

## *The vulture restaurant*

*Pilar R. Quirós*

***The threat of Mad Cow disease threatened them too. But they survived, thanks to a chain of feeding points established by the Junta de Andalucía, which has become a true restaurant chain for the vultures of the region***

The Mad Cow disease indirectly seriously affected an entire species in Andalucía. As a result of the scare, the Delegation of Agriculture in the Junta de Andalucía decreed that all dead farm animals should be removed from the fields immediately, thereby removing a large part of the staple diet of the vultures of Andalucía. Tipheads, another valuable source of food for vultures, were also sealed. The situation became very serious for these magnificent birds in a very short period of time, and something had to be done to save them. The Environment Delegation came up with the answer, which was a network of feeding points (tipheads) throughout the region, just like the one set up by Icona, the body in charge of mountain regions in those times, had done in El Chorro 25 years ago. That experiment in feeding had been very successful in maintaining the Griffon Vulture population alive, in serious danger of extinction in the region at that time.

The El Chorro experiment was followed by another feeding point in Ronda and Casares, and then the Junta de Andalucía decided to extend the network to Sedella and El Torcal. Another was deemed necessary in Cañete, and today this network of feeding points has become the best restaurant chain for vultures in the province. The present

head of the Carrion Bird Recuperation Centre (CRAC), El Boticaró, is Chelo Atencia, who, with her husband Saturnino Moreno, also acts as guide for visitors wishing to see these magnificent creatures at their feeding points.

One of the best of these tipheads is in Ronda, on a piece of private land. It stinks, which is a measure of its worth. The owners of the land are a Dutch couple, the Mesdags, who know that a tiphead for most people is a source of essential food for other species. Their love for the Griffon Vultures prompted them to allow a hilltop on their land to be used as a feeding point.

The sun is beating down on the visiting party, now sheltering in the shade of a large oak tree. The Griffon Vultures, apparently oblivious to the heat, are flying majestically overhead. Here in El Lagarín, the vultures enjoy a wide area of land with no telephone poles or overhead electrical cables. Here too they can eat at leisure.

The few oak trees in the region are bare, which means they have been taken over by the vultures, who weigh about eight kilograms and have a wing-span of three metres. Their beaks are strong, and very useful in tearing the dead meat they find apart. Their heads are light grey coloured, contrasting with the dark brown of the wings. They are gregarious

birds who like to live in colonies, and in recent years, their numbers have risen to acceptable levels in this part of the world, currently estimated to be 65 pairs in the province of Malaga.

“The setting up of the network of tipheads has allowed the Griffon vulture population to grow quite a lot, and we have also improved the situation of the Egyptian Vulture population, with four pairs now nesting in the area. We are now heavily committed to seeking out those people who lay poison traps. All hunting organisations and farmers involved in this will lose any grants they may be getting from the state,” says the Environment Delegate, Juan Ignacio Trillo.

One of the curious facts about this species is that they mate for life and have their young every year. In order to care for their young, they have to have a plentiful supply of meat, which they have always obtained from scavenging. They normally nest close to feeding grounds, and since their new feeding grounds are now those set up by the Environment Delegation of the Junta de Andalucía, these areas are where they now tend to nest. One of them is close to the tiphead in Casares. “Here they are forced to compete with the wind generators, and they usually lose,” we are told by Chelo. “We have had seven deaths in this area in the past few years, all caused by wind generators,” he says, adding that he is very nervous of these giant blades and expects more vultures to be killed by them in the future.

Another vulture restaurant is the tiphead in El Torcal, at the foot of the

Sedella Mountain. It was set up five years ago, and has been working very successfully since then. This is a beautiful part of the Tejeda-Almijara nature park, and here more than 300 vultures feed. A female vulture was taken to the park from the Jerez zoo in the hope that she might nest and lay eggs here, but the experiment failed when the chick died. In fact, no vultures have nested in this park for the past 40 years, although the CRAC personnel are hoping that the female brought from the zoo will lay more fertile eggs in the near future.

The top vulture restaurant, nevertheless, is the one in Cañete la Real. The bulk of the food served here comes from a pig slaughter-house run by Zamudio, who ensure that all the leftovers are placed regularly in position for the vultures. The location of the slaughter-house means that a large colony of vultures has taken position on the Padrastro peak, more than a kilometre from the town. The area is also attracting tourists these days, all anxious to catch a glimpse of the vultures. “Pig meat is a real delicacy for the vultures,” says Chelo. “It also comes chopped into convenient pieces, which makes it easier for them to consume. They find it easier to separate the meat from the skin, making it easier to get at than horse meat and, best of all, the area has been a traditional home to the vulture for many years past. More than 700 vultures have been seen feeding here.” Meanwhile, Saturnino focuses his telescope on the peak, where about 50 Griffon vultures appear to be basking in the hot sunshine.

“Some researchers are studying the vultures’ immune system, which is truly

amazing. They can eat anything, and are capable of putting up with the cold of winter and the heat of summer, and they still survive. I'd love to have an immune system like theirs," he says while preparing his telescope for us to see the vultures. But our visit is cut short by a call from the Carrion Bird Recuperation Centre informing us that the Local Police have rescued a vulture in trouble.

Now on to Manilva, at the other end of the province of Malaga. Mari Carmen, the cleaning woman at the police station in Manilva, was left in charge of the vulture until our arrival, and the big bird is now perched on the station rooftop. The bird had drunk four glasses of water, the young woman reported. Chelo suggests taking some food out for the vulture, but in the end it is the head of the Local Police in Manilva, Francisco Luque, who goes out on the roof to get the bird back to safety.

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"This vulture had probably strayed from a nest in the Crestellina mountains, and became disorientated, finding its way here," says Chelo. Meanwhile Saturnino is trying to put the bird in a box, for its journey to Malaga. The visitors, without knowing it, will be sharing the back seat of the car with the vulture. We decide, on the way, to name the bird: Moses because the last four that came out of the Crestellina mountains died, and this one survived.

Chelo and Saturnio have dedicated a large part of their lives to the care of these vultures. The Delegation for the Environment trusts them to do this work, paying the cost of food for the vultures, veterinarian fees and other costs, such as travel. They provide love for the vultures, and dedication to their well-being. Their only desire is to ensure that the vultures will continue to fly free through the mountains, as they have always done.

