colombia and sent to 3 Colombian zoos where captive breeding is being initiated with the objective to reinforce the wild population. There was also a field trip to the Paramo to discuss *in situ* research/conservation actions. In Argentine Patagonia 20 immature wild Andean Condors were examined in 2015 to study condition and multiple factors that may influence movements and immature dispersal. The work aims to examine life history traits and movement patterns, to predict responses to environmental changes.

**Black vultures** are also being examined and tagged in Argentina with similar health status objectives and looking at the possibility of pathogen transmissions. Body condition, blood biochemistry and

bacteriology are being determined to study the effects including the use of anthropogenic food subsidies products. **Turkey vultures** are also being tagged to look at migration routes. Two satellite-tracked Turkey Vultures (tagged in USA) were found dead in Argentina in 2015. Although the cause of death of one of the birds is unclear, the other bird appears to have died after being poisoned in an area in northern Argentina where cattle ranchers are known to poison mammalian predators, including feral dogs and pumas. Such poisoning also threatens Andean Condors and other avian scavengers. Finally, Black vultures are being [GPS tagged in Lima, Peru](#), by an innovative project identifying the distribution of rubbish dumps and highlighting illegal dumping sites!

**European roundup** - Little progress has been made to ban **diclofenac in Europe**, subject to awaiting the first proven deaths of vultures to such poisoning. Further efforts may be needed to do this. National Action Plans to mitigate this diclofenac risk presented by key countries (including Spain), at the request of the European Commission, have on the whole been inadequate.

A [new LIFE project](#) has just started for reintroduction of **Cinereous Vulture** to Bulgaria, being implemented by NGO 'Green Balkans' with the first releases planned for 2018.

VCF [transported 7 Cinereous](#) vultures from Spain to France for eventual release there in the coming months. These are rehabilitated birds and are now being held at Baronnies and Verdon, and are likely to be among some of the last to be released according to the action plan, following many years and over 70 releases involving many cooperating NGOs, which have helped successfully establish a healthy growing population in France of now over 35 breeding pairs.

A further [new project](#) was launched in February on the Bulgaria/Greece border (four organisations involved) which focuses on both **Cinereous and Eurasian Griffons** and reducing mortality factors such as poaching, poisoning and electrocution and collision with power lines.

The [full census results](#) of summering Eurasian Griffons in the French/Italian/Swiss Alps mobilized 340 volunteers and registered at least 1700 birds, which reinforces the remarkable increase since 2003 when there were none.

[IBM](#) report **Bearded vulture** figures in the Alps [continue to increase](#) – 37 pairs of mature birds (which includes 8-10 new pairs) had 28 clutches by February. The reintroduction work in Andalucía (Spain) is also going well, following the first fledged young this century last year, there is a new second pair establishing itself making two potential breeding pairs.

Volume 69 of **Vulture News** (November 2015) was [published online](#) with open access, with a lead article about camera-trapping vultures at feeding sites – a useful non-invasive monitoring tool that can generate large data sets. The journal website now hosts recent issues (thanks to EWT in South Africa) whilst the archive volumes will take longer to upload. VSG members are encouraged to submit articles to our journal, and also to promote the journal to colleagues. Articles can be full research papers or interesting results, findings, comments, reports and/or news articles. A correspondent for South Asia is still needed for the journal. Queries and submissions can be directed to the editor [Campbell Murn](#)

**Regional Chairs:** Finally, we sincerely thank Munir Virani, Kariuki Ndonganga & Alvaro Camiña for their efforts as Regional Co-chairs in getting VSG to this point, and we welcome and thank Darcy Ogada and Masumi Gudka for agreeing to step up to the Regional chair challenge!

**Chris Bowden**



**Andre Botha**

**Co-chairs: Vulture Specialist Group, IUCN Species Survival Commission**  
[chris.bowden@rspb.org.uk](mailto:chris.bowden@rspb.org.uk) [andreb@ewt.org.za](mailto:andreb@ewt.org.za)

**African Regional Co-chairs:** Darcy Ogada, Masumi Gudka

**European Regional Co-chair:** Jose Tavares

**Additional contributions:** Sergio Lambertucci, Keith Bildstein, Salim Javed, Ohad Hatzofe, Sharif Jbour, Kariuki Ndonganga, Campbell Murn, Hernán Vargas, Chris Parish, Kerri Wolter.