

Aegypius monachus
EURASIAN BLACK VULTURE
EUROPEAN ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAMME

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THE STORY OF LAURITA.

From the wild into the zoo... and back into the wild.

In 2004, a newborn EBV chick by the beautiful name of Laurita set a fine example of how collaborations between the captive breeding network EEP and conservation projects in the wild can work in both directions for the benefit of the species:

Laurita was born from an egg laid in the wild in Western Andalucia, Southern Spain, in the early days of March 2004 and had a very troubled start into her young life. Following disturbance of the wild nest, she had to be taken into captivity by the Junta de Andalucía while still in her egg.^[a] The egg was brought to the Centro de Cria Guadalentin, a breeding center for Bearded Vultures in Eastern Andalucia, where it was incubated artificially. There Laurita, named in honor of the warden who saved her, hatched in early May and was reared by hand for the first days to gather strength for the next chapter in her adventure: Within days after hatch and still merely a fragile 430 g handful of down, the precious hatchling was escorted by her keeper to Antwerp Zoo, Belgium, to be adopted by the zoo's EBV breeding pair.^[a, b]

Antwerp's old pair, both already in their late 30s in 2004, had reached fame not only for being one of the first pairs worldwide to ever breed in captivity, their first son was born in May 1981 in Antwerp, but also for being proven loving foster parents to a row of "orphan" chicks within the EEP in previous years.^[b, c] Assuming their fostering may be once more needed in the breeding network in 2004, the pair had been stimulated into breeding mood in spring by letting them incubate a mock egg. By May they were ready to take care of a hatchling in despair - one just like Laurita. Laurita was brought to Belgium by plane with her own personal assistant and around-the-clock service. At Antwerp zoo the little vulture was eventually secretly swapped with the mock egg the following day to become the famous pair's fourth foster young. She was immediately taken care of by her foster father.



Figure: Laurita, 9 days old, resting after a long journey from her wild home in Andalucía/Spain over a breeding centre in Spain to Antwerp Zoo/Belgium. It is the evening before she will meet her foster parents, the zoo's established breeding and foster pair.

Nourished by her adoptive parents at the zoo, Laurita developed well and grew into a strong and strong-minded youngster in the course of a few weeks. Her weight was monitored daily and supplementary feeding was required on the first day after adoption only. Laurita's strong personality was shining through early when at an age of just 19 days she crawled the remarkable distance of 1.5 m from her nest and had to be navigated back by her foster parents. However, when she also kept crawling from her nest during the following days, her experienced foster parents responded by embedding her in nesting material at the new spot the little foster rebel had chosen for herself and continued rearing her there. At an age of 72 days Laurita was walking around in the aviary. The young female was destined to soon follow into the footsteps of two earlier adopted young of the pair, who were both reintroduced, and return to the wild. At an age of 83 days Laurita was fully feathered and able to eat and regulate her body temperature autonomously, however, still weeks away from fledging... a good age to be released by the hacking method!



Figure: Does this box make me look fat? Laurita being weighed upon departure from Antwerp Zoo, age 83 days.

Along with four other young of 2004 - all coming from zoos participating the EEP in Austria, France, Germany and Switzerland - Laurita was chosen for release back into the wild in the Baronnies area in Southern France^[b, c] where the quintet set the start into a joint release endeavor by the VCF (then BVCF) and Birdlife International's French representative LPO (Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux)[k] that is still ongoing in 2014. Laurita was brought to the release site by the end of July, ringed and marked with a bleaching pattern. With fellow release candidates from Switzerland and Germany, all three about the same age, she was placed on a sheltered rock formation to spend the final weeks until fledge. Being temporarily confined to their platform at a sensitive young age, hacked birds ideally get attached to their release site and remain local. Laurita spent 43 days on the platform before fledging first of the trio one evening in early September 2004 at an age of 129 days.^[d]



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Laurita (zoo d'auvers)
 Date de naissance : 02/05/2004
 Date de lâcher : 27/07/2004
 Méthode : Taquet
 Bague droite : Muséum Paris TY2995
 Bague gauche : DC (Bleu, lettres blanches)
 Marquage : 21, 22, 23 & 27, 28, 29 à gauche



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Figure: Laurita being ringed, bleached and filed at the release site in France in the species' former distribution range (top). The group of young on their protected hacking platform with Laurita on the right (bottom).



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Figure: Laurita in flight in the Baronnie area about two years after her release in late December 2006. She is still wearing her ring with the white inscription "DC" on blue ground, but has moulted some of her bleached secondaries in the meantime.

Two days after leaving the hacking platform, Laurita was next spotted in flight nearby at 1200 m altitude with her two platform mates^[d]... the former tiny Andalucian “orphan” was now circling French skies and became one of the first EEP-released young to reclaim this lost part of the species’ original distribution range.

The following year, 2005, Laurita was developing well and was seen visiting various places in the area, often in company of Eurasian Griffon Vultures.^[d, f] In 2006, Laurita was seen at places as distant as the Baronnies and the Verdon canyon within very few days, seemingly racing back and forth the 150 km between both sites. She was also seen riding thermals with Eurasian Griffon Vultures and had obviously discovered the joy of travelling.^[f]

Laurita was last observed with certainty in early 2007 in the Baronnies sabotaging another EBV pair’s attempts at nestbuilding by stealing their material^[h]. In summer of the same year, a bird that had lost its ring was seen in the Baronnies area and believed to be Laurita, then 3 years of age and near the onset of sexual maturity. From here the trail of this remarkable young female with the troubled start into life has been lost.^[f] Hopefully one day genetic screening of wild EBVs and their young will shed light on what happened to her since and proof that Laurita still is alive out there breeding somewhere.

Acknowledgments:

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