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Madrid

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On February 27th, a number of conservation NGOs that are actively participating in reintroduction projects of Black Vulture in Europe got together in Madrid to discuss and coordinate their projects and future plans.

The reintroduction of Black Vultures to areas where it formerly bred, and where threats have in the meantime disappeared, is a powerful conservation tool that has already resulted in the reestablishments of successful colonies in Catalonia (Bomort-Alynia project, led by GREFA), and in three locations in Southern France (Grands Causses, Baronnies and Verdon, led by LPO, LPO-PACA and Association Vautours en Baronnies). Similar projects have also been discussed and planned for the future elsewhere.

Since captive breeding of Black Vultures is very difficult, and there is currently very little breeding productivity in captive centres and zoos, these projects have been relying on wild birds, obtained from Spanish rehabilitation centres, in order to secure individuals for release. Black Vultures, mostly young birds in dispersion in the first autumn, often get lost, exhausted or wounded, and go into rehabilitation. Spain, which has 97 % of Europe's Black Vultures, and an increasing, healthy breeding population, is the only country that has the possibility to provide enough individuals from the wild (rehabilitated) to reintroduction projects.

In the last few years two ongoing projects (Cataluña and France) have been operating in an uncoordinated way, and often requests for birds have reached MAGRAMA, the regional administrations or the rehabilitation centers in parallel. Although not intended, the end result is that there is some "competition for birds", which have left rehabilitation centres, and the regional and central administration, in a difficult position.

Thus, under the initiative of GREFA and the Vulture Conservation Foundation, this coordination meeting has happened, in order to discuss the current and future projects, and map out future needs, in a coordinated way, so that these are integrated into one coherent request for collaboration with all relevant stakeholders, framed in the national and regional conservation priorities and legislation.

The participating organizations have agreed that



1. The absolute priority is to finish the current reintroduction projects. Both are very successful and have led to the establishment of new breeding colonies, but need to be completed. Each one of these two projects (Catalonia and France) need as a minimum 15 birds/year, for the next 3 years (2014-2015-2016). This accounts for a total of 30 birds per year for both projects and a total of 90 birds until the successful completion of the projects in three years. The French project may need a few more individuals beyond that, until the colony in Verdon reaches some 5-6 breeding pairs, but these numbers will be small.
2. In the short term the organisations would like to secure, with the kind support of MAGRAMA and all the different Juntas, a minimum of 30 releasable birds for reintroduction projects this year (2014).
3. These organisations have agreed an operational system to temporarily hold, process and transport these birds until they reach the reintroduction projects, once they have been provided by the regional governments. Each year, we will be asking MAGRAMA and the Juntas to kindly provide a minimum of 30 releasable Black Vultures from rehabilitation centers in Spain, that will be shared equally between the projects in France and Catalonia. The processing, holding and transporting of these birds will be done by GREFA, AMUS and VCF, in an agreed coordinated operational system already mapped out.
4. These organisations have further decided to continue with reintroduction projects in the medium term, as this conservation technique has proved effective, and there is now a lot of expertise. Seemingly there is good availability of birds, due to the good health of the Spanish breeding populations. The future projects agreed follow two main priorities: 1) enhance the connectivity among the natural strongholds of the species (Andalusia, Extremadura, Madrid) and the successfully reintroduced populations (Catalonia and France). This has already started, but could be relatively easily enhanced by starting a reintroduction project in-between. A site on the South of Burgos province has already been selected due to favourable scientific and institutional criteria. This reintroduction project would be led by GREFA; 2) Re-establish the species on the Balkan Peninsula, where it survives only in a single colony in Greece. Given the work done with Griffon Vultures, and the huge capacity and expertise developed in Bulgaria over the recent years, this should happen there. This reintroduction will be led by the Green Balkans NGO. The organisations thus encourage the MAGRAMA and the regional administrations to support these two aims for reintroduction projects in the future.
5. These organisations have further decided that while the new projects (Burgos & Bulgaria) could start as early as 2015 or 2016, the physical reintroductions would only start not earlier than 2017, as the first priority would still be to finish the two on-going projects, and all proper feasibility plans need to be finished and reviewed by independent experts, and



fulfil the IUCN reintroduction criteria. If more birds are made available in the period 2014-2016, or if there is any exceptional circumstance that suggests otherwise, there may be pilot reintroductions earlier in these new sites.

6. The organisations have also concluded that the development of specialized captive breeding centres for Black Vulture is currently not a priority, since these are extremely expensive, will require recurrent management and will only produce results in the long term. It seems that there are enough birds coming from the rehabilitation centers in Spain to sustain current and future reintroduction projects. This does not however, detract from keeping some unreleasable Black Vultures for communication purposes, and the development of husbandry and veterinary expertise.
7. Finally, the organisations have also concluded that given the current availability of birds, at the moment there is no need for any method involving widespread extraction of young from natural nests for reintroduction projects. The simplest, cheapest and least controversial method preferred is to use rehabilitated birds from the wild. This again does not limit or preclude any pilot research projects into the methods and potential impacts of any extraction method, to inform any possible future options.

The organisations would like to thank the valuable support that MAGRAMA and the regional administrations have given so far to the reintroduction projects, and would like to continue and enhance this collaboration that is resulting in the reestablishment of Black Vulture across its former range in Western Europe (and hopefully in the future also on the Balkans).

Signed by

AMUS

GREEN BALKANS

GREFA

LPO

Vautours en Baronnies

VCF

