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Observation in Bulgaria of a Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* tagged in Spain

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ABSTRACT

Griffon Vultures are found throughout the Mediterranean Basin, with the largest population being in Spain. Since 1973, several thousand Griffon Vultures have been ringed in Spain with metal or plastic rings. Here we report the movement of one of these birds discovered 2300 km away from the ringing site, ten years later, with several observations during this period in different places in France, Italy and Bulgaria.

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Griffon Vultures are found throughout the Mediterranean Basin, with the largest population, in Spain, determined as about 30 000 pairs (BirdLife International 2015). Since 1973, c5000 Griffon Vultures have been ringed in Spain with metal rings and c1000 with Darvic plastic rings (Camiña 2004).

A carcass of an adult Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* (Figure 1) was found in the territory of Orylane village, municipality of Ugarchin, District of Lovech, north-central Bulgaria, on 16 December 2017 (43.1175°N 24.4949°E). The bird was found casually by hunters during a hunting party, lying on the ground in an oak forest, with no obvious signs of fractures or wounds. The vulture was marked with a colour ring and a Spanish metal ring. It is likely that the bird had roosted on a tree in the area before being found dead. The hunters and other local people reported seeing this Griffon Vulture within about a kilometre of the town of Ugarchin at least three times during the week before its body was found: it had been located on the ground in a field, close to a waste disposal site and perched on a tree on a hill (Figure 1).

According to local observers, this Griffon Vulture was flying well over short distances and did not exhibit any behaviour which could be ascribed to distress. The necropsy, carried out at the Wildlife Rescue Centre of Green Balkans in Stara Zagora showed no fractures or signs of shooting or electrocution. The right lobe of the lungs, however, was severely malformed, precluding half of the organ from functioning. The pathological changes to the lung had appeared long before death and their

cause could not be determined. The oesophagus was full of food. Death was considered most likely to have been caused by asphyxiation, due to the excessively filled oesophagus and the respiratory damage. Such a cause of death for Griffon Vulture, although seldom reported previously, was mentioned in studies from Spain and Italy (Poveda *et al* 1990, Loria *et al* 2008).

This Griffon Vulture was marked with a yellow plastic ring with black inscription 8A6 on the right tarsus and a metal ornithological ring inscribed 1107217 MINIST.AGRICULT. ICONA-MADRID-SPAIN on the left tarsus. It had been caught, emaciated, at fledging time and identified as a juvenile, in Spain during summer 2007. It was ringed and rehabilitated at a specialised rescue centre and eventually released on 18 December 2007 near Villanueva de Argaño, Burgos, Spain (42.3758°N 3.9334°W). It was first reported, by (visual observation using a) spotting scope, on 16 October 2010 in Châtillon-en-Diois, Drôme, France (44.7115°N 5.4908°E; Alvaro Camiña pers comm). Subsequently it was reported on 15 May 2012 and 21 May 2013, still in France, at Rougon (Verdon Canyon), Alpes-de-Haute-Provence (43.7988°N 6.4152°E; Sylvain Henriquet).

These observations were followed by six reports in Italy, documented through a camera trap set on a supplementary feeding site for vultures. These records were from Monte Velino Reserve, Magliano de'Marsi municipality, L'Aquila, Abruzzi (42.1236°N 13.3622°E; Mario Posillico), where the bird was photographed on



Figure 1. Carcass of Spanish-ringed Griffon Vulture 8A6 found in central Bulgaria on 16 December 2017.



Figure 2. Field observation of Griffon Vulture 8A6 at a feeding station in southwestern Bulgaria on 27 September 2017.

27, 28 and 30 August 2013 and on 20 June, 7 August and 19 December 2016. On 27 September 2017 Griffon Vulture 8A6 appeared again in southwestern Bulgaria, at another supplementary feeding site for vultures at Rakitna, Kresna Gorge (41.8446°N 23.1620°E; [Figure 2](#)). The bird was reported there once more on 7 October 2017. These are the last documented sightings of Griffon Vulture 8A6 before the discovery of its carcass ten weeks later near Orlyane.

Discussion

Although it is known that the Griffon Vulture is able to move very long distances also during erratic movements and hence dispersal of juveniles and immatures (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Eliotout 2007, Del Moral *et al* 2009, Grubač 2014, BirdLife International 2018) this is the first detailed account about the displacement of Griffon Vultures from the Iberian Peninsula to the Balkan Peninsula. The line-of-sight distance from the marking and release site in Spain to the point where the carcass of the bird has been found is over 2300 km, and a much longer distance results if we consider its possible detours trying to fly mainly over land around the sea while visiting the Apennines and then Balkans. The reported sightings constitute the first proven record of a Griffon Vulture carrying out such a large displacement from west to east in Europe, as opposed to more traditional seasonal migration movements such as north–south as reported in other studies (Sušič 2000, Tsiakirtis *et al* 2018, Arkumarev *et al* 2019). Places where the bird was seen are shown in [Figure 3](#).



Figure 3. Locations of all known observations of Griffon Vulture 8A6 after its first capture in Spain in summer 2007.

Within the ongoing Griffon Vulture reintroduction projects in Bulgaria, some cases of displacements of released birds from east to west were recorded. The most distant resighting was of K5H – an adult female Griffon Vulture captured in Spain, translocated and released in Bulgaria – that a year after the release was spotted in Baronies, France (Green Balkans 2013). However, this and some similar cases are not clearly comparable to the one we report here, because these birds, having been intentionally translocated, are often trying to go back to their natal place – especially if captured and translocated as wild adults.

The long displacement documented here, and the further evidence of long-range wanderings of juvenile and adult Griffon Vultures that is accumulating, provide a pathway for genetic exchange between populations. Thus, given the international character of such movements, the need to preserve and identify vulture flyways and displacement corridors, and enforce the actions prescribed in the vulture multi-species action plan (Botha *et al* 2017), becomes more and more urgent.

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