



LIFE Gyp'ACT



Towards a sustainable
return of the Bearded Vulture



Adonis,

one of the first Bearded vultures released in the Grands Causses in 2014



Pre-operational context of **LIFE Gyp'ACT**

The Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), a charismatic high-mountain species, has experienced a worldwide range contraction over the last century, mainly due to anthropogenic threats (poisoning and direct persecution). Due to this decline, the species has been listed as a priority species under the Birds Directive 79-409 (EC). Depending on the region in Europe, the Bearded Vulture is still considered critically endangered. To remedy this situation, population conservation and restoration measures have been implemented. Thus, Bearded vulture populations in Europe are recovering and continuing to grow. The French population (Alps, Massif Central, Pyrenees, Corsica) of Bearded vultures has thus been strengthened by 11 new breeding pairs between 2019 and 2022. The positive dynamic in France is driven by the Alpine and Pyrenean populations.

The Bearded vulture benefited from the LIFE GYPCONNECT reintroduction programme during the 2015-2022 period (LIFE14 NAT/FR/000050). This project was a response to objective III of the National Action Plan (NAP - in favour of the Bearded vulture in France), to extend the range of the species and to facilitate the exchange of individuals between the species population nuclei from the Alps to the Pyrenees.

The **Bearded vulture**, a remarkable species

Classification

- **FRENCH NAME:** Gypaète barbu (formerly: casseur d'os)
- **OTHER NAMES:** Casseur d'os, Phène des Alpes
- **FOREIGN NAMES:** **English:** Bearded Vulture, **Spanish:** Quebrantahuesos, **Portuguese:** Brita-ossos, **German:** Bartgeier, **Italian:** Gipeto
- **LATIN NAME:** *Gypaetus barbatus*
- **PHYLUM:** Vertebrates
- **CLASS:** Birds
- **ORDRE:** Accipitriformes
- **FAMILY:** *Accipitridae*
- **GENUS:** *Gypaetus*
- **SPECIES:** *barbatus*

Characteristics

- **CONSERVATION STATUS:** Endangered
- **WEIGHT:** 5 to 7 kg
- **WINGSPAN:** 2.6 to 2.9 m
- **SEXUAL DIMORPHISM:** the female and the male are identical

Lifespan

The Bearded vulture is a species that can live for more than 30 years but produces few chicks and late in life. The dynamics of bearded vulture populations are therefore based on lifespan and adult experience.

Breeding

In general, the birds do not breed until they are 7 to 8 years old. Breeding pairs are sedentary and settle in one territory all year round. In winter they build a nest on a cliff with twigs and wool. They lay 1 to 2 eggs per year. Even if both eggs hatch, only one chick is raised.

Diet

The Bearded vulture sometimes arrives several days after the other vultures and completes the rendering work. It feeds almost exclusively on bones, which it takes from the carcasses of wild ungulates (chamois, mouflon sheep, ibex, etc.) or domestic ones. It can swallow bones up to 30 cm long! When the bones are too large to be ingested or connected to each other, they are dropped from a height of a few metres to a few tens of metres onto a scree until they break up and are eaten.

Phenology

The breeding cycle is very long: it starts in autumn with the selection and construction of the nesting site and continues until the start of the following winter with the emancipation of the resulting young.



Did you know?

The Bearded vulture acquires the orange colour of its plumage by deliberately bathing in ferruginous water or mud.



A **vulnerable** species

This project is therefore a continuation of GYPCONNECT to respond to the main threats identified, some of which are still relevant today. Some of these threats are detailed below:

- 1• Vulnerability** of new population nuclei between the French Alps and the Pyrenees. Life GYPCONNECT has allowed 46 bearded vultures to be reintroduced over six years. It is important to continue efforts to increase their numbers, which is the only way to combat the risk of population decline by ensuring an annual growth rate that compensates for annual losses of individuals.
- 2• Destruction by shooting** - Shooting accounts for 31% of Bearded vulture deaths in Europe, while in France it accounts for more than 20% of recorded cases. The LIFE GYP'ACT project therefore plans to raise awareness and hold the perpetrators of these malicious acts accountable.
- 3• Poisoning** - Poisoning accounts for 26% of Bearded vulture deaths in Europe. LIFE GYP'ACT plans to intensify efforts by focusing on enhanced control measures.
- 4• Lead exposure** - Lead poisoning accounts for 12% of the causes of Bearded vulture deaths in Europe and is therefore one of the four main causes of death. GYPCONNECT has experimented with the use of lead-free ammunition by hunters, and LIFE GYP'ACT plans to expand the use of lead-free ammunition to all project areas.

- 5- Line collisions/electrocution** on electrical grids and collision with wind turbines:
 - Actions to secure and neutralise the electrical grid will be continued with LIFE partner ENEDIS.
 - Preventive measures will be proposed to the wind energy professionals and instructing services.
- 6- Acceptance by local stakeholders** - Successful reintroductions depend heavily on the acceptance of the project by local populations, including farmers and hunters. LIFE GYP'ACT foresees the involvement of local stakeholders in the implementation of the project.
- 7- Difficulties linked to food resources** - The aim is to continue and consolidate the network of natural feeding sites, with the creation of new installations...

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In view of these very encouraging results, it appeared crucial to continue the efforts initiated during GYPCONNECT to significantly improve the conservation and protection status of the Bearded vulture in France and Europe by continuing to restore new population nuclei and consolidating the population continuum between the Alps and the Pyrenees.

3 geographical areas concerned





The objectives of **LIFE GYP'ACT**

- To consolidate the flagship actions of the GYPCONNECT project, including reintroduction.
- To address identified threats and challenges (illegal destruction, poisoning, power grids).
- To extend the experiments conducted during the GYPCONNECT project (experimentation with lead-free ammunition, electrical grid).
- To ensure that all stakeholders in the territories take ownership of the Bearded vulture's conservation objectives.

SOME INDICATORS OF EXPECTED RESULTS

Objective 1 To increase the number of pairs between the Pyrenees and the Alps (currently 4-5 pairs). The aim is to establish 2-4 new pairs, considering the late age of sexual maturity (~7 years). To achieve this, reintroductions should continue with the release of 6-10 birds/year over the life of the project.

Objective 2 To promote the flow of individuals between the Pyrenees and the Alps, in particular through consultation on natural rendering between France and Spain (Pyrenees), and by strengthening the natural rendering network (creation of 10 to 20 new feeding sites). This objective aims to ensure the genetic mixing of the different population nuclei of the species.

Objective 3 To reduce mortality associated with energy infrastructure:

- Reduce mortality linked to the electricity grid by continuing to secure and neutralise it (~20 linear km will be treated) thanks to the involvement of ENEDIS,
- Prevent the risks associated with wind turbines by finely monitoring the movements of birds, communicating protection issues and monitoring compliance with the legal framework.

Objective 4 To combat intentional destruction and poisoning:

- Reduce the risks associated with shooting by holding the perpetrators responsible and through awareness-raising actions carried out jointly with hunters. At the end of the LIFE programme, it is expected that the number of Bearded vultures shot will decrease by 25-50%,
- Reduce the risks of intoxication by using lead-free ammunition in 3 to 4 new territories and implementing plans to prevent and combat the risks of intoxication with the participation of the French Office for Biodiversity.

Objective 5 To increase public acceptance by concretely involving local populations, along with farmers and hunters in the LIFE GYP'ACT implementation process.

The importance of **LIFE GYP'ACT**

LIFE GYP'ACT is part of an international strategy and should thus ensure the coherence of the programmes undertaken in Europe (Alps-Spain, etc.), along with the viability and development of the Western Palaearctic* population nuclei. It should thus make it possible to consolidate all the efforts made during the international reintroduction programme for the species since the mid-1970s, following its disappearance from the Alps in the last century.

Benefiting from international cooperation, it plays a central role in the project to restore viable Bearded vulture populations in Europe.

It draws on the lessons learned from previous programmes and is therefore a real laboratory of best practices for the reintroduction of a wild species.

In this way, it makes an important contribution to the development and implementation of EU policy and legislation on biodiversity and nature conservation.

* Vast region, including Europe, northern Asia (north of the Himalayas), North Africa and the northern and central parts of the Arabian Peninsula.



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