

Book Reviews

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/vulnew.v80i1.5>

PARSONS, I. (2020). *A vulture landscape. Twelve months in Extremadura*. Whittles Publishing, Dunbeath (Scotland). 133 pp. £17.99. ISBN 978-184995-457-0.

This book is an unusual and interesting portrayal of three species of vulture – Griffon, Egyptian, Cinereous (referred to as Black Vulture throughout the book, and hereafter) – but particularly the Griffon, in a remote corner of Extremadura in western Spain. The area is that wedge of land that pushes into Portugal along the Tajo/Tagus River, just south of Alcántara; it is north and south of the valley of the Rio Salor, a tributary of the Tajo. Undulating plains to the north and the hilly Sierra de San Pedro to the south, where Ian Parsons says there are nearly 400 pairs of Black Vulture. Curious, because he sees so few of them in the field at any one time. (The Rio Salor rises about 100 km to the south-east at Montánchez, which is near to Trujillo. I once attended a Black Stork conference there, and we visited the Parque Natural de Montfragüe, where I thought lots of Black Vultures nested. Indeed yes, but the bird atlas of Spain, 1997, also states 100-120 pairs in the San Pedro, so another conservation success story there in Spain, but not mentioned by Parsons).

Each month of the year starting with April is treated as a chapter, and it's as though we the readers accompany Parsons as he goes bird and vulture watching in the area, as befits a tour guide. This makes for exciting reading in every chapter, and already in April he has introduced us to the three species of vulture and no less than 22 other species right down to the diminutive Zitting Cisticola, a far cry from the huge vultures with their nearly three-metre wingspan. At the same time he describes the birds' calls, so we feel that we have really been on a guided tour whilst looking for the vultures. Early on, Parsons has an interesting discussion on vulture watching and vulture gazing, to him the two are distinct. Quite so!

Rightfully, he acknowledges the work in Europe and Spain of the Vulture Conservation Foundation and the Spanish Ornithological Society (SEO, BirdLife partner), respectively. Such organisations and the ecotourist bird guides are of course complementary in what they are doing for the birds themselves.

Half the book details his observations on the vultures, mostly on the Eurasian Griffon which nests in a gorge(s) of the Rio Salor. His observations are very good, whether on the network in the sky, the way the birds fly, their eating habits, etc. Much of the descriptions verge on the anthropomorphic, but this (frowned upon in academia) was not a problem to me as it brought the birds, their intentions, their choices to life, and indeed we could vividly feel what it could be like to be a vulture. For me, as a reader of endless scientific articles on vultures, Parsons' approach was very refreshing, and I enjoyed the format. Not sure though that I entirely agree with him on the thermo-regulatory function of bare head and neck (actually sparsely covered in white down), and the two photos on pages 44 and 45 do not show this. He says that the Griffon can “expose a third of its body surface to the air”. Almost all his other notes on vulture biology are correct as far as is known today, and he is to be congratulated on writing such a factually accurate book. Also he is up-to-date, e.g. with the recent invasions of the Rüppell's Griffon from Africa into the Iberian peninsula.

There are 58 coloured photos, several of them on the other birds. However, I would have welcomed pictures of the Red Deer, Great Bustard, and one or other harrier, which are subjects of interest to him. Indeed, the Great Bustard has its European headquarters in Spain, and is surely a special bird in any landscape. Curiously, nobody is credited for the photos, so I suppose they are all taken by the author himself.

Another aspect of the book that I enjoyed/appreciated was that it taught me some new words, though one of them was not in my large Chambers' (1972) dictionary!

One mistake that Parsons makes is on p. 63, where he states that the California Condor species had "fallen to just sixty-seven individuals" – no, it was 27. Perhaps this is not serious from a Spanish landscape?

All in all, this is an enjoyable book, and thoroughly to be recommended. On p. 1 the author says that "To watch vultures ... is an exhilarating experience that we should all have." *Exactamente!*
