



Bearded vulture

Gypaetus barbatus

One of the world's most impressive birds of prey, the bearded vulture was nearly hunted to extinction in Europe, a victim of human misunderstanding. According to popular belief, this magnificent bird of prey was responsible for decimating flocks of sheep, carrying off lambs and pushing adults off cliffs – hence its German name, "Lämmergeier" or "lamb vulture" – and even attacking human beings and carrying off children! Its persecutors realized too late that the bird, which they saw feeding on sheep, was in fact doing them a great favour by cleaning up dead carcasses: this reduced the incidence of disease and infection among the rest of their flocks. By the early 20th century only one substantial population was left, in the Spanish Pyrenees.

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Where to look: Today, thanks to successful reintroduction efforts, bearded vultures may be seen throughout the year in mountainous regions of France, Switzerland, Austria and Italy. They require areas where there are sufficient prey – ibex, chamois, wild sheep and feral domestic animals – and predators such as the lynx or even the highly endangered wolf, since the vultures generally feed on carrion. They prefer steep escarpments and warm valleys which generate thermal uplift during the day, allowing them to hunt and scavenge over extensive areas. Their breeding sites normally lie between 1,000 and 2,000m, and their home range may reach 300 to 400 square kilometres.

What to look for: The bearded vulture's brownish-black wings, tail and back contrast sharply with a brilliant orange-yellow body and yellowish, sometimes almost white head. The ferocious-looking eyes (which belie the bird's non-aggressive nature) are offset by a scarlet ring surrounded by a black mask from which long bristles extend forward to form a beard. Their large, wedge-shaped tails distinguish them from other large vultures and eagles. Sexes are similar, but juveniles are darker and more uniform in colour than adults. The vultures can sometimes be seen dropping bones too large to swallow onto rocks from a high altitude – a unique behaviour giving the bird access to nutrient-rich marrow.

Threats: The bearded vulture is highly vulnerable to disturbance, and is always among the first species to disappear when conditions deteriorate – such as when its food supply is reduced. Although most people today are aware of its great ecological value, it still runs the risk of being shot by the occasional hunter or farmer. Today, however, the major threat facing the bearded vulture is from electrical wires and ski-lift cables which criss-cross its habitat: these have already caused the deaths of several young vultures released as part of reintroduction programmes.

What we can do:

1. **Stop the shooting.** With public awareness campaigns, we can continue to educate our neighbours about the bird's essential role in the alpine ecosystem.
2. **Protect the vulture's habitat and food supply.** This includes protecting prey species and other predators, preventing disturbance of the breeding sites, and finding ways to minimize the dangers from overhead wires and cables.
3. **Support reintroduction programmes.** Within the last decade, a major international effort has successfully reinstated the bearded vulture into several parts of its former range; today there are more than twenty immature birds of this species in the Alps. Such efforts require our long-term support. Their success will be complete when the bearded vulture can once again reproduce in its natural habitat.

Based on material provided by Dr David Stone, consultant to IUCN – The World Conservation Union