



LIFE  
Egyptian  
vulture  
project



Measures for the conservation of the Egyptian Vulture  
in Italy and the Canary Islands





The Egyptian Vulture is a small vulture that not many people outside expert circles will have heard of. This intelligent, docile creature, with its attractive yet somewhat bizarre looks, has long coexisted peacefully with Man. Ancient civilizations and peoples respected and sometimes even revered it.

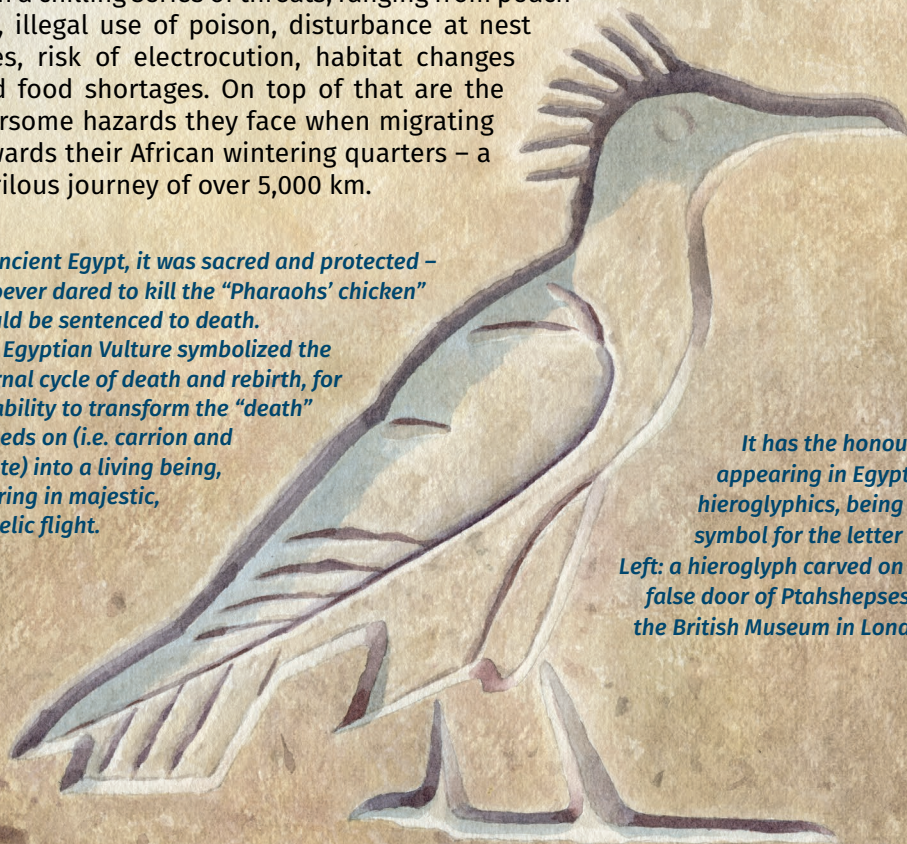
## on the wings of history

However, in the last few hundred years, Man's activities and infrastructures – as well as his barbarity – are putting this splendid bird's survival at risk: the Egyptian Vulture is a globally-threatened species, while in Italy it is teetering on the very verge of extinction. Since the 1950s, when there used to be 150 breeding pairs of Egyptian Vulture in various regions of central and southern Italy, mainly on the Tyrrhenian side, a rapid unstoppable decline has left only a dozen pairs.

They are concentrated in Sicily, with only two surviving pairs breeding on the Italian mainland, in Basilicata. Italy's few remaining individuals are having to deal with a chilling series of threats, ranging from poaching, illegal use of poison, disturbance at nest sites, risk of electrocution, habitat changes and food shortages. On top of that are the fearsome hazards they face when migrating towards their African wintering quarters – a perilous journey of over 5,000 km.

*In ancient Egypt, it was sacred and protected – whoever dared to kill the “Pharaohs’ chicken” would be sentenced to death.*

*The Egyptian Vulture symbolized the eternal cycle of death and rebirth, for its ability to transform the “death” it feeds on (i.e. carrion and waste) into a living being, soaring in majestic, angelic flight.*



*It has the honour of appearing in Egyptian hieroglyphics, being the symbol for the letter “A”.*

*Left: a hieroglyph carved on the false door of Ptahshepses, at the British Museum in London.*

Its unusual Italian name, capovaccaio (meaning “cowboy”), comes from its habit of mixing in with grazing flocks and herds; far from having any malicious intent, for the Egyptian Vulture, sheep and cattle are a food source in the form of excrement, insects and afterbirth.

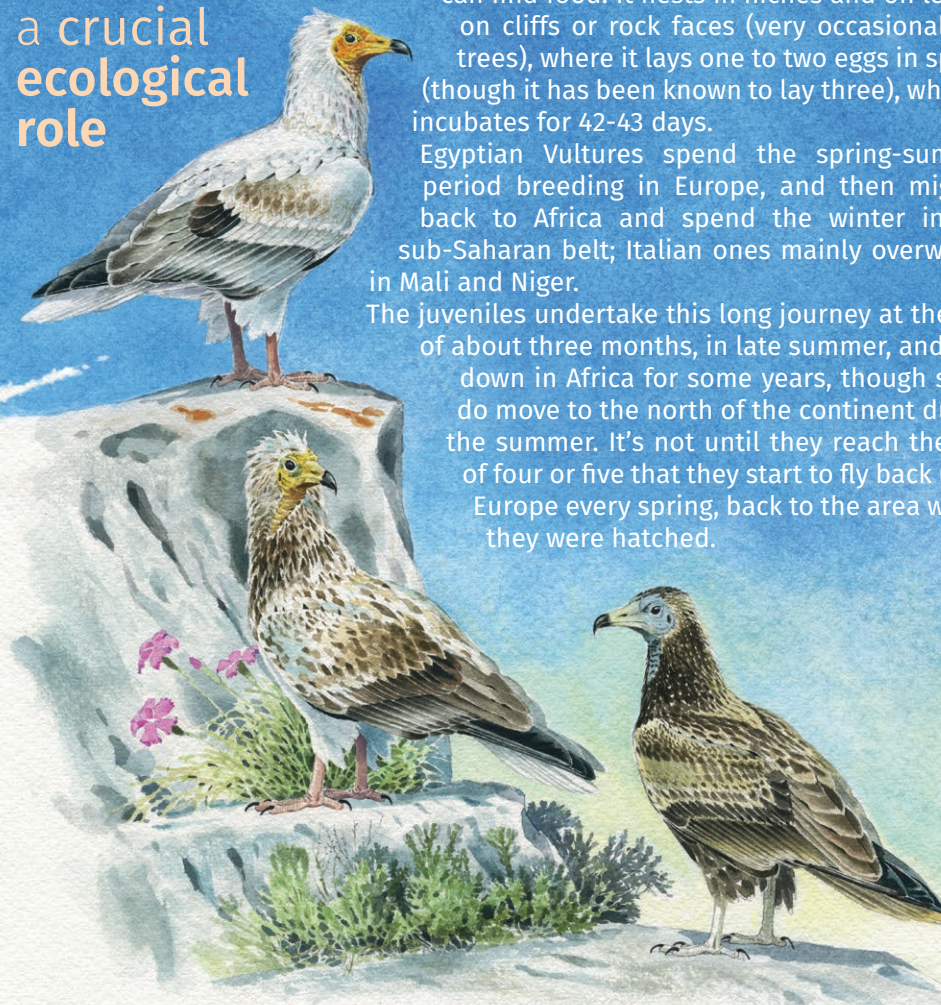
However, this little vulture's diet is mainly made up of carrion, just like its bigger cousins. Indeed, it helps to clean up the environment and stops diseases from spreading among domestic and wild populations – a crucial ecological role.

That explains why the Egyptian Vulture prefers open areas and pastures, where it can find food. It nests in niches and on ledges on cliffs or rock faces (very occasionally in trees), where it lays one to two eggs in spring (though it has been known to lay three), which it incubates for 42-43 days.

## a crucial ecological role

Egyptian Vultures spend the spring-summer period breeding in Europe, and then migrate back to Africa and spend the winter in the sub-Saharan belt; Italian ones mainly overwinter in Mali and Niger.

The juveniles undertake this long journey at the age of about three months, in late summer, and stay down in Africa for some years, though some do move to the north of the continent during the summer. It's not until they reach the age of four or five that they start to fly back up to Europe every spring, back to the area where they were hatched.



*The Egyptian Vulture is the smallest of Europe's four vultures, the only one to migrate, as well as having the most distinctive looks – black and white plumage, a yellow face, “disheveled” tufts of head feathers and pink legs characterize the adults, while the juveniles have brown plumage flecked with cinnamon, with blue-grey skin on their face and legs. In flight, though, its majestic elegance and broad wingspan (155-170 cm) stand out. The “guirre canario”, as the Canary Islands endemic subspecies is known, is slightly larger.*



## The areas involved in the project

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### Puglia

The Gravine Area (SCI/SPA) is the only area in Puglia where the Egyptian Vulture has bred in recent years. It occupies a vast area of the Murge plateau, intersected by rugged rocky gorges of karstic origin and grazed by cattle and sheep.

### Basilicata

The areas of Basilicata under the project are the only two remaining areas in mainland Italy where the Egyptian Vulture still breeds: the Gravine di Matera (SAC/SPA), in the Murgia Materana Regional Park, where a network of spectacular canyons skirt the city of Matera and wind down towards the Ionian Sea, and the SPA Appennino Lucano, in the Appennino Lucano-Val d'Agri-Lagonegrese National Park, with its imposing rockfaces, its hilltops and its valleys of pastureland.



SCI: Site of Community Importance;  
SAC: Special Area of Conservation, under the  
Habitat Directive (92/43/EEC);  
SPA: Special Protection Area, under the Birds  
Directive (74/409/EEC).

### Calabria

Actions in favour of the Egyptian Vulture are to be carried out along a stretch of the Apennines in the southern part of the Pollino National Park (SPA Pollino Orsomarso), featuring majestic cliff faces, spectacular gorges and extensive pastures, and in a hilly area in the north-eastern part of the Calabria region (Vallone Sant'Elia, SCI), where the Egyptian Vulture has bred in recent years.

### Sicilia

Some of the actions of the project will be carried out in the area of the Parco delle Madonie (SPA), in the Regional Park of the same name, which held a number of Egyptian Vulture nests in its rugged mountainous terrain until the early 20th century. At the western end of the island, close to the Lakes of Preola and Gorgi Tondi (SPA), a welcome stopover point for many migratory birds on their way either to or back from Africa, another feeding point for birds of prey will be created.



Barranco de las Peñitas, Fuerteventura

### Canary Islands

#### Canary Islands (Fuerteventura and Lanzarote)

Fuerteventura and Lanzarote are home to an endemic subspecies of the Egyptian Vulture (found only on these islands), known locally as the guirre canario. At first sight very similar to the European Egyptian Vulture, the Canary guirre differs from a genetic point of view, being larger and non-migratory, living here the whole year round. Until the 1950s, the Canary guirre bred on every island in the archipelago, but various human activities have led it to seek refuge now on only the two easternmost islands.

In recent decades, numerous protection programmes have led to a promising recovery. In 2018, the most numerous contingent, on the oldest Canary island of Fuerteventura, consisted of 68 pairs, while the smallest volcanic island, Lanzarote, hosts six pairs.



G. Ceccolini



## the actions planned under the project for Italy

### Protection of nesting sites

Trekking, free-climbing, nature photography and other activities near rockfaces that would otherwise be suitable breeding sites for the Egyptian Vulture may prevent new pairs from establishing a nest or else threaten the breeding success of established pairs. Nest sites need constant monitoring to prevent, identify and reduce the effects of any disturbances.

### Securing power lines

Some types of medium-voltage power poles can cause death by electrocution of any individuals that land on them.

In Italy, over 500 of these poles, located in particularly sensitive areas for the species, will be modified to make them safe perches for the Egyptian Vulture and for other large birds which are vulnerable to this threat.

### Food support

Habitat changes, the move away from extensive farming and health regulations that now require livestock carcasses to be incinerated, reduce the amount of food available to carrion-feeding raptors.

The project will build three supplementary feeding stations near nesting areas in Puglia, Basilicata and Calabria, which will help to achieve better breeding success rates. A further feeding point will be located in a strategic area of western Sicily, to serve as a refuelling station before undertaking the long migratory journey across to Africa. These feeding stations will also mean Egyptian Vultures can find food much closer to hand, without running any of the fatal risks that long foraging flights can involve.



### Captive breeding and release of individuals into the wild

The Italian Egyptian Vulture population has fallen to such low levels that it needs to be restocked by releasing young captive-bred birds into the wild. The complex and problematic captive (or “ex-situ”) breeding of the species is carried out by the CERM Association at a specialist centre in southern Tuscany where several young birds are hatched every year.

Releasing these young birds involves a period of adaptation in aviaries or rocky cavities, post-release feeding support and constant monitoring of their movements via GPS/GSM datalogger devices

which are fitted to them. Their migration is followed in real time and a network of naturalists, ornithologists, CUFA Carabinieri and others is ready to intervene to provide support and assistance.



### Tackling the illegal use of poison

The use of poisoned bait to kill animals regarded as “vermin” is a widespread, barbaric and illegal practice. Scavenging raptors are not usually targeted by poisoners but are “collateral” victims, i.e. they ingest poisoned bait scattered on the ground or else feed on the carcasses of animals which have died from eating the same poisoned bait. The project aims to prevent and combat this crime by using CUFA Carabinieri anti-poison dog units, running awareness-raising campaigns for the general public and training for park staff.



### Awareness-raising and sharing

Various activities will be carried out in the project areas aimed at informing, raising awareness among and directly involving both locals and visitors. A range of initiatives will disseminate information at European level on actions implemented and results obtained and will encourage constant comparison with other organizations working for Egyptian Vulture conservation.



Italy and the Canary Islands (Spain) are home to small isolated populations of Egyptian Vulture: in the first part of the 20th century, the number of pairs collapsed and its range was drastically reduced. Although these two areas are geographically far apart, the species is threatened by similar problems, mainly linked to human activities and infrastructures.

The Egyptian Vulture LIFE project implements concrete measures to prevent the extinction of the Egyptian Vulture in Italy and to consolidate the recent revival of the guirre canario. In Italy, the project covers Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily, while in the Canary Islands it covers the islands of Fuerteventura and Lanzarote.



N. Cillo



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REGIONE PUGLIA



REGIONE BASILICATA