Faits de conservation en Méditerranée
Mediterranean Conservation News

A new colony of critically endangered Northern Bald Ibises has been discovered in an Al Badia (desertic steppe) area of central Syria

A new colony of critically endangered Northern Bald Ibises (*Geronticus eremita*) has been discovered in an Al Badia (desertic steppe) area of central Syria. The small colony contained three pairs which were discovered incubating eggs, and a seventh adult. This is the first evidence of the continued breeding of Northern Bald Ibises in the Middle East since a colony at Birecek in Turkey became extinct in 1989. The new birds were found in spring 2002 by a team carrying out wildlife surveys on behalf of the Syrian Government's Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR).

Survey Team leader, Associate Professional Officer, Wildlife Expert, Gianluca Serra said, « *Discovering this bird was like finding the Arabian Phoenix regenerated from the ashes. The survey work through remote and rough terrain was some of the most exciting and challenging fieldwork we had ever experienced. Throughout it all, my Syrian colleagues from MAAR, Ghazy Al-Qaim and Mahmoud Abdallah, were optimistic that Northern Bald Ibises still existed in the Al Badia or desertic steppe of central Syria because we had received reports of their presence from Bedouin nomads and local hunters.* » Dr Michael Rands, Director of BirdLife International, said « *This fascinating species, once common throughout much of the Middle East and southern Europe, is now on the brink of global extinction, despite much conservation effort in Morocco and Turkey. This fantastic discovery gives new hope that the Northern Bald Ibis can be saved, and the BirdLife Partnership will do all it can to assist the Syrian authorities to conserve this amazing threatened species for future generations to enjoy.* »

The Northern Bald Ibis was formerly widespread across the Mediterranean region, but has suffered a long-term decline and now has an extremely small population. The reasons behind decline include human persecution, loss of steppe or unintensive agricultural areas, pesticide poisoning, human disturbance and dam construction. Until this recent discovery, the total world population was put at 220 individual birds, confined to two colonies in north-west Morocco. The Northern Bald Ibis is classified as Critically Endangered according to the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List criteria. This means it faces an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future.

The discovery was made at the end of an extensive two-year programme of wildlife surveys aimed at producing a biodiversity inventory for Al Talila Reserve, the first Syrian protected area.

Contact: Birdlife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA, United Kingdom. (http://www.birdlife.net/news).

The Iberian lynx needs networks of large reserves

The Iberian lynx, an endemic species of southern Iberia, is considered by the IUCN as the most endangered felid in the world. Recent research made at Estación Biológica de Doñana (Sevilla, Spain) has focused on the factors responsible of lynx decline (Rodríguez & Delibes, 2002-2003). In 1953 myxomatosis, a viral disease, quickly spread across the Iberian peninsula resulting in a strong drop of rabbit numbers (virtually the only lynx prey species) which lasted for decades. An analysis of the subsequent range contraction during a 35-year period shows that only lynx populations inhabiting areas larger than 500 km² were able to persist. The extinction of these small lynx populations has been attributed to demographic stochasticity related with metapopulation disequilibrium. The refill of gaps, *i.e.* vacant territories, may have accounted for reduced fragmentation of larger populations. There was also strong indication that migration from neighbouring sources was essential for the survival of vulnerable small populations.

Simple regression models could be used to choose where conservation efforts should be located in order to optimise the persistence of lynx populations. The quality of lynx habitat in terms of scrubland structure and rabbit availability was probably higher around 1950 than it is nowadays. Keeping human pressure low, and assuming that habitat quality was restored to the former levels, several nature reserves larger than 50,000 ha should be established and saturated with populations of about 100 adults to guarantee lynx survival in the short to medium term (30 to 50 years). Reserves of this size can be labelled "large" for European standards. Moreover, reserves should be arranged in networks where inter-population distance should be minimised within a maximum of 30 km, a figure close to the upper threshold for lynx dispersal distance. Intervening habitats between reserves may be not as good as within reserves but their structure should facilitate migration between lynx populations, and sources of disperser mortality must be removed.

For more information read:

— Rodríguez A. & Delibes M., 2002. Internal structure and patterns of contraction in the geographic range of the Iberian lynx. *Ecography,* 25: 314-328.

— Rodríguez A. & Delibes M., 2003. Population fragmentation and extinction in the Iberian lynx. *Biological Conservation,* 109: 321-331.

Alejandro Rodríguez
Dept. of Applied Biology, Estación Biológica de Doñana, CSIC,
Avda. María Luisa s/n, 41013 Sevilla, Spain.
email address: alrodri@ebd.csic.es