

## ***Mighty vulture back from near extinction***

### ***Austrian project breeds success***

***Colin Nickerson***

Haringsee, Austria – Europe’s immense Bearded Vulture, sometimes called the “bone crusher,” boasts a wingspan of nearly ten feet, plucks meals from avalanche debris, and breeds its chicks in the subzero temperatures of the wintertime Alps. Its gastric juices register a “1” on the pH scale, nearly pure acid. Seething belly bile is a necessity for a creature that subsists mainly on weather-bleached bones. One tough bird, to be sure, but *Gypaetus barbatus* has been suffering hard times for the past 100 years or so, all but eradicated from its Alpine roosts. Today, however, the bone crusher is soaring toward a comeback as the continent’s most ambitious – and priciest – wildlife reintroduction project achieves small but biologically significant success. The species was hunted nearly to extinction in the Alps by the start of the 20th century, mainly by farmers and sportsmen seeking government-paid bounties on eagles, vultures, and other raptors. But it was ornithologists, ironically, who administered the coup de grace. Dismayed by the Bearded Vulture’s sharp decline, natural history museums dispatched collectors to kill specimens for mounted display. The last Alpine Bearded Vulture was bagged in

1913, in Italy’s Aosta valley, although some birds survived in zoos and remnant European populations lingered in the Pyrenees and on a few Mediterranean islands, including Corsica and Crete. “People failed to perceive the beauty of these magnificent, free-ranging animals,” said Hans Frey, an Austrian veterinary scientist who since the 1970s has made saving the little-appreciated bird his life’s obsession. “Folk legends made the vulture out to be a killer of livestock and small children. Even those who didn’t believe such tales saw it as a despised and ugly pest.” Since 1986, Frey and wildlife biologist colleagues have released 144 Bearded Vultures into their native Alps at roughly \$130,000 per bird. Then they crossed their fingers, hoping the vultures eventually would go looking for love. Breeding the birds in captivity took biological know-how, patience, and veterinary skill. And successfully setting fledglings free at wilderness sites in Austria, France, Italy, and Switzerland took careful planning and expertise in geology and vulture habitat. But then it was up to the vultures to figure out how to forage for food – and, just as critically, to discover one another, mate, and multiply.

Bone crushers are not especially amorous birds. The vultures are even more finicky about sex than food. They don't reach breeding age until age five or older, late for most bird species. They don't care much for one another's company, preferring lives of extreme

solitude. They wheel in search of death over aggressively defended individual territories that typically cover 200 square miles of rugged range. The released birds – an estimated 120 have survived – have formed only nine “breeding pairs.”

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