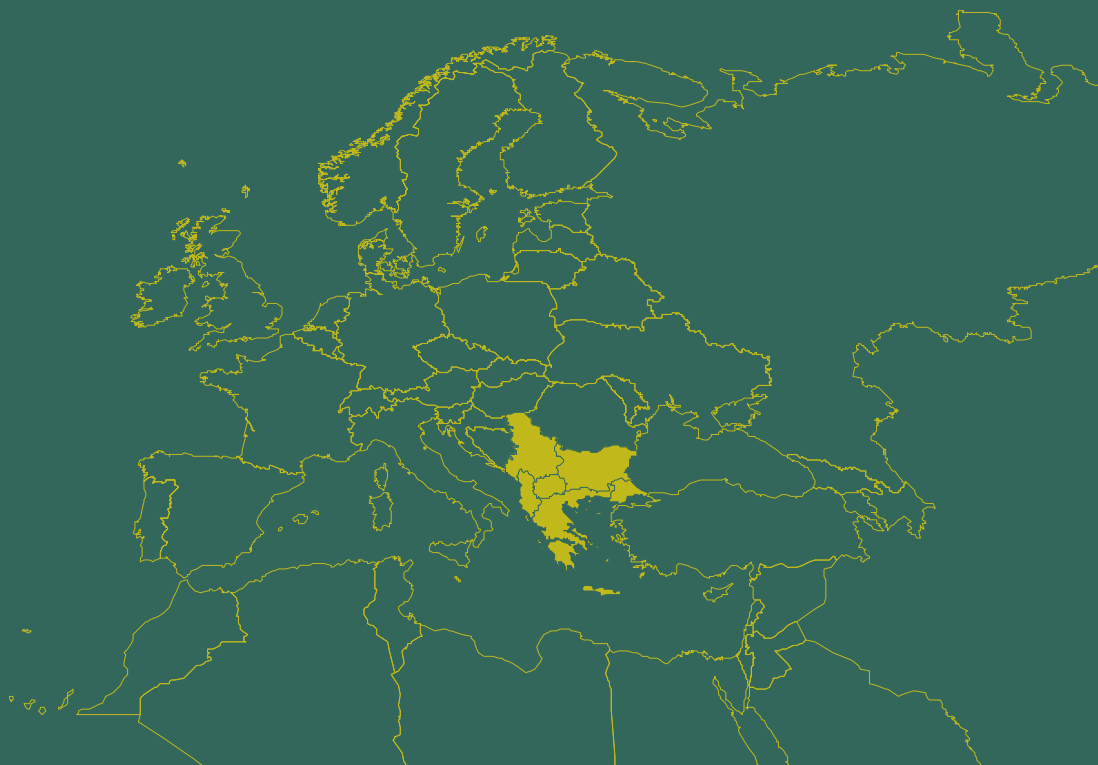




# THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON

The Egyptian vulture on the Balkans and along the migration road.

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Editorial

## ЗА ЧЕРНОТО И БЯЛОТО В НАШАТА РАБОТА

*За много години, скъпи приятели!*

Да се надяваме, че новата 2014-та година ще донесе благополучие както на хората, така и за египетските лешояди, и биоразнообразието като цяло.

С трети брой на бюлетина „Помощ за египетския лешояд“ ще ви разкажем повече за работата си през изминалата година. Ще споделим с вас резултатите от мониторинга на гнездящите двойки, които продължават да очертават мрачно бъдеще за вида. Отново ще полетим с миграциите лешояди, за да разберем колко опасна за младите птици може да бъде една естествена бариера като Средиземно море. Но, както добре знаете, египетският лешояд е черно-бял, следователно новините за него няма да са само черни. Ще споделим радостта си от завръщането в популацията на два от маркираните предишни години лешояди, както и плана за разрушаване на електропроводоубиец в Судан. Ще разкажем за статуса на вида в Албания, за новия съвместен проект между БДЗП и PPNEA в тази земя на орли и замъци. Ще тръгнем по следите на маркираните с предаватели птици, за да станем свидетели на чудото „миграция“ над залива на Искендерун в съседна Турция и прелета на 552 египетски лешояда! Ще поговорим, разбира се, и за хората с големи сърца – за училищата в Гърция, които осиновяват двойки египетски лешояди; за таланта на 140 идеи и въздействащите графити в Хасково; за доброволната охрана; за международния семинар в Горно поле и за това дали сговорна транс-континентална дружина може да се справи с комплексни проблеми, водещи до изчезването на вида. Изданието ще завършим с една уникална интерпретация на света през очите две редки птици, поет и фотограф – двама необикновени сътрудници по проекта.



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Приятно четене!

Stoyan Nikolov  
(Project Manager)

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© Nikolai Terziev

## CONTEMPORARY ART IN FAVOUR OF CONSERVATION

In the end of last summer a large wall painting decorated the Kliment Ohridski School in the town of Haskovo. The graffiti artwork, conceived by the team of the Return of the Neophron LIFE+ Project, was created by artists from [140 Ideas](#).

The graffiti consists of five scenes that represent the life cycle of the Egyptian Vulture. Although it is arranged linearly, the composition actually displays the cycle of life for all living creatures on the planet – from the tiniest animals and plants to the giants in our oceans and, of course, Man.

The artwork is an example of how conservation, education and art can come together to popularize our natural heritage; its location is quite appropriate as schools are the place where Bulgaria's future leaders' minds are shaped.

## VOLUNTEERS GUARD NESTS DURING THE BREEDING SEASON

In August 2013 we turned to our volunteers for help with the guarding of nests of the Egyptian Vultures. 17 people took part in the activity and provided monitoring for 9 juvenile vultures. Besides that, regular guards monitored another 7 birds.



© Vladimir Dobrev

The month of August is a critical time for the juvenile Egyptian Vultures, as they start making their first flight attempts, and these are not always successful. Therefore the presence of a guard who monitors the nest and intervenes should the case arise can contribute greatly to the species conservation.

In 3 of the monitored nests the first attempts at flying turned out a bit harsh for the juveniles but under the unerring supervision of their guards and with some encouragement they grew stronger and mastered their flying skills. All the youngsters from the guarded nests left their homes without incidents and losses.

The team of the project wishes to thank all our volunteers for their efforts and dedication!

For more nest guarding see page 7.

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## INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE 2013

by Stoyan Nikolov

The seminar was held from July 29th to August 3rd in the Eastern Rhodopes, Bulgaria.

Its aims were to: give an update on the information about the Egyptian vulture in the Balkans, along the flyway and in the wintering grounds; to promote further cross-border cooperation; and to demonstrate various research and conservation techniques implemented under the LIFE+ project "The Return of the Neophron" (e.g. monitoring of the breeding territories, blood sampling,



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tagging with satellite transmitters, nest-guarding, supplementary feeding, anti-poison work, etc).

The seminar was attended by representatives of environmental NGOs from all Balkan countries where the globally threatened species still occurs (Bulgaria, Greece, FYROM, Albania and Turkey), as well as by experts from the UK and Sudan (a key wintering area of the Balkan population).

The event was organized by the current LIFE+ project and the UNEP/CMS Raptors MoU project "Capacity Building to Support the Conservation of Migratory Egyptian Vultures from the Western Palearctic on their Wintering Grounds in Ethiopia, Sudan and Chad".

## THE CHALLENGE OF MIGRATION – A REAL EGYPTIAN VULTURE STORY

by Vladimir Dobrev

One of the most impressive natural spectacles in the world is the migration of birds – a journey that some, unfortunately, will never finish.

This was the exact fate of the ten birds we fitted with satellite transmitters this year. Only two of them managed to reach their wintering grounds in Sahel – Paschalis and Sanie. The two birds started from the Rhodopes and chose different migration routes. Sanie was a traditionalist and chose the safe route through Turkey, while Paschalis was the first transmitter-fitted juvenile to cross the Mediterranean in one day, covering more than 400 km (250 mi). Five birds



© Svetoslav Spasov

were lost in the sea and three others found their end near the nests or on the Greek islands. Their fate confirms the laws of natural selection and makes our mission to save this species even harder.

[www.lifeneophron.eu/bg/Tagging.html](http://www.lifeneophron.eu/bg/Tagging.html)

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## HEAT, WONDERFUL PEOPLE AND... 552 EGYPTIAN VULTURES! by Petar Yankov

September is the migration month of the Egyptian Vultures and Turkey is the location to monitor them. Here is what Peter Yankov, who was part of the international team of RSPB, Doga Dernegi (BirdLife partner in Turkey) and BSPB, told us:



I left the 'Point' at Atanasovsko Lake near Burgas, in Bulgaria, and headed for South Turkey, dreaming of a Mediterranean breeze, cooling Turkish tea in the observation shed and endless flocks of migrants. Alas, it was not to happen. Only the last part came true. Still, we met some wonderful people – our own new team and local people we bumped into -- but of them more later.

The team comprised members from RSPB, Doga Dernegi (the Turkish BirdLife partner) and BSPB and was required to choose a point for observation in the northern part of the Gulf of Iskenderun for future annual monitoring of changes in the population of the Egyptian Vultures from the Balkans and Western Turkey. The satellite-tagged birds of the EU LIFE+ Project Return of the Neophron had not only linked the miracle of migration with this easternmost location of the Mediterranean Sea, but had also indicated that here there was a typical narrowing of the migration corridor, aptly named 'bottle-neck'. Our task was to find the best place in this narrowing, the location where the wide air highway between the Bosphorus and the Western coast of Turkey shrunk before widening again as the birds headed east, south-east and south towards Syria. Steffen, Sureyya, Can, Evrim, Saniye, Joro, Misho, and me had a month to accomplish that with our small rented Citroen.

### It was not to be an easy task

though at first it appeared simple. The criteria such a point needs to meet are so specific that they have been described in a scientific publication dedicated entirely to them. Steffen, true to the strictly scientific approach, didn't rule out a 'zero' outcome, ie the possibility that no appropriate location could be found. Well, we would find out about that soon. But first there was a lot of work to be done. And don't think that being close to the sea means that you can easily buy a chaise-longue or a parasol. Eventually we carried out the whole project without these crucial devices which would provide a certain comfort during the migration observation. The 40-degrees-centigrade heat was a real challenge for our Spartan spirit; the cases of our telescopes faded in the scorching sun, the rubber fittings of the lenses loosened. The coffee left to cool down on a nearby rock actually increased in temperature. But we had the

best air-conditioning in the world – namely, our interest and the will to find the answer to our problem, as well as the experience from numerous similar adventures. When the flow of migrating raptors intensified, the small discomforts such as the heat just ceased to exist. . . Finding the Egyptian Vultures among the thousands of other raptors was a serious challenge. Especially the juvenile individuals that flew together with other dark-feathered species; or the adults flying in a flock of hundreds of pale morph Booted Eagles.

### Right from Day One questions began to flood into our consciousness.

Why did migration near the Gulf of Iskenderun differ so much from the phenomenon observed in the Burgas Bay and along the whole Bulgarian Black Sea coast? And not only in number and species – we had expected these to vary, – but also in the flight patterns.



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© Petar Yankov

Here the birds didn't avoid the sea – which is typical behaviour in Bulgaria. Of course, the strong afternoon wind took them inland; they had their preferred passageways; and when the skies were clear, they flew so high that they seemed like mere dots even through our telescopes. We were surprised to discover that mountains here didn't act as a barrier for soaring migrants. The Taurus Range, almost as high as the Balkan Mountain, didn't stop the honey buzzards, eagles, hawks, Egyptian Vultures and other raptors; it rather served as a 'lift' with its slopes facing in all directions, constantly heated by the sun. Another belief, that migration slows down or ceases around noon, was also refuted. The birds just flew so high (probably more than 1.5 – 2 km) that it was not possible to spot them unless against the background of a cloud. One of the most persistent questions we asked ourselves: in 1981 an impressive number of raptors migrated near the Belen Pass (including 874 Egyptian Vultures!); something similar was observed by a BSPB team there in 2007, but now the skies above us were almost empty! Could the 27 wind turbines installed there in recent years have had a drastic influence on the situation? And if the Egyptian Vultures were in such numbers over a point on the wider migration front, how many thousands passed through the bottleneck? And why didn't we see almost any harriers? During the rare occasions of no migration (or simply one that took place at altitudes invisible to us!) we dreamt of an infra-red device which could picture all warm-blooded animals in the air on a screen. We had no idea such a device actually does exist. We also imagined another apparatus which could visualize the thermals and thus help us understand what actually 'navigates' the soaring migrants. We became aware of many important questions which – according to our knowledge – haven't been discussed in any well-known publications, for example the variations in wind speed and direction with altitude. People

usually explore these factors near the surface of the earth but the birds actually fly much higher and the measurements there would show an utterly different picture. Even less than a month of observation sufficed to convince us that at places the migration corridors were very stable and there the birds flew at a lower altitude. One of the typical landscapes of the region – wide areas covered in black volcanic rock, were obviously quite attractive for soaring birds which could easily gather altitude here in mere seconds! We bore witness to an exciting, unusual migration. Saker and Red-footed Falcons, Imperial, Spotted, Steppe and Bonelli's Eagles, Pallid Harriers and Red Kites... The migration was sweeter than kunefeh... You don't know what it is? The sweetest Turkish desert, a specialty in the region of Adana. And unusual like the migration here – its base being... Yellow cheese!

**Yes! Food and the local people** were as fascinating as the migration. One fantastic example of a different culture concerned a local community leader in a small mountain village. A man with two wives and the courage to actually shoot at the police with his official handgun in order to protect the village forest from becoming a quarry. And he succeeded, together with his fellow villagers – he saved the forest and remained mayor despite the armed resistance against the authorities! This gave us another dream – to hope that there would be at least one such mayor in Bulgaria one day... We fed our imagination with dreams, and our bodies – with unimaginably delicious foods, and a plenty of them too. The traditional Turkish hospitality led us into the houses of ordinary people who left us with exceptional memories and the feeling that we had just visited our closest friends. At the improvised point near the water catchment of a small village the locals showed up, bringing ayran (a yoghurt drink), fruits and meals for lunch even though they had



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met us only minutes before! We will always remember the visit to the minefields at the border with Syria: we were taken there by Abdullah, a vigorous protector of the surviving gazelles found in that area, and who managed to preserve an area of land for them. Or the evening spent with nature conservationists from Dortyol who fought for clean air and water; I felt as if I was in a prestigious academic club in their company. But please don't think that we only ate and socialized there. Let me share some of

**the results of our trip.** We found an observation point and the risk of a 'zero outcome' vanished. Not only that but together with our top choice observation point we picked two more points nearby – we established that birds flew there in different meteorological conditions. We determined the observation period, the number of people needed, and we calculated an approximate cost of the monitoring per year. All this was accomplished through an average of three-days-long evaluation at 13 possible points with assessment of the migration at each of them (by means of a special data base; each evening we had the tedious task of entering all the data gathered). We registered 26 species of migrating raptors with a total of 62 243 individuals. Among them – 552 Egyptian Vultures. And all this – in the short period 29 August – 26 September, with a total of 383 observation hours. And without taking into consideration the migrating storks and pelicans, nor including the peak of the most numerous migrants – the Honey Buzzard and the Lesser Spotted

Eagle – we simply had another goal. Even though the period of observation was almost half that in 1981, almost all species now (with the exception of the Egyptian Vulture) were registered in higher numbers than the numbers at the Belen Pass then. Of course this only confirms the fact that the chosen observation point is much better than the one at Belen. We were highly impressed by the numbers of migrating Levant Sparrowhawks (15 701), Short-toed Eagles (6 257), Booted Eagles (1028). And, finally, we filled in another blank spot, namely, that

## migration in the northernmost section of the Iskenderun Bay

takes place on a very narrow front and the spot is exceptionally suitable not only for monitoring of the Egyptian Vulture, but also as a new point along a future 'chain' of observation points for global monitoring of migration. In the context of this chain such points located on a relatively similar latitude will be of crucial importance as they permit the most extensive assessment of the migration flows. A few such 'chains', located along the north-south axis, together with a higher number of satellite tagged birds will allow for a better understanding of the migration routes and will clarify the miracle of migration. And most importantly – they will enable us to monitor the changes in the populations of many endangered species of raptors in this part of the world – something which becomes more and more important with every passing day.



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Conservation

## ALARMING RESULTS FROM MONITORING IN BULGARIA AND GREECE

by *Vladimir Dobrev*

A decline in the numbers of occupied territories, as well as pairs, was recorded in 2013. The total of 40 occupied territories and 37 pairs is the lowest number ever recorded. The number of occupied territories (n=40) has decreased with 9% in comparison with 2012 (n=44). The number of fledglings (n=30) is 12% less than 2012 (n=34).

In 2013, we lost the northernmost pair on the Balkans, most probably as a consequence of the use of pesticides. The birds B11 and B28 (read the story of B28 on page 9), which were ringed in 2008 in the Rhodope Mountains came back with breeding partners and brought a ray of hope.



© Georgi Gerdzhikov

© Vladimir Dobrev



## SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING AND NEST GUARDING OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURES IN BULGARIA AND GREECE

by *Vladimir Dobrev*

In 2013, we provided safe extra food for 17 pairs, which is two more pairs than 2012. Even so, the breeding success didn't increase – it was about 0,7-0,8 juveniles per pair, which is about the average breeding success for the species in Bulgaria and Greece. The supplementary feeding doesn't increase the breeding success but the juveniles benefit from the safe food delivered, as it gives them a greater chance to survive longer.

18 nests of Egyptian Vultures were guarded in 2013. Guarding them is very important in the incubation period and around the time when the chicks are ready to make their first flight. The nest guarding activity allowed us to save several juveniles whose first flight turned into a first fall.

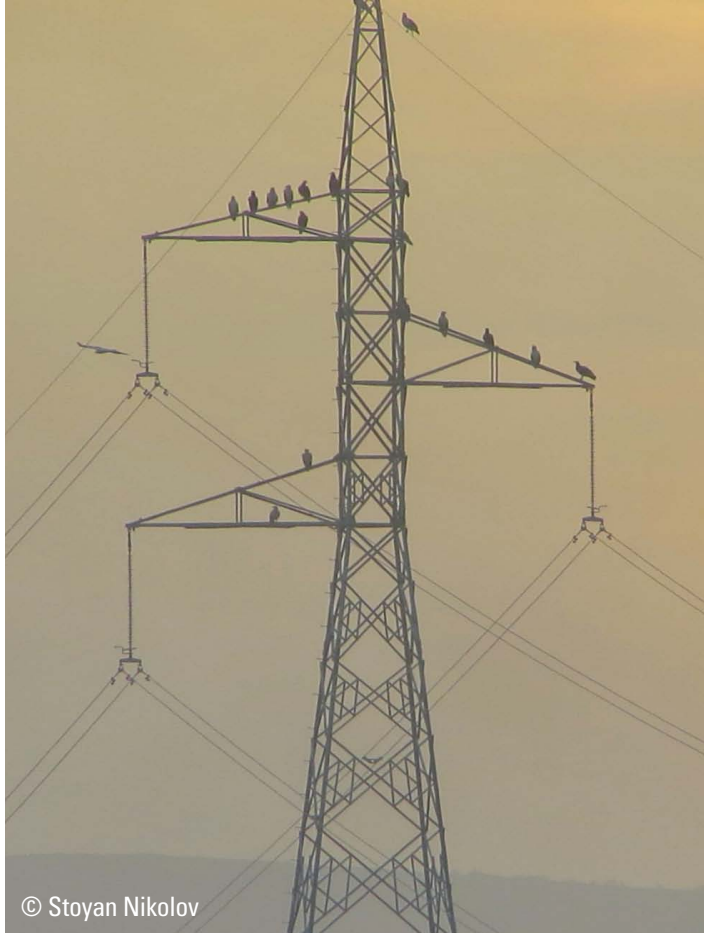
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## INSULATION OF DANGEROUS POWER LINE IN PORT SUDAN *by Stoyan Nikolov*

The Sudanese Government has started insulating the 30 km long power line in Port Sudan, which is known as an Egyptian vulture killer.

About 80 electrocuted Egyptian vultures have been found so far under the power line but it is speculated that it has caused the death of hundreds, when you take into consideration the fact that the power line was built in the '50s in an area of importance for the migrating Egyptian vultures. Victims of the power line are also Lappet-faced vultures, Steppe eagles and even the Bonelli's eagle, which is a rare species in Sudan.

This initiative was the result of the risk assessment made by BSPB, RSPB and SWS (Angelov et al. 2013, BCI, 23(1): 1-6), in particular by the close communication between the SWS and local authorities.

## PARAGLIDERS IN SUPPORT OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE *by Nikolai Terziev*

A meeting between The Return of the Neophron project team and paragliding clubs from north-east Bulgaria took place in the village of Madara with the help of the mayor - Mrs Antoaneta Ivanova. The event was hosted by the manager of the Madarski Konnik Lodge, Mr Dimo Dimov. Among other important topics, the specifics of paragliding in the area were discussed, such as when fans of paragliding can start flying and how long they can remain in the sky near the nests of cliff-nesting birds during the breed-

© Gorkaazk, Wikipedia



ing season. These questions are important as paragliding activity in the nesting areas of vultures can cause disturbance with fatal consequences for the hatching of the eggs. The participants in the meeting expressed their intention to cooperate with each other in order to find an acceptable solution for the problems in a way which will be satisfactory for both sides.

The return of the Neophron team would like to express their gratitude to Yanica, Severin, Daniel, Yavor, Dilyan and Neven for their understanding about the need of urgent measures for the conservation of rare species like the Egyptian Vulture.

Thank you, friends!

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Vulture stories

## AN EGYPTIAN VULTURE FROM THE EASTERN RHODOPE MOUNTAINS SETTLES IN NORTHERN BULGARIA *by Volen Arkumarev*

In 2008, BSPB/Birdlife Bulgaria began a ringing program for juvenile Egyptian Vultures. Over the next three years, 77 young vultures were marked with Bulgarian rings. In the years after the ringing, the growing vultures were observed in Greece, Turkey, Israel and even Egypt! We were eager to see them fully grown and breeding. Early in April this year, we registered an Egyptian Vulture bearing a green ring as one of the partners of a pair, which traditionally breeds in Northern Bulgaria. At this stage, we could only confirm that the bird was hatched in 2008 but we couldn't identify the code on the ring. Thanks to the photographer's skills and the diligence of one of our most experienced associates – Dimitar Nedelchev, who guarded and fed the pair with great care, we were able to take a close-up picture of the bird. The photograph revealed that the vulture is our old friend with ring code B28, named 'Maya'.



© Volen Arkumarev

It all started in the beginning of June five years ago. The crack of a brown egg shell and the first breath marked the beginning of a new life. In the heart of the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, in a cozy alcove rock, covered with soft, warm wool, a small Egyptian Vulture was born. Two months later, the BSPB team put coloured and metal rings on this chick and its sibling, wishing them both strength and success. One of the rings had the number B28. In September that year, the young and inexperienced Egyptian Vulture left her homeland and departed on her first big adventure – the migration to Africa. At this point we lost track of her, only to



© Dimitar Nedelchev

meet again three years later. In May 2011, we received a signal about an Egyptian Vulture in poor condition. It was Maya. Locals from the village of Listets (Silistra District, Bulgaria) had found the vulture with symptoms of severe food poisoning. Thanks to the rapid intervention of the Green Balkans Wildlife Rehabilitation and Breeding Centre, the condition of the vulture was stabilised. After a two-month recovery period, Maya flew again over her native Eastern Rhodopes. Only a few days later, we saw her feeding with other Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, which gave us stronger hopes for her survival. And now, two years later, she has not only survived, but also successfully formed a pair 230 km away from the nest where she hatched. Her partner is a widowed male, who lost his mate in unknown circumstances last year. The newly formed pair began incubation, but unfortunately failed. Breeding failure is normal for inexperienced birds who breed for the first time – such as Maya.

The fact that individuals from the main population in the Eastern Rhodopes (where the number is relatively stable) try to form pairs in Northern Bulgaria (where the number of the species continues to decline from year to year), brings new hope to our team.

We wish the new pair a long and happy life together!

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Living with the Egyptian Vultures

## STUDENTS ADOPT EGYPTIAN VULTURES *by Alkis Kafetzis*

In 2013, 103 primary and high-school students from 4 different schools in Western Thrace (the Soufli and Iasmos High Schools and the Tichero and Sapes Primary Schools) adopted 4 breeding pairs of Egyptian Vultures. The event was part of our efforts to build support from the local communities that live near the birds and thus improve the conditions in which the last remaining Egyptian vultures survive.

In order to succeed in our important task – namely, to provide a safe and hospitable home for the Egyptian vultures – every member in each of the four teams assumed a specific role (danger team, naming team, messenger team, reporting team, art team and ornithology team). In this context, we organised presentations on the species and the project, as well as field trips to the nesting sites and activities (for example, impromptu demonstrations, opinion polls and painting banners in public).

We hope that the adopted birds will receive attention in the coming years, with the current teams becoming more active and with new teams joining the ranks in the struggle for the conservation of this unique bird.



© Alkis Kafetzis



© Alkis Kafetzis

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## WHO AM I...

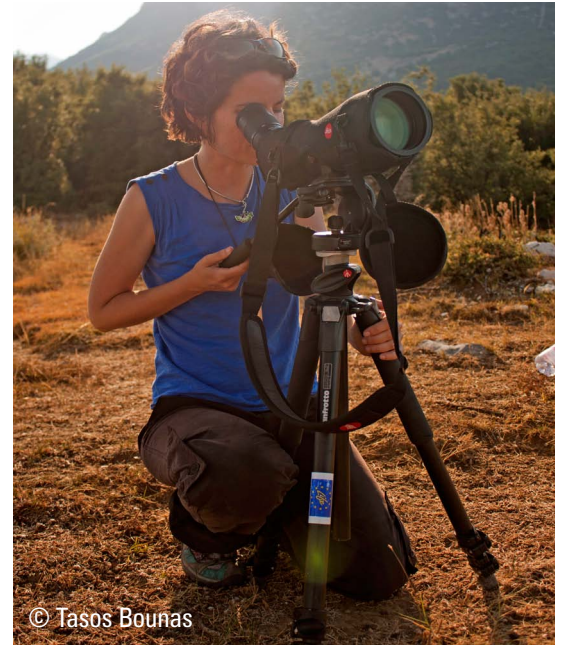
**Victoria Saravia**, *Project Coordinator for The Hellenic Ornithological Society/ BirdLife Greece (Associated beneficiary)*

### Living with Egyptian vultures is quite a challenge!

I spend most of my time in the office doing paperwork, but when I finally get out into the field, I realise that actually finding one of these birds in Greece has become as difficult as looking for a needle in a haystack!

For the past two years, ever since I started working for the LIFE+ project The Return of the Neophron, my life has been orbiting around this peculiar bird that was once as common as a buzzard but has now become as rare as a dodo.

The situation of the Greek population – and of the Balkan one for that matter, has become so critical that Egyptian vultures need all the help they can get, so if my small contribution can give some hope to the survival of this emblematic species, all my efforts and worries, long working days and arduous trips to the field will have been worth it!



© Tasos Bounas



© Dimitar Gradinarov

**Nikolai Terziev**, *Education and Communication Officer for Bulgaria:*

Hello!

My name is Nikolai and I work as Communications and Education Officer. I've been working for BSPB for eight years now, but I have dedicated my whole life to the conservation of nature. The reason for me to get involved with conservation is connected to my immense love for nature, as well as with my serious concern that mankind's false belief that nature's resources are endless will get us in trouble.

I believe that the loss of biodiversity is one of the serious challenges we face as humans. The Egyptian Vulture and its siblings in other parts of the world have a unique nature and help to keep the natural balance in our ecosystems. These precious raptors

fall victim to the same process, which robs the future generations of their natural (and cultural) heritage. But enough worries! Let me tell you about the four 'most' things in my life... some of which bring me joy and satisfaction:

1. The best thing about my work is that it allows me to make new friends from all spheres of life all the time; people who share my viewpoint towards life.
2. The worst moment in my work is when I face the apathy of a big part of our society – people who lack the will to change their lives for the better.
3. The greatest joy is when I manage to make more people from the latter group join the former in point one.
4. I love my friends, I love birds, whales, wild cats, dogs, seafood, melodic music, climbing, American football, mountains, forests and active, positive people who make the positive changes in our lives happen.

Wish me luck with point three!

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SPA

## SPA: MOST ARDA (BG0002071) by Nikolai Terziev

Most Arda Special Protection Area (SPA) is located in the heart of the Eastern Rhodope Mountains and covers a section of the Arda River valley – between Studen Kladenec and Ivaylovgrad Dams. The area includes the river course between the village of Rabovo and the town of Madzharovo along with the wooded mountain slopes and the rock masses of Iranov Ridge.

Most of the area is occupied by broadleaf dry-tolerant forests, arable land, grass and bush communities mixed with Mediter-

ranean flora like prickly juniper, white thorn and white jasmine. Among the animals that can be seen here are: southern crested newt, agile frog, five-streaked and Erhard's wall lizards, green whip snake, Hermann's and spur-thighed tortoises, roe deer, beech marten, forest dormouse, wild cat, red fox and several bat species.

Out of the 140 bird species here, 31 are included in the Bulgarian Red List

and 65 have conservation significance on a European level. Most Arda Area is an important site for the conservation of southern, cold-sensitive species including: black-eared wheatear, olive-tree warbler, masked shrike.

Vultures are among the most spectacular inhabitants of the area. Most Arda serves as one of the last fortresses for species with global priority for conservation, such as the Cinereous and the Egyptian Vultures.



© Svetoslav Spasov

The local people are kind and hospitable and, despite the dynamic human activity in the region, they have succeeded in preserving its high biodiversity along with the heritage left to us from the old cultures of antiquity.

## SPA: "TZENA AND PINOVO MOUNTAINS" (GR1240007, 20066 HA) by Lavrentis Sideropoulos

The Tzena and Pinovo Mountains (2182 m tall) are situated on the border of Greece and FYROM and consist predominantly of limestone formations with impressive gorges and crags. The mosaic of extensive broadleaf forests (oak and beech), high and lowland pasture and small-scale agriculture land hosts a very rich bird diversity, including several woodpecker species, as well as alpine and farmland passerine

species. The exceptional raptor diversity and the presence of the four European vulture species until recently (mid-2000s) in par-



© Lavrentis Sideropoulos

ticular led to the creation of a feeding site for vultures under LIFE97NAT/GR/004243.

Despite recent losses in the once rich diversity of birds (nowadays the Egyptian Vulture can be spotted only sporadically), raptors are still the crowning glory of the area; from the shy Levant Sparrowhawks darting in and out of the *Platanion orientalis* galleries along the riverbeds, to the

majestic resident Golden Eagle pair that soars above the screed slopes, scaring the ever-cackling rock partridges into silence...

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Cooperation

## THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE IS INCLUDED AS A TARGET SPECIES IN LIFE FOR KRESNA GORGE *by Emilian Stroynov*

**In 2003, the last remaining pair of Egyptian Vultures in the area of the Kresna SPA was confirmed to have raised two chicks near the village of Ilindentsi for the last time.**

In 2004, only the male bird arrived at the site and it was last seen there in 2007. After the re-introduction of the Griffon Vulture in Kresna Gorge and the creation of a feeding site for vultures in the area, the observations of non-breeding Egyptian Vultures increased from one individual in 2010 to three in 2013. The birds were obviously attracted in the area by the feeding site and the presence of a group of Griffon Vultures. The inspection of the identification rings on one of the birds registered here in 2013 revealed that it was ringed by Metodija Velevski (MES) as a fledgling in 2011 in the area of Demir Kapia in FYROM.

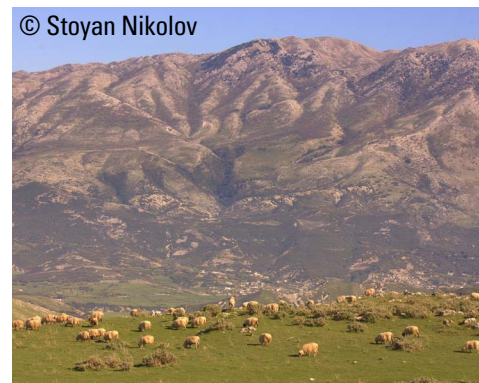
Besides the general restoration of the habitat of the vultures (including actions against poisoning, food-base restoration and optimisation and raising of public awareness), the LIFE for Kresna Gorge Project is also aiming towards the launch of a captive breeding facility and stock for the species. The LIFE for Kresna Gorge Project team collaborates with the team of The Return of the Neophron Project to ensure a better future for the Egyptian vulture in Bulgaria.

## ALBANIA EXPEDITION 2013 *by Stoyan Nikolov*

In April 2013, a second expedition in Southern Albania took place, joining the efforts of BSPB, HOS and PPNEA to update the number of breeding Egyptian vultures in the country.

A total of 8 active breeding territories were found, together with a large number of abandoned nests close to the border with Greece. Our estimation is that currently about 10 pairs breed in the country. Food supply in this part of Albania is rich because of the numerous herds of sheep and goats. The identified threats were related to sporadic poisoning and direct persecution, which is related to the practice of stuffed birds.

This is a good start for building capacity in Albania for work with the species and local communities, as well as for broader understanding of the threats.



## ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS IN ALBANIA AS MEANS FOR SPECIES AND HABITAT CONSERVATION *by Mirjan Topi*

A new project, **Land of Eagles and Castles: Pilot Sustainable Tourism Model for the Albanian Adriatic Coastline** (coordinated by the PPNEA in partnership with BSPB/BirdLife Bulgaria) was granted by the CEPF. The project is the result of collaboration of the two NGOs for the conservation of the Egyptian vulture (one of the flagship species of the current project) in the Balkans.

The aim is to deliver a model for establishing community-driven, nature-based tourism in three of the eight KBAs (Key Biodiversity Areas) identified along the Albanian coastline: (i) Narta Lagoon; (ii) Vlore Bay, Karaburun Peninsula and Cika Mountain areas; and (iii) Butrinti.

Building capacity and raising awareness of the local stakeholders about the importance and profits coming from the biodiversity components and encouraging sustainable livelihood activities through providing real examples will directly decrease disturbance, ensure indirect long-term conservation of the flagship species within the project KBAs and also decrease the degradation and loss of natural habitats.



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Fun

## PHOTO ESSAY "MY COLOURFUL WORLD" by Dimitar Nedelchev

You already know a lot about the feeding and nest guarding activities aimed at the last remaining Egyptian Vultures in the Balkans. Now let us present to you these activities from another point of view and reveal the colours of the world through the eyes and lens of Mitko Nedelchev (one of the first and most enthusiastic project associates).

### The Point

The Egyptian Vultures have taken me many places and I have kept something from each of them in my heart. For my daily monitoring of the birds I always choose a strategic, well-hidden place. In 2013, my first day in the field coincided with the initiative "Let's clean Bulgaria in one day". I dutifully picked up all of the garbage surrounding the observation point. The result shocked me – it was unbelievable that such a small area could hold so much rubbish. I hoped that by doing so, I'd help keep the area clean for a longer period of time.



© Pavel Gospodinov



### The view from the vultures' "porch"



This is the ledge on which I regularly bring out food for the vultures and monitor their feeding. It is inaccessible for land predators and the food I bring decreases the risk for the birds to suffer from food poisoning. The camouflage of the camera trap is a masterpiece. The vultures are very suspicious and wouldn't land at the faintest hint of something amiss at the feeding site. I set the traps close to the food so that I can capture all the features of the birds in detail. This camera trap revealed that Maya (vulture with ring B28, hatched in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains), came to nest in Northern Bulgaria.

### My temporary home



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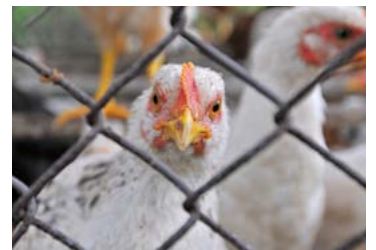
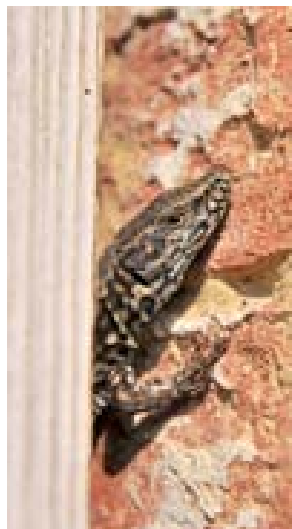
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Fun



I find accommodation in the villages close to the nest of the vultures; it's always in one of those plain-looking houses, which are not actually plain at all. This saves me travel time and allows me to get to know the local people and to win them over to our cause.

## Friends in fur and feathers



I spent over 300 days near the vultures and I can say that in all that time I communicated more with animals than I did with people! Indeed, I got to know my feathered and furred neighbours so well and our fortunes became as one as I bore witness to their secrets and revelations: the nursing cooperative of two cats, a mother and a daughter, who raised their young together and shared the task of suckling the kittens; the fearsome Sara (part Moscow Watchdog, part something else) who hated people and never let me touch her – unlike Darko, my landlord's other dog; then comes Oinkie – my landlord and his wife raised him from a small piglet and he followed them everywhere; there was also a small lizard on the wall by the door which bid me "Good morning" every day. Let us not forget the snail in the garden, which reminded me that the world is in a constant hurry and nobody stops to think about where they're going and whether or not they should stop or at least slow down their pace...

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Reading

## ...IN THE CANYON OF THE LOMOVETE by Krassimir Manev

April's breath smelled of spring. The mild warmth of the sun confirmed the beginning of the new season. I couldn't wait to arrive at the 'Point'. The trip from the city to the small village on the train seemed to last an eternity – even though it took only half an hour. The three kilometres on foot from the station to the village itself also seemed longer. I packed my bag and left. The vultures filled all my thoughts – since the moment I opened my eyes in the morning. Autumn and winter had melted away, taking with them day after day since I saw them off last year. The birds visited me twice in my dreams – perhaps because I had gotten so used to them in the four months we spent together last summer. Back then, they occupied every moment of my days – courtship, laying of the eggs, sunbathing, raising the young vulture which I named Becky... and Becky's departure - what a spectacular departure that was!



© Ivo Damyanov

In the beginning of September, summer was still reluctant to go. In the morning, Becky would perch on the rocks around the nest, here, there, then back here... He liked the edge at the northern end of the rock, with the swift current of the river underneath. Maybe it was the song of the water that pleased him, or the beautiful calm surface of the water after the rapids. He perched on a ledge and stayed for a while. Then he entered the nest for a minute. He went out and flew in a circle over the cliff. After two slow, gracious circles, he turned towards the neighbouring village southwards from the nest. A lump came to my throat. Becky was gone beyond a shadow of a doubt. I was deeply convinced that his slow, graceful wing beats were his way of saying goodbye. "Goodbye, friend. Goodbye... goodbye... goodbye..." With my eyes stuck to the south, I suddenly felt the tears running down on my cheeks, wetting the suntanned skin of my face. Becky's parents had left before him. I felt forsaken. I went to the Point for another ten days even though I was sure Becky wasn't coming back...

I was at the end of the village, by the bridge on the river. I saw two buzzards high in the sky. They were in the company of a vulture too. My hand shot for the binoculars. Manya! Becky's mother! It was definitely her! I shouted with joy. I admired their flight for a while and then started for the Point. With a heart full of joy and happiness I didn't feel how the three kilometers passed. The whisper of the river and the scent of the bushes charged me with positive energy. Manya made this charge even stronger. I stopped to rest before reaching the Point. There she was, next to the nest, drawing solemn circles in the skies. The buzzards were nearby.

April slipped by. The wild plums and the blackthorns shed their flowers on the floor of the canyon. Far above the river, in a remote niche, Manya was already giving her warmth to a new life. A new Becky. Last summer, I had given Manya's male partner the name Volodya, because some features of his character reminded me of Volodya Visotsky. He was a diligent replacement for Manya in the nest duties and shared the burden of incubation with her. Still, from time to time he just liked to set off and fly, fly, fly. Perhaps in this way, he shared his grace and magnificence with the whole canyon of the Lomovete. Perhaps...



# LIFE+ Project "THE RETURN OF THE NEOPHRON" LIFE10 NAT/BG/000152

