

# STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents the results of the first census of *Neophron percnopterus* in the Canary Islands, undertaken during 1987. The species is currently restricted to the islands of Fuerteventura and Lanzarote; the populations on La Gomera, Tenerife and Gran Canaria are now considered extinct. The number of breeding birds is estimated at between 31 to 37 pairs, mainly concentrated on Fuerteventura (26 to 31 pairs) with the remainder on Lanzarote and its outlying islets. The population trend is unknown and, at the moment, apart from some egg-collecting, there appears to be no serious threat factors operating.

## INTRODUCTION

The Egyptian Vulture is a medium-sized raptor with an irregular distribution across various countries of the Mediterranean basin, from the Iberian Peninsula to Turkey. It is also present in Arabia and India as well as in several areas of tropical and northern Africa (Cramp & Simmons, 1980; Brown et al. 1982).

In Macaronesia it is present only on the Canary Isles and in the Cape Verde Islands, being still fairly common on the latter archipelago (Bannerman & Bannerman, 1968; Norrevang & Hartog, 1984). In the Azores (Le Grand, 1983) and in Madeira (Bannerman & Bannerman, 1965) it is only an accidental visitor.

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## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The data compiled in this work were obtained almost entirely during the spring of 1987, by a team of 6 ornithologists, although subsequent notes from observations made in 1988, 1989 and 1990 are also included. The methods used varied according to the type of terrain being surveyed. These were mainly:

1. transects on foot in rugged areas of certain islands and islets.
2. counts made from vehicles in flat land, with fixed observation points ( for 10 minutes at every 5 km).
3. observations made from prominent view points (for 30 minutes).
4. surveys of coastal areas made from small fishing-boats.

## RESULTS

### Tenerife

We did not see any pairs during the survey period, and we feel certain that the species no longer breeds on the island. The rare positive sightings made in the last few years, have all been of migrants (Delgado et al., 1988).

This raptor was apparently plentiful in the past (Godman, 1872; Koenig, 1890) and although in the middle of this century some authors report having seen it with relative frequency ( Lack & Southern, 1949; Volsøe, 1951), from that period on, a decline has been evident ( Dickerson & Dickerson, 1960; Ennion & Ennion, 1962; Ash, 1969; Heinze & Krott, 1980). The situation of this species in the last few years was discussed by Martín (1987), who emphasised the fact that the Egyptian Vulture did nest (perhaps for the last time) in a gorge in the Anaga Massif (N. E.). According to this author, the population on Tenerife in 1984 comprised a minimum of 3 individuals ( 1 adult and 2 sub-adults) restricted to the Teno Massif (NW of the island).

### Gran Canaria

As on Tenerife, the species has disappeared over the last three decades. The only precise data is that of a single adult observed in July 1983, in the Inagua pine forest (Nogales, 1985). From the comments of various authors (Thanner, 1910; Bannerman, 1912; Gurney, 1927; Hemmingsen, 1958), it can be deduced that Egyptian Vultures were easily sighted, particularly in the flat areas to the south of the island (at Aguimes, Maspalomas, etc.).

## Fuerteventura

The largest part of the population in the archipelago is to be found on this island. Observations made during the study show that the Egyptian Vulture is well distributed throughout the whole of the island, except in the region between La Oliva and Lajares and at El Jable, probably due to lack of suitable breeding sites. In our estimation the population of this species on the island would be in the order of 26-31 pairs.

Although a number of authors mention the presence of the species (Bolle, 1854; Meade-Waldo, 1889; Hooker, 1958; Osborne, 1986), none of them offers any data on its status. Philips (1985) counted a total of 52 birds, mostly adult, and only Martin (1987) indicates that their population might be as high as 20-30 pairs.

## Lobos

During 1987 we did not confirm their presence, although in February 1990 a pair bred in an old nest of a Raven *Corvus corax*. Bolle (1854) also found a breeding pair. On 1st March 1985 we observed 2 adults which probably had flown from the neighbouring island of Fuerteventura.

## Lanzarote

The species is fairly scarce on this island. We located only two isolated pairs (possibly breeding) in some mountainous regions. Moreover, Verdu (pers.comm.), reported 2 pairs nesting in the eastern region of the island. This Vulture does not appear to have been too plentiful, at least in recent years (Hemmingsen, 1958; Hue & Etchecopar, 1958). Some years later, Trotter (1970) considered that the population varied at around 6 or 7 pairs.

## Montaña Clara

On 12th March 1987 we observed 2 adult individuals on the island; this area has very suitable nesting sites, but we cannot confirm breeding. On the visits carried out in 1988 and 1990, we observed only solitary individuals, not exhibiting any apparent breeding behaviour.

## Alegranza

A pair bred during 1987 and two pairs bred in 1988. These two pairs again bred in 1989 and in 1990. Bannerman (1963) sighted only one pair during his stay on the islet (1913) and in August 1978 we saw 2 adults accompanied by a juvenile.

## DISCUSSION

The main tendency of the Canary Islands population of Egyptian Vultures in the last few decades has been one of decline, which is similar to that experienced by the species elsewhere within its Palaearctic range (Bergier & Cheylan, 1980; Cramp & Simmons, 1980; Handrinos, 1985; Mullie & Meininger, 1985; Grubac, 1989; Cortone & Liberatori, 1989). In the Canaries this was formerly a very common bird of prey, especially on Tenerife and Gran Canaria and to a lesser extent on Fuerteventura and Lanzarote (Bannerman, 1963). In the 1950's it was still plentiful on Lanzarote (Hue & Etchecopar, 1958), as well as in certain areas on Tenerife (Lack & Southern, 1949; Volsøe, 1951), but very scarce on La Gomera (Cullen et al., 1952).

Later references show that the species had in general become scarce and Martín (1987), in particular, offers the following summary of the status in the archipelago in 1985.

Lanzarote and outlying islets	2-3 pairs
Fuerteventura	20-30 pairs
Gran Canaria	fewer than 5 birds
Tenerife	fewer than 5 birds
La Gomera	extinct

There have been various reasons for this great decline in numbers. Firstly the detrimental effects of the massive use of insecticides to fight the plague of locusts *Schistocera gregaria* during the 1950's (Canizo, 1953-54). Many farmers who knew the "Guirre" (vernacular name) perfectly well, have commented to us that from that time onwards the birds became scarce. Furthermore, the general reduction in livestock numbers throughout the archipelago (Garcia, 1984), the disappearance of fixed spots where animal remains were thrown and the burying of cattle carcasses as a sanitary measure caused a progressive reduction in the main food sources of the species.

Only Fuerteventura, of all the islands where the Egyptian Vulture is still present, keeps relatively large flocks of livestock (mainly goats), many of them half wild. We lack the precise data which might allow us to trace the circumstances of the population trend over the last few decades. Nevertheless, some farmers, when asked, have commented that the "Guirre" was more common in the past than now, and to support these comments, we have been able to confirm that traditional breeding sites are at present empty, or have undergone a considerable reduction in the number of pairs breeding.

On Lanzarote, its present population is very limited and judging by the published literature, it seems to have always been so. Nonetheless Concepcion (pers.comm.) comments that only five years ago there was a population of 10 pairs.

Contrary to the situation of other birds of prey in the Canaries, the Egyptian Vulture does not seem to be seriously threatened at present (Carrillo & Delgado, 1991), because it has been and is still, respected by the local inhabitants who consider it to be beneficial. All the same, we must bear in mind that the main islands to which the present population is confined (Lanzarote & Fuerteventura) are subject to progressive changes to their natural habitat caused by the increased growth in tourist developments. During the last few decades, the effects this has caused to bird communities has led to a decline in many species mainly through unchecked road developments, disturbance in the breeding areas etc. Furthermore, the location of Vulture nests means that many of them are of easy access and are consequently robbed year after year. Finally, we must mention that a small number of birds die every year as a result of illegal hunting, even though this is a protected species. For example, Pallares (pers.comm.) comments that in 1990 a pair of Egyptian Vultures was shot by hunters at a rubbish tip near their breeding site.

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