

commonest species 30 years ago, was more disturbing. Although still extant in the Masai Mara Game Reserve, it is no longer found in the human settlements outside the reserve, and was not recorded during three years of raptor surveys in 2001–2003. The survey routes took in breeding cliffs used by Egyptian vultures, but only four were seen.

Contrary to the expectations of the team in Tanzania, they too were unable to find lammergeier or palm-nut vulture, and they failed to record a single Egyptian vulture. In Uganda, the team were able to compare their sightings with data from the 1960s. Perhaps surprisingly, palm-nut and Rueppell's vultures were among a number of raptor species which appeared to have increased substantially. But others, including hooded vulture, showed equally substantial declines. By contrast, the team in Ethiopia found that the most common species within a 200-km radius of Addis Ababa was the 'ubiquitous' hooded vulture, almost always near settlements and especially at garbage dumps. Next commonest were Rueppell's and white-backed, but they saw very few Egyptian and lappet-faced vultures, and no white-headed vultures.

Experience from India shows that feral dog numbers, like those of rats and other disease-bearing pests, increase where vultures are not around to do their job of clearing wildlife carcasses and dumped waste such as butchers' offal and human and animal excrement. To ensure that this and other important ecological, economic and cultural services provided by vultures are fully understood, the BirdLife Africa Partnership has been carrying out education and awareness

programmes. Awareness-raising activities are targeted at influential groups, using posters and other media. The Africa Partnership is urgently seeking funding for presentations aimed at farmers and vets, using materials that will be circulated on CDs and downloaded free from the internet. A children's colouring book, *The Vultures of Africa*, will be distributed to schools and conservation organisations throughout Africa. It features all 11 of Africa's vultures, each with a line drawing that can be coloured in, a description, where it lives, what it eats and its conservation status. Much effort will be made to ensure that vulture stories and issues are covered in newspapers, radio and TV.

At the biennial meeting of the Africa Partnership in 2010, delegates adopted the idea of identifying key areas which could be made safe for vultures. For example, the countryside around breeding colonies could be kept free from poisons, with carcasses provided to ensure that the birds have access to uncontaminated food. Such 'vulture restaurants', already established in South Africa, are popular tourist attractions, providing local communities with an economic incentive to protect their vultures and giving visitors a more sympathetic image of vultures to take home with them.

Some fundamental features of vulture ecology work against them. Their habit of gathering in large numbers at carcasses that may be poisoned makes them prone to sudden population crashes, while being naturally long-lived birds, they are slow to recover. They reach maturity late: *Gyps* species may not breed until five years old, and may only produce

a single young every other year. Skies that are allowed to become empty of their vultures may not be filled again for many human generations to come.

Abridged from Nick Langley in World Birdwatch Vol. 33, No. 2 (June 2011)

Translocating rhinos in Assam

In January 2011, four (1.3) Indian rhinos were translocated from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas National Park. The animals join two females that were moved to Manas in late December 2010, and five (2.3) that were moved in 2008.

Indian rhinos are a conservation success story. The species has recovered from about 200 animals in the early 1990s to more than 2,850 today. The species is a popular zoo animal – about 175 Indian rhinos live in 66 zoos around the world. As a result of increasing commitment to conservation, zoos from Europe, Australia and the United States have joined forces to support the rhino moves. Pobitora, where the four rhinos were captured, boasts the highest density of rhinos in the world, with more than 90 in less than 18 square kilometres of rhino habitat. To minimize the chance of loss from disease and other disasters, the rhinos need to be spread among other parks. The translocations will lessen pressure on Pobitora's rhinos for food and space, and hopefully reduce the number of rhinos straying into nearby villages causing injuries to people and animals.

Moving a rhino is no easy task – the moves are the result of months of meticulous planning for every possible situation that might arise from capture to release, all with the aim of keeping both the animals and the people involved safe. Under the guidance of veterinarians, field workers, park

guards, conservationists and forest department officials, the four animals were captured and released within 24 hours. Veterinarians darted them with tranquilizers, then transported them 250 km in specially-designed crates. Each rhino is radio-collared and will be closely monitored by WWF-India and Manas National Park staff.

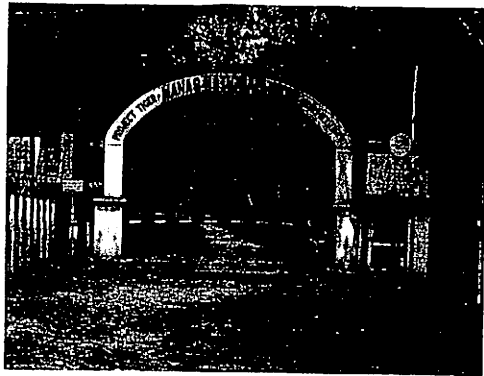


Photo: Jonas Livet

The translocations are the backbone of the ambitious Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020 – a partnership between the government of Assam, the International Rhino Foundation, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Bodoland Territorial Council, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service – that aims to attain a population of 3,000 wild rhinos in seven of Assam's protected areas by the year 2020.

Manas National Park, once an icon among India's many spectacular wildlife reserves, was designated in 1985 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, one of only 911 sites in the world (as of 2010) to have been named as places with special cultural or physical significance. Manas is home to the tiger, pygmy hog and golden langur as well as elephants, wild buffalo and gaur. Rhinos were once common in the park,

but violent civil conflict beginning in 1989 caused massive damage to the its infrastructure, including destruction of anti-poaching camps, roads and villages. Until recently, the last rhino seen in Manas was in 1996.



Zoos have contributed more than half a million dollars in the past three years to rebuild Manas's infrastructure, including anti-poaching camps, roads, and bridges, in preparation for the park's new inhabitants. Because of the ever-present threat of poaching, guards from the local communities, which herald the rhino homecoming, have been hired to protect the park's rhinos and other wildlife. Many of the guards are former poachers who now want to help to conserve the park's living treasures. The funding consortium, led by the International Rhino Foundation in the U.S., Save the Rhino International in the United Kingdom, and the Asian Rhino Project in Australia, include the American Association of Zoo Keepers, and the zoos of Basel, CERZA, Cincinnati, Chester, Los Angeles, Mesker Park (Evansville, Indiana), Philadelphia, Stuttgart, Taronga, Woodland Park (Seattle), and San Diego.

Abridged from Z Magazine (Spring 2011)

Conflict of interest

Wildlife charities say news of a review of EU rules protecting habitats is "very alarming" and could water down vital protections for wildlife.

George Osborne told MPs he wanted to make sure that "gold plating of EU rules on things like habitats" were not putting "ridiculous costs" on firms.

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has announced it would be reviewing the impact of the EU Habitats and Wild Birds Directives in England "focusing in particular on those obligations that affect the authorisation process for proposed development, with a view to reducing the burdens on business while maintaining the integrity of the purpose of the directives".

The RSPB suspects that the review is aimed at watering down environmental protections, to the benefit of business and says there must be no weakening of protection for important species.

"[The directives] have been protecting welfare and natural heritage for the last 20 years... it doesn't stop development or business growth. It improves and enhances that development.

Mr Osborne was backed by Country Land and Business Association vice president Harry Cotterell, who told BBC Radio 4's Farming Today: "We have always had big, big problems with the Habitats Directive and the way it is being implemented in this country.

"We think it is being over implemented, and this is a very welcome attempt to possibly melt some of the gold plate on the directive.

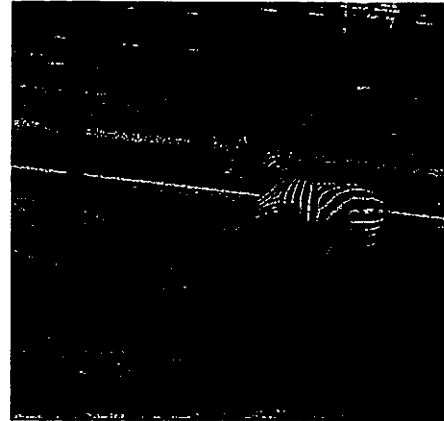
"Finally we might see a time when human beings are treated with about the same importance as bats, newts and dormice."

Adapted from BBC news web site.

MISCELLANY

Zebras escape zoo

Zebras who had escaped from a petting zoo were found wandering in a small town after an employee reportedly left their cage open.



The two animals managed to get out of their pen at Leesburg Zoo in Virginia. They were later captured by the sheriff's office and hit with tranquiliser darts before being returned to their enclosure.

Police received several calls yesterday afternoon from alarmed residents reporting zebras on the loose in traffic. No one was injured by the escaped animals.

Mail Online

Late starters

A mallard duck at a wildlife haven in London has hatched 11 ducklings - six months later than usual.

Ducklings would normally arrive between April and June but have been spotted swimming with their mother at London Wetland Centre in Barnes.

The strange sight is being put down to warm autumn weather and the fact that the ducks are prolific breeders.

John Arbon, a manager at the wetland centre, said he thought the birds had a good chance of survival.

He said: "She's got them into a reed bed, she's got them into quite a nice warm little bit of habitat that will hold its temperature up and it will provide them with lots of insect food.

"So at the moment, the chances are quite good.

"It is down to the mild weather plus the fact that this is a mallard - mallards are prolific breeders given the opportunity."

The centre said the latest that mallard ducklings would normally hatch was August, but that tended to happen when a clutch had failed and the adults tried for a second brood.

According to the BBC Weather centre, November has been sunnier than usual with temperatures about 3C above average and rainfall about half the average.

The wetland centre, which is run by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, said it had also seen other strange wildlife behaviour and daffodil shoots have sprung up.

Happy orang-utans live longer

Researchers recently examined keeper ratings of subjective well-being of 184 orang-utans from 42 zoos, mainly in the United States. Keepers were asked to rate oranges they worked with regularly on four items: the animal's ratio of positive to negative moods, its enjoyment from social interactions, its enjoyment from achievement of goals, and how happy the keeper would be if he/she were that