

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS, NOTES AND REPORTS

### New record of African White-backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*) in Europe

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The African White-backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*) was the most common vulture in Africa, with a wide distribution along the entire Sahel region, into East and Southern Africa (IUCN, 2014). From the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, this species has exhibited declines across much of its range, from 50% to 90% in different regions (Nikolaus 2006, Thiollay 2006, Virani *et al.*, 2011, Ogada *et al.* 2015). Due to this situation, the global conservation category of this vulture has been decreased to Endangered (IUCN, 2014).

Outside the African range, in Europe, few records exist of African White-backed Vultures. The first recorded observation of this species in Europe was in October 2006, with one bird photographed at the most southwesterly point of Portugal, San Vicente Cape (Jara *et al.* 2008).

After this first observation, three more records have been collected on the north side of Gibraltar Strait (southern Spain): an immature, possibly a 2<sup>nd</sup> year bird, in September 2008; a 2<sup>nd</sup> year bird killed by a wind turbine in June 2009 (Dies *et al.* 2011) and another immature bird in September 2011 (Gutiérrez *et al.* 2013). More recently, in May 2014, the first observation of the species in North Africa was recorded at Tetouan in northern Morocco, on the southern side of Gibraltar Strait (El Khamlichi *et al.* 2014).

Here we report a new observation of an African White-backed Vulture in southeast Portugal, in the protected area of Moura/Mourão/Barrancos, close to the Spanish border (N 38.2280, E 7.1570).

On August 24<sup>th</sup> 2014, whilst at the Biological Station of Garducho (Mourão Council), we observed a group of 70 Eurasian Griffons (*Gyps fulvus*) landing at a cow carcass, approximately 200 m from the building.

During initial observations, whilst using a telescope to search for tagged birds, we noticed a vulture that was clearly different to the other vultures present. Closer observation enabled more details and

characteristics to be observed, and these revealed a bird with a darker face than the Eurasian Griffons in addition to streaked chest feathers with a narrow light area along the centre of these feathers (Figure 1). The vulture was also much smaller in size compared to the other vultures close to it (Figure 2). The age of this African White-backed Vulture was estimated as a 2-3 years (A. Botha personal communication).



**Figure 1:** *Gyps africanus* photographed in Portugal

This new observation in SE Portugal is the 5<sup>th</sup> record of this species in

Europe. It is also the most northerly observation and the first outside the

Gibraltar Strait and San Vicente Cape areas, which are both in the southern Iberian Peninsula.

These areas, and especially because the Gibraltar Strait is the most important bird migration corridor in Western Europe (Zalles & Bildstein 2000), have important

concentrations of vultures during spring and autumn migrations. They are also adjacent to the most important breeding population of vultures in the southern Iberian Peninsula, with almost 2000 breeding pairs of Eurasian Griffons (Garrido & Romero 2009).



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**Figure 2:** *Gyps africanus* next to *Gyps fulvus* photographed in Portugal

Although the occurrence of African White-backed Vultures in the Iberian Peninsula is a relatively recent situation, it is not new for other typically African vulture species, such as the Rüppell's Griffon (*Gyps rueppellii*). The first recorded

observation of Rüppell's Griffon in Spain was in 1990 (Fernández 1998) and in the subsequent decade, no fewer than 23 observations have been confirmed in Spain and Portugal (Gutiérrez 2003). Since that time, there has been a notable

increase in records of Rüppell's Griffon in the Iberian Peninsula, with most of the observation around the Gibraltar Strait area (De Juana 2006, Gutiérrez *et al.* 2010). An unsuccessful breeding attempt has also been recorded in eastern central Portugal (Costa *et al.* 2003), whilst several records of this species exist in southeast France in 2013 from a bird that was wing-tagged in Portugal (Godino & Machado 2013, Godino & Machado *in prep.*).

Gutiérrez (2003) suggests that the increasing number of Rüppell's Griffon sightings in Europe is due to the species associating with increasing wintering population of Eurasian Griffons in West Africa; more than 5000 Eurasian Griffons cross the Gibraltar Strait during autumn migration (Camiña, 2004). This migratory population comes into contact in its wintering areas with local Rüppell's Griffon populations (Roy 2005), and when the Eurasian Griffons return to Europe in the spring, some Rüppell's Griffons join them on this return.

The relatively recent and still few observations of African White-backed Vultures in the Iberian Peninsula could be a precursor of a similar process. In both cases the first records have occurred in the same geographical area (the

Gibraltar Strait) and during similar periods – the end of summer and early autumn (Jara *et al.* 2008, Dies *et al.* 2011, Gutiérrez *et al.* 2013). In this context, another raptor species, the North African Long-Legged Buzzard (*Buteo rufinus cirtensis*), had a similar process in the past and has been recently recorded breeding in the Gibraltar Strait area in southern Spain (Elorriaga & Muñoz, 2010).

Both Rüppell's Griffon and African White-backed Vulture populations are in strong decline across West Africa (Nikolaus, 2006; Thiollay, 2006; IUCN, 2014, Ogada *et al.* 2015), almost certainly in areas where these populations come into contact with wintering Eurasian Griffons. However, in spite of these population declines, the number of Rüppell's Griffons seen in the Iberian Peninsula is increasing (De Juana 2006, Gutiérrez *et al.* 2010). These contrary situations indicate that a range of factors is very likely to be responsible, and it has been suggested that the influence of global climate change should be investigated (Ramírez *et al.* 2011).

With vulture populations, and in particular the African White-backed Vulture, undergoing declines in West Africa, the new record reported here could be an indicator of an

increasing movement pattern into Europe for this species, in the same way as Rüppell's Griffon. Due to the critical situation of the African White-backed Vulture, it is urgently necessary to research the reasons of this process, in particular the evolution of vulture populations in southwest Europe with movements of African vultures into this region.

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