

Poison blamed for decline of Spain's majestic Black Vultures

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Spain's biggest bird of prey, the endangered Black Vulture, has suffered a "catastrophic" decline in numbers because of illegal poisoning by hunters. The use of poisoned bait to kill foxes, badgers, wild dogs, feral cats and smaller birds of prey has reduced the population by almost a half in the past decade, says the Foundation for Conservation of the Black Vulture. The foundation has stepped up its campaign against poisoning after more hunters employed the practice to eliminate the natural predators of the rabbits and partridges they breed to shoot. "The problem is that the Black Vulture flies low seeking tiny prey, precisely the small creatures that have died from consuming the poison," says Juan Jose Sanchez, president of the foundation. "It's a tragedy that 600 have died in a population that barely reaches 1,500 throughout Spain." The scourge is

particularly severe in Catalonia, where the bird, which can boast a wingspan of three metres, is being reintroduced into oak forests after it was wiped out a century ago. The hunters breed partridges and rabbits in farms then release them into hunting enclosures. Because the animals lack defence instincts and have not been toughened up through natural selection they are easy prey for nature's predators, which is why humans seek to kill off the competition even though it is an offence to poison wild animals, punishable by up to two years' jail. The usual practice of hanging lumps of poisoned sausage has been blamed for the deaths of wild mountain cats, common genets, and eagles. Twenty people have been caught in Catalonia laying down poison in the last four years, sometimes surrounded by dead animals including another protected bird of prey, the Red Kite.

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