

Poison strikes again in the Douro canyon



Inspecting the Egyptian Vulture remains recovered in the International Douro Natural Park. Photo: ICNF



Descending the cliff to recover the Egyptian Vulture remains in the International Douro Natural Park. Foto: ICNF

Two Egyptian Vultures were found dead in a nest in the International Douro Natural Park, on the border between Portugal and Spain. Tests indicate that they were poisoned. The birds were recovered under the Life Rupis project, which aims to protect endangered eagles and vultures in the Douro canyon, in Portugal and Spain.

“Illegal or negligent use of poisons is one of the biggest threats to many protected species in Portugal and Spain. And it’s not just wildlife that’s at risk: poisons which kill vultures are also dangerous to pets and people,” says Joaquim Teodósio from SPEA (Birdlife in Portugal), who coordinates the Life Rupis project. “Alongside cases in which the victims were endangered wild animals, in the Life Rupis project we’re also following situations where sheep or dogs belonging to local people were killed, for example.”

The Egyptian Vultures recently discovered dead in the Douro region were collected by members of the Natural Park /ICNF, supported by Oriolus and by the Portuguese national guard (GNR). Lab tests on the vultures’ remains revealed that the birds died because they ingested an illegal poison: carbofuran. The substance was probably placed in bait spread on the ground to kill wild or feral animals. The same thing is likely to have happened in other cases the project is following. Aside from these cases where poison was illegally used, the project is also following other cases where – intentionally or due to negligence – deaths were caused by pesticides and other toxic substances used in agriculture.

To detect and investigate possible poisoning cases in the Douro region, two poison detection brigades – comprising an agent and a dog trained to detect poisons – have been created thanks to the Life Rupis project, which is co-funded by the European Commission’s LIFE programme. National authorities and park rangers on both sides of the border work to identify and investigate these situations, and they also work to prevent further poisoning in the areas with the highest records of poisoning cases in the last few years. Working together, Life Rupis partners have implemented protocols to ensure the best possible connection between the various steps in the process, from the agents on the ground to the specialised test labs and courts of law.

The problem of illegal poison use goes well beyond the Douro. In the south of Portugal, project Life Imperial – which aims to conserve the Spanish Imperial Eagle – has encountered several cases in which this and other endangered species were poisoned. In Spain, the trial is starting on the biggest case of protected species poisoning on record: the killing of almost 200 eagles and other protected birds. Also in Spain, two men were recently arrested for possession of baits and enough poison – carbofuran, the same substance as in the Douro – to kill hundreds of people. And beyond the Iberian Peninsula, news is no less grim. Two female Egyptian Vultures that were being tracked by an international team were killed in September: one was shot down in Sicily, and the other, whose remains were found in Tunisia, was likely poisoned.

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Life Rupis is working to prevent cases like these from continuing to occur. Aside from patrolling on the ground, the project also works to alert people to the dangers of illegally using poisons.

“The main aim is prevention, for the sake of nature and of public health. And in unpreventable cases, we have to be able to identify and investigate effectively, so the culprits suffer the consequences,” says Teodósio.

NOTAS:

Life Rupis – ‘Life Rupis – Conservation of Egyptian Vulture and Bonelli’s Eagle in the Douro Valley’ (LIFE14 NAT/PT/000855) aims to preserve Bonelli’s Eagles, Egyptian Vultures and other raptors in the Douro canyon, spanning protected Natura 2000 areas on both sides of the border: Douro Internacional Natural Park in Portugal and Arribes del Duero Natural Park in Spain. Running from 2015 to 2019, the project promotes the region’s biodiversity and sustainable development. Co-funded by the European Commission’s LIFE programme and coordinated by the Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds (SPEA), Life Rupis has eight other partners: Associação Transumância e Natureza (ATNatureza), Palombar – Associação de Conservação da Natureza e do Património Rural, Instituto de Conservação da Natureza e das Florestas (ICNF), Junta de Castilla y León, Fundación Patrimonio Natural de Castilla y León, Vulture Conservation Foundation (VCF), EDP Distribuição and Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR) | <http://www.rupis.pt/>

SPEA (Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds) – SPEA, BirdLife’s partner in Portugal, is an environmental NGO that works on the conservation of birds and their habitats in Portugal. | www.spea.pt

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