

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS, NOTES AND REPORTS

Possible sighting of the Indian subspecies of the Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus ginginianus* in Africa

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The Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* is a widely distributed species with three recognised subspecies: the nominate *N. p. percnopterus* occurring in Europe, Africa, Middle East and Central Asia, *N. p. ginginianus* from the Indian subcontinent (India, Nepal, Pakistan) and *N. p. majorensis* in the Canary Islands (Fergusson-Lees & Christie 2001; Donazar *et al.* 2002).

In December 2010, we conducted a survey to study the distribution of and threats to

Egyptian Vultures in southern and eastern Ethiopia. On 10th December, we observed a dispersed group of more than 20 Egyptian vultures in the small town Silsa (12°24'3.74" N 41°10'50.60" E), situated in a desert location in the Afar depression. The birds formed a congregation with six juvenile and immature Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis* and at least 10 Fan-tailed Ravens *Corvus rhipidurus*. About half of the vultures were feeding on remains of sheep slaughtered at the back of a small

restaurant near the main road. One of the adults among the group of Egyptian Vultures had a distinctly cream-coloured bill tip and was considerably smaller than the rest of the vultures present there. The bird had black-coloured claws, and was therefore not a leucistic bird with abnormal horny pigmentation of the bill. It was tamer than the rest of the vultures and allowed photographing from up to 4-5 meters. The small size and the colour of the bill tip are characteristic signs for the Indian subspecies *N. p. ginginianus* (Naoroji 2008), and we therefore conclude that the bird observed on 10th December in Silsa most probably belonged to that subspecies. To our knowledge, this is the first record of this subspecies outside the South Asian subcontinent.

If we accept that the bird belonged to the Indian subspecies, it must have travelled from the Indian subcontinent to Ethiopia. The geographic boundary between the nominate and the Indian subspecies is not fully understood, but believed to be in Pakistan and Himachal Pradesh (India). In the transition zone, body size is intermediate and adult bill colouration can vary between brown and cream-coloured tips (Naoroji 2008). *N. p. ginginianus*

is known to be resident throughout the South Asian subcontinent excluding the Trans-Himalaya, Northeast and Islands, and areas in the northwest in India and Pakistan occupied by the nominate subspecies. However both subspecies are also described as locally migratory (Naoroji 2008). Movements of Egyptian Vultures from the South Asian subcontinent to Africa may occur from Pakistan and India via Iran and Oman or the United Arab Emirates by crossing the Strait of Hormuz (Jennings 2010). Flying over of the Strait of Hormuz, a stretch of water >50 km wide, is only suspected (Cunningham 2002), but likely given that wintering Egyptian Vultures are common on the island of Qeshm, Iran (Cunningham 2002), which is situated 50 km offshore in the middle of the Strait of Hormuz. The species is also increasing in winter months in the neighbouring parts of Oman, where congregations of up to 250 have been observed (Jennings 2010), suggesting immigration from Iran. A crossing of the 50 km open water from the island of Qeshm to Oman, is substantially less than the 130 km over the Mediterranean from Sicily to Tunisia, which Egyptian Vultures cross regularly on migration (Agostini *et al.* 2004). Once on the Arabian Peninsula, the bird may

have passed through Saudi Arabia or Yemen and crossed to Djibouti via the Bab-el-Mandeb straits, which are a well known migratory corridor for Egyptian Vultures (Welch & Welch 1988, 1998). Our observation lies in the Afar depression, 225 km west from the Bab-el-Mandeb straits. The Afar depression is known as the main wintering area for Palearctic Egyptian Vultures in East Africa (Sigismondi & Politano 1996), where 1,400 Egyptian Vultures were counted in Ethiopia in December 2010 (pers. obs.). If the nearest part of the subspecies breeding range (South Central

Pakistan) is considered as place of origin of the bird observed by us, it would have flown at least 3,000 km.

We may speculate that this observation is also the first documentation of long-distance movement of the subspecies. However, given the scarcity of observers in the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, other similar observations may have been overlooked. Future surveys of the species should include detailed scrutiny of the individuals in wintering congregations in the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa.



An Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* photographed in the Afar depression, Ethiopia (Photograph by Nikolay Terziev)

Acknowledgements

We thank Steffen Opiel for valuable comments on earlier draft of the manuscript. The work was funded by the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, grant no. 1025975 and by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society provided logistical support. Four reviewers are thanked for their input to this note.

Editor's Note

This article has been published in *Vulture News* for two main reasons. Firstly the observation and particularly the topic of discussion are interesting. Secondly, the editorial team decided the article was a very useful discussion

starter. It must be stressed that there was clear disagreement between the reviewers about the veracity of this observation and the conclusions drawn by the authors, and that publication in *Vulture News* does not confirm the conclusions of the authors that the observed bird was *N. p. ginginianus*. The article title reflects this. *Vulture News* would welcome submissions from interested commentators who may wish to outline their views in relation to the appearance of this bird, the generally understood movement patterns of the species and/or other explanations for the observation reported here.

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