

BirdLife

T H E M A G A Z I N E

JULY-SEPTEMBER 2020



REVEALED:

OUR MOST AMBITIOUS CAMPAIGN EVER
– HOW IT WILL CHANGE LIVES, AND
HOW IT CAN BECOME A REALITY

#1PLANET 1RIGHT

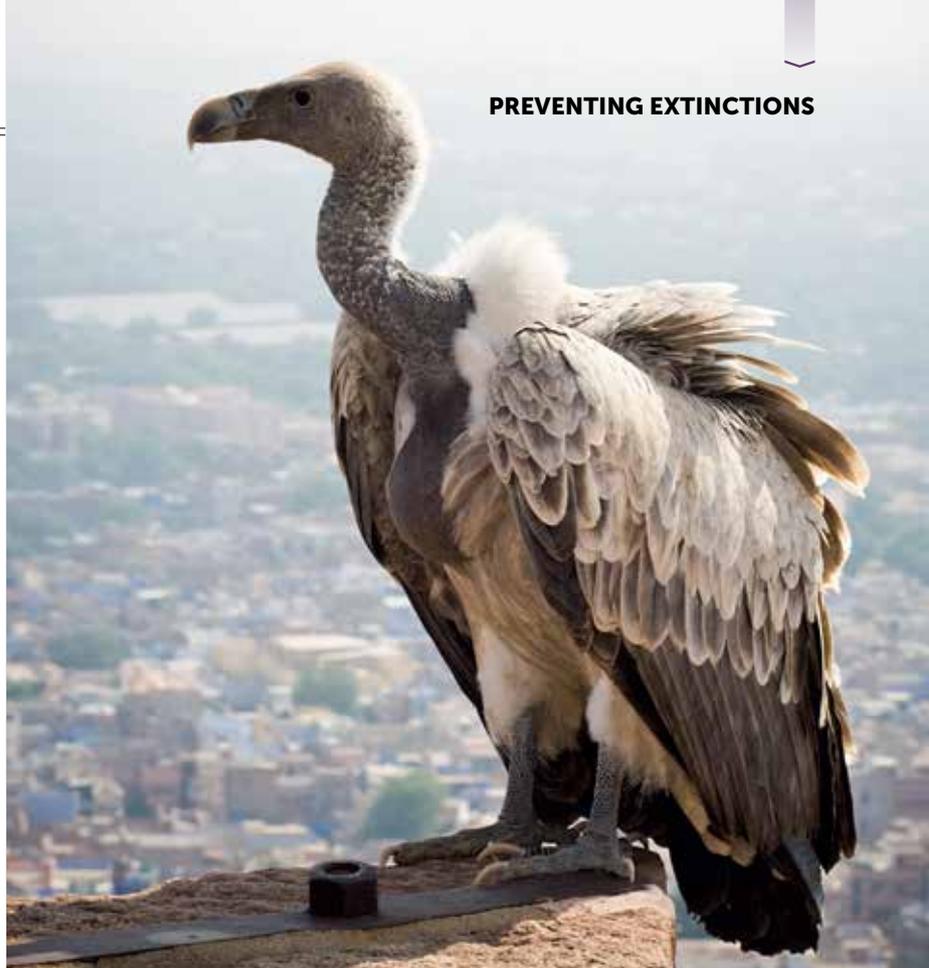
A NEW HOPE FOR VULTURES

A landmark policy resolution could prove a major step forward towards our mission of ensuring vultures are safe from poisoning across their entire range

Rachel Gartner



Photo Bjorn Olesen



Vultures carry an air of invincibility about them. To see these majestic raptors soar above us, you would be forgiven for thinking nothing could harm them – but recent history has shattered that illusion. The well-documented Asian vulture crisis of the 1990s - which saw the Indian subcontinent's populations plummet from abundance to the edge of extinction in the space of a decade, should have been a wake-up call to the world on the catastrophic impact poisoning can have on these ecologically-important birds – but as we entered 2020, we still lacked the robust intergovernmental policy required to safeguard these scavengers. All this began to change at a critical migratory species summit this past February.

Before we get into that, a recap for the uninitiated; while many vulture poisoning incidents are intentional, such as that which claimed the lives of large numbers of Hooded Vultures in Guinea-Bissau earlier this year, the poisoning incidents that saw Asian vulture numbers drop by 99% were purely accidental. The cause was diclofenac – a common non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug used in livestock – which is lethal to vultures that feed on the bodies of cattle that die soon after being dosed. The result is that just one contaminated carcass can wipe out an entire flock of vultures.

BirdLife and its partners in South Asia including the Bombay National History Society and Bird Conservation Nepal (BirdLife in India and Nepal

respectively), supported by the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and all working under the Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction (SAVE) consortium, have managed to slow and even halt those declines, bringing about increases, in certain areas like Nepal where decisive sustained actions have been taken, most notably getting veterinary diclofenac effectively banned and local vets and communities behind these measures through 'Vulture Safe Zone' initiatives and activities. However, the drug – and other NSAIDs* which are definitely or potentially harmful to vultures – are still being widely used elsewhere in the world, putting many vultures in peril and compromising the good work being performed in other vulture-range states.

For several years, BirdLife International has been pushing for a strong intergovernmental policy on the use of veterinary NSAIDs. And in February this year, a resolution adopted by the thirteenth Conference of Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS COP13) covered their use and regulation as never before, offering new hope for African-Eurasian vultures.

The resolution at the CMS COP13 outlined three key actions that perfectly reflect what BirdLife and SAVE have been calling for: tests on all existing veterinary NSAIDs to determine which are harmful to vultures and which are safe, withdrawing licensing for veterinary use from those (including diclofenac) that are vulturetoxic or implementing adequate risk assessment; safety testing of any new

← CMS COP13, the event where the resolution was adopted, took place in Gandhinagar, India this past February
Photo CMS

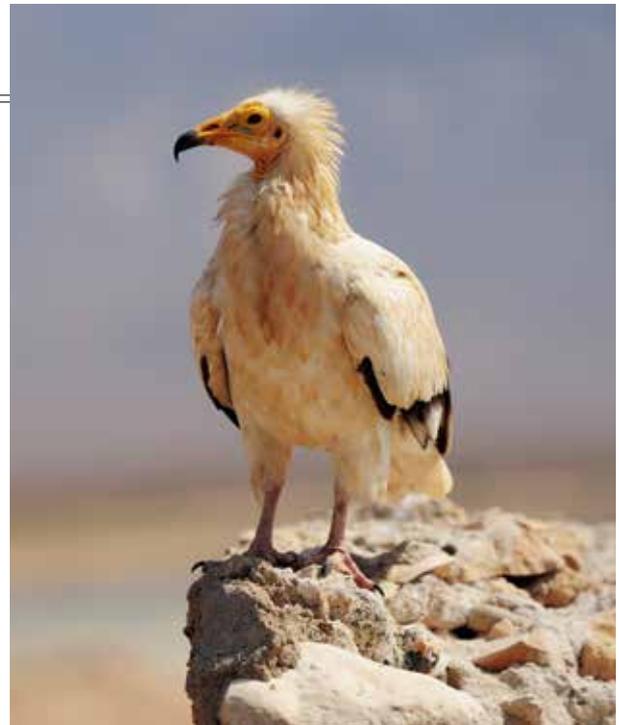
↩ Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*
Photo LeAndr/Shutterstock

↑ Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus* in Rajasthan
Photo ErickN/Shutterstock

QUICK FACT

***WHAT ARE NSAIDS?**
Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, a family of drugs used in both people and animals to treat pain and inflammation.

Photo Shutterstock



veterinary NSAIDs before they are licensed; and the identification and the promotion of safe alternative drugs. It also supports the actions proposed in the CMS Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures.

All three steps are necessary for the long-term conservation of African-Eurasian vultures, but according to Roger Safford, Senior Programme Manager in BirdLife's Preventing Extinctions Programme, the safety testing of both new and existing NSAIDs is particularly key: "We need to look at all the veterinary anti-inflammatories and withdraw from veterinary use the ones that are toxic to vultures. If we replace diclofenac with another drug that is just as toxic to vultures, then we just perpetuate the problem."

Once we know which drugs are harmful, governments of vulture range states can ban their use in livestock and suggest safe alternatives, keeping vultures out of harm's way.

But this resolution is just the first step in a long process and there is still much work to do. We now need to ensure that governments follow up on the commitment, against the powerful pharmaceutical lobby.

And this could be tricky. Despite knowing the risks of diclofenac, several European countries still approved it for use in cattle in 2014. Worryingly, it is now becoming widely used by vets in Spain and Italy, countries with large vulture populations. Such use being permitted in Europe, increases the chances of similar licensing in Africa.

Iván Ramírez, BirdLife's Head of Conservation for Europe & Central Asia, explains that part of the problem is that veterinary associations are pressing governments not to ban products. "Their rationale is that diclofenac wouldn't have such a severe impact on vulture populations in Europe as it did in Asia because of the way

↖ **Bearded Vulture**
Gypaetus barbatus Can be found in mountainous regions of Europe (and this past July, in Derbyshire, UK!) Photo Michael Ninger/ Shutterstock

↗ **Egyptian Vulture**
Neophron percnopterus Photo via Shutterstock

→ **At CMS COP13, Indian PM Narendra Modi pledged that his country would take a leading role on the conservation of species on the Central Asian Flyway - and also mentioned vultures during the inauguration. India has taken over presidency of CMS COP for the next three years**
Photo Vicky Peavoy



livestock is managed in Europe. But there is scientific evidence suggesting that Eurasian Griffons, for example, could decline by 7% per year if exposed to this drug. This is an unnecessary risk considering it takes only a tiny proportion of dosed carcasses accidentally being left out to kill large numbers of vultures.

There's no excuse for continuing to allow these drugs to be used, with several affordable and safe alternative anti-inflammatory drugs available which don't compromise animal welfare, food standards or public health. And healthy vulture populations offer numerous benefits to people: by their unsurpassed scavenging efficiency, disposing of tens of thousands of tonnes of dead animals every year, they clean up the environment and help to reduce disease transmission at carcasses.

Following on from the resolution, we are urging governments and veterinary pharmaceutical companies to join our efforts and take the responsible course of action. We're developing best practice for how to do this, providing information to governments who are also interested in banning toxic veterinary NSAIDs, and testing various NSAIDs to determine whether or not they're safe. We'll be doing all we can, both in political arenas and on the ground, to make sure old world vultures are protected – throughout their range. ■

We would like to thank Species Champions, Sean Dennis and Barry Sullivan, for their ongoing funding and support of our work with vultures. BirdLife's efforts are made possible in part by its membership of the Restore Species partnership, which works to prevent extinctions caused by illegal and unsustainable trade and hunting, and poisoning.