

Starvation of Griffon Vultures in Aragón (N Spain)

What is a Griffon Vulture?

With a wingspan of 250 centimeters and a weight of some 6 kilos Griffon Vultures (*Gyps fulvus*) are one of the biggest birds living freely in Europe. They breed in colonies on ledges of huge rock walls and at daytime wander up to some 300 kilometers in search of food: carcasses of dead animals. They can eat the flesh in minutes, just leaving the clean bones. The problem about 20.000 Griffon Vultures who are living in Aragón (N.Spain) can't find enough food to raise their young. Hunger obliges them to get closer to farms to get food. They enter farms to eat recently dead animals, placentas and even seem to attack weak animals. Hundreds of sheep have already died of fear for attacking Vultures and farmers are becoming afraid for Griffon Vulture attacks. At the other hand, more immature Griffon Vultures were brought in to rehabilitation-centers in the autumn of 2006. Lack of food made them so weak they could be caught by hand. Without help many of them certainly would have died and it is unknown how many individuals have died in the fields. Less than half of the usual population of Griffon Vultures from the important colonies of Riglos and Guara started breeding in 2007, because most of the adults are too weak to produce eggs. It is expected that the ones started breeding will raise no young at all by lack of food. Other scavengers such as Lammergeir (Bearded Vulture), Egyptian Vulture and Black and Red Kite face, all protected and endangered species, figuring on European Red Lists, are facing the same problem. The Griffon Vultures are suffering from some other important problems. Many windmill parks built in the last years in Aragón work as a slaughterhouse for Vultures. Between 2000 and 2006 almost 1.000 Griffon Vultures were found dead at just five of these parks in the Zaragoza province. Electrical wires produce an unknown number of kills. Another important dead cause is the use of poisoned baits to kill foxes and wandering dogs. This illegal practice is recently spreading in Aragón, as in many parts of Spain, and is causing unknown but certainly important death on all kind of scavenger birds.

Starvation: Where it comes from

Since October 2005 the autonomous region of Aragón, situated in the North of Spain with the seize of Belgium and Holland together and about 2.3 million inhabitants, introduced a new law which makes it impossible to throw dead animals at the Muladares. Muladares are the traditional places around the villages where farmers bring their dead animals to be eaten by Vultures and other scavengers. In Aragón traditional livestock farming (sheep, goat) is still important and cows wander during the summer months freely in the high Pyrenees. In the year 2000 at least 200 traditional Muladares were in regular use, all closed today. With this new law (DECRETO 207/2005, de 11 de octubre, del Gobierno de Aragón., published in BOA number 128 the 28th of October 2005) the Aragón government suddenly stopped the essential food sources for Griffon Vultures and other scavengers. As all traditional Muladares were closed, no new measures on artificial feeding were taken or even thought of. Griffon Vultures breeding in Aragón and Spain About 80% of the European population of Griffon Vultures are breeding in Spain. Aragón, which includes the central Pyrenees, is one of the strongholds of the species. Since Griffon Vultures became protected, populations have grown enormously. National counts in 1979, 1989 and 1999 showed that the Spanish population doubles in less than 10 years. Figures of 1999 showed 22.455 breeding pairs for the whole of Spain. Aragón counted for 25% of this population. Birds from Aragón have been used for reintroduction programs elsewhere in Europe, eg. in Italy. Few recent

counts on breeding Griffon Vultures in Aragon are available but their downfall is obvious: Griffon vulture nests and breeding success in the Pyrenees of Aragon: Riglos: 2000-2002 92 pairs and 58 young 2006: 74 pairs and 38 young 2007: 40 pairs and 0? young Guara - San Martin de la Valdonsera 1999 89 pairs and 75 young 2007 15 pairs and 0? young

Protests Hungry Griffon Vultures and their presumed attacks on ill and weak livestock has been a hot item in the Aragon newspapers for the last year, some examples are added to this writing. The Farmer Association as well as all Nature Protection explained they didn't agree with the way the new law has been introduced. The regional Minister (Consejero) of Agriculture of Aragon Mr. Gonzalo Arguilo, responded the problems were exaggerated and no dead animals at all may be left in the field (newspaper Heraldo de Aragon, 31-01-2007). This is contrary to European Commission Decision, which mentions scavenging birds as a legal method for destruction of dead livestock. The Aragon Government have started working on the introduction of some ten new artificial feeding sites, Muladares, which in future will be supplied with garbage of slaughter-houses. Actual situation and future Feeding of garbage from slaughter-houses on artificial Muladares, organized by the Government of Aragon can by no means be sufficient for all the birds who feed on dead animals in the region. As long as the regional Government of Aragon will not take the problem seriously and use the European Directive, as can be done in this case, young Griffon Vultures will starve to death on their nest and full grown exhausted individuals will be picked-up from the ground not being able to fly anymore. Attacks on weak and ill livestock at farms will continue to occur. It is important to point out that the COMMISSION DECISION of 25 November 2005 amending Decision 2003/322/EC as regards the feeding of certain necrophagous birds with certain category 1 material, published in the Official Journal of the European Union 26.11.2005, has been written especially for situations as we find it in Aragon: In order to improve the availability of feed to endangered or protected species, ensure that carcasses of bovine and at least 4% of carcasses of ovine and caprine animals intended to be used for feeding are tested prior to that use with a negative result. It has to be added that by transporting carcasses in ordinary trucks, not cooled, all kind of carcasses mixed and at temperatures that in the Ebro Valley of Aragon rise to over 40 degrees Celsius in summer, this introduction of the new law (DECRETO 207/2005, de 11 de octubre, del Gobierno de Aragon) is increasing the risk of spreading animal deceases in stead of decreasing it. We already noted that municipals are not willing to authorize artificial feeding sites on their ground because these risks of contamination.

Conclusion and solution

Our conclusion is the Aragon Government is not acting according to the letter nor to the sense of European COMMISSION DECISION of 25 November 2005, speaking about '... improve the availability of feed to endangered or protected species ...'. It is quite cynical to see how the EU spend millions on reintroduction programs and LIVE-projects on endangered bird species, as the Griffon Vulture and the Lammergeir, which populations are now seriously threatened by the decision of a Regional Government. From the point of view of food for the Griffon Vultures and other scavenger birds, it is important that traditional Muladares will be re-opened. Instead of closing this Muladares, decease controls on carcasses as mentioned above can take place, a system already adopted by France and the Spanish Region La Rioja (N. Spain). In combination with traditional Muladares, some artificial feeding-sites can be established. The point of view of the Farmer Association is that all traditional Muladares, where

needed, should be opened under decease control as stated by the European Commission.

Signed: Independent experts on Vultures and scavenger birds, march 2007: Wil Luijff, FFF@antenna.nl [Fast Forward Foundation, the Netherlands] Kees Woutersen, keeswoutersen@auna.com [www.birdingpyrenees.com] Fondo Amigos del Buitre (FAB), fab@fondoamigosdelbuitre.org [www.fondoamigosdelbuitre.org] Alvaro Camiña, acamia@vodafone.es [biologist and investigator] Griffon Vultures trying to find some food on a waste dump, behavior never seen before Fondo de Amigos del Buitre (FAB) is a NGO in Aragon which keeps on fighting to prevent the 20.000 the Griffon Vultures of Aragon starving to death. We ask other organizations to help, writing a letter of support to: fab@fondoamigosdelbuitre.org. We appreciate articles in newspapers and magazines on the subject to make the problem know to all. Please send us a copy so everybody in Aragon can see how other Europeans think about it.