

# Presence of the Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus* in lowland Turkmenistan

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A recent evaluation of historical and current records of griffon *Gyps* vultures throughout the former Soviet Union (Katzner *et al* 2004) found “almost no information on vultures from Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan” ie a considerable part of Central (Middle) Asia. Distribution of the Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus* in Turkmenistan, mapped in a very recent guide to Central Asian birds (Ayé *et al* 2012) is almost the same as in Dementiev & Gladkov (1951) ie limited to the mountains at the southern and the eastern boundaries of the country.

I have recently seen Eurasian Griffons in western and northwestern Turkmenistan. On 9 August 2012 at 10.30 h local time eight birds were circling above the northwestern slopes of the Great Balkan, an isolated massif in the lowlands near the Caspian sea. They were gaining height together near rocks, as griffons usually do when they leave a communal roost. My distant observation point (39° 42' N, 54° 23' E GPS) was at c500 m asl in a hill steppe which changed to flat gypsum desert with sand tracts at lower altitude further north. Livestock (sheep) were progressively scarcer. The day after, at 15.50 h local time, I observed a pair of Eurasian Griffons passing along cliffs in the Yangykala canyon (40° 28' N, 54° 43' E, Plate 1). Seen from above they exhibited the white downy ruff and pale wing-coverts with contrasting dark blotched band, characteristic of adult birds. This remote canyon is a spectacular product of the erosion of an ancient sea bed, which is now at c200 m asl. It was an extremely dry area and although I explored the surroundings in the late



**Plate 1.** One member of the Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus* pair seen in the Yangykala canyon, Turkmenistan, 10 August 2012. © Giuliana Marzi

afternoon and next morning, I found no sign of either domestic or wild mammals except for one, blurred, gazelle trail.

My first sighting suggests the presence of a griffon colony 200 km minimum distance from the nearest known griffon area, the northernmost foothills of the Kopet Dag. It might be a small colony—griffon colonies are small in similar regions (Dementiev & Gladkov 1951, Katzner *et al* 2004)—nesting on the rocks of the Great Balkan and scavenging on the relatively productive pastures of its foothills. My second sighting suggests a wider geographic distribution; to almost 100 km further north, and a harsher habitat. A consequent question is whether the observed pair of adult birds were local breeders, long-ranging foragers, or vagrants. Radiotracking in desert regions (Bahat 1995) showed adult birds less prone to vagrancy than immatures, though they were able to forage very far away from the colony; but such long flights might result from the choice to reach grazing areas intensively used by ungulates, which would not be the case at Yangykala. Although mountains seem preferred, griffons can also inhabit plains provided that broken terrain is available (Dementiev & Gladkov 1951): Yangykala would offer extensive cliffs as nesting sites and thermal-producing ground. A further question is whether my sightings resulted from a Eurasian Griffon presence overlooked for a long time, or recent range expansion. The same question applies to the Eurasian Griffons in neighbouring southwestern Kazakhstan, to the north, most of them seen only recently and with no sign of breeding (years 2000–2011, map in Sklyarenko & Katzner 2012). Dolgushin (1962) mentioned a record from the Mangghystau peninsula. Taken together, these sightings suggest a rather wide distribution of the Eurasian Griffon in the lowlands east of the Caspian sea.

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