

Vulture numbers are cut to the bone

Extinction fears for a scavenger vital to preserving ecosystems

Robin McKie

South Africa's national lottery is claiming an unlikely victim: vultures. Local people – convinced these birds' superb eyesight gives them the gift to see the future – are eating vulture meat to acquire the power of clairvoyance. And they are not alone. In neighbouring Zimbabwe, voters fearful of supporting the losing side in recent elections ate vulture meat, mainly heads, talons, eyes and hearts, believing this would enable them to pick the winning party. Then there has been the rise of traditional medicines, for which vulture parts are highly valued, as well as soaring cases of poisoning and shootings by starving farmers in East and West Africa. In addition, in South Asia over the past five years, the use of the painkiller diclofenac in cattle has wiped out three species of vulture and reduced the remaining two species to a few dozen pairs of breeding birds. The drug, it was discovered recently, destroys the birds' kidneys.

In short, the vulture – the ultimate scavenger, for ever associated with pitiless opportunism - has been sent spiralling towards extinction, say ornithologists. 'Something very, very bad is happening to the vulture,' said Guy Rondeau, of Afrique Nature International. 'There has been an almost total collapse in numbers in many parts of the world.' The consequence of this dramatic decline is not merely an issue that should concern wildlife enthusiasts, add scientists.

Vultures' ability to pinpoint corpses as they circle hundreds of feet in the air, combined with their power to strip carcasses clean of their flesh in minutes, mean they are vital in limiting the spread of diseases in livestock. With vultures around, corpses don't get a chance to rot and act as reservoirs for disease.

This problem has reached the level of a major ecological issue in South Asia, as ornithologist Mark Anderson, based in South Africa, points out. 'In India the cow is sacred and cannot be eaten. So it was traditionally left to vultures to eat their corpses. Without vultures, packs of feral dogs have taken over.' These packs are 'destroying livestock and wildlife, harassing people and sometimes spreading rabies and other diseases,' added Chris Bowden, a vulture expert with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. In addition, the Parsees of India, who leave their dead on 'towers of silence' to be picked clean by vultures, have had to develop alternatives. In Mumbai, one group bought six 'solar concentrators' – mirrors – to cremate corpses using sun power. 'It is only in the West that we look at the vulture with revulsion,' said Rondeau. 'In many countries they are venerated.' The ancient Egyptians worshipped the vulture, while shamans in hunter-gatherer tribes attributed the powers of clairvoyance to them. Many countries, including Mali, have vultures as their national emblem, although the

bird has all but disappeared from its skies. 'Vultures have completely deserted the colonies on the cliffs around our village,' said Diomande, a hunter from the Bafing region of south-west Mali. 'We don't see any today. We think they are angry at the way we treat the land.'

A measure of this loss is provided by recent surveys which indicate that vulture numbers have dropped by 95 percent in West Africa. 'It also appears there has been a similar, drastic reduction in East Africa,' added Anderson. 'The situation is catastrophic,' said Francis Lauginie, of Afrique Nature International. 'Conservation efforts have to be urgently introduced. This could have irreversible consequences for regional ecosystems and communities.'

The exact causes of the disappearance of the vulture in Africa are unclear. 'In Asia, diclofenac was responsible,' said Rondeau. 'But that is not the case in Africa. It is hardly used there. There seems to be a number of causes. The need for vulture flesh to satisfy markets for traditional medicines, their links with clairvoyance, hunting, and deliberate poisoning are probably all involved.' The result has been plummeting numbers of a species that may look unpleasant but which has some heart-warming qualities: vultures mate for life while mothers and fathers share nest duties. 'They are

phenomenal parents,' says South African wildlife expert Kerri Wolter, in an article in the journal *Science*.

There is one encouraging piece of news. Vultures have started to prosper in Europe. Conservation programmes in Spain and France have been so successful that wild vultures have been spotted even in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. The vulture may be dying out in Asia and Africa, but it could soon appear in Britain, it seems.

Rich pickings

- Although ungainly on the ground, vultures can soar with astonishing grace and to remarkable heights. One jet collided with a vulture at 10,000 m (six miles).
- The Beatles were originally to play the four vultures in Walt Disney's *Jungle Book* but had to drop out because of schedule difficulties. Other actors took over and the vultures were portrayed as a homage to the Beatles.
- One of the most unlikely uses of the species's name was by John McEnroe, who denounced Wimbledon umpires for being 'the pits of the world - vultures!'
- Prometheus was punished for stealing fire from the gods by having a vulture eat his liver for eternity.

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