

Wintering of Egyptian vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*) in Sicily: new data

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Abstract

Wintering of Egyptian vultures (Neophron percnopterus) in Sicily: new data.— Populations of the Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) in continental Europe are usually migratory, travelling from their breeding grounds to wintering areas in the sub-Saharan Sahel region. In Sicily, there are currently six breeding pairs of this species, but there are few reports about their presence in winter. We report the sighting of one young and two adults in Sicily during the 2015–2016 winter season.

Key words: *Neophron percnopterus*, Wintering, Sicily

Resumen

Invernada del alimoche común (Neophron percnopterus) en Sicilia: nuevos datos.— Las poblaciones continentales europeas de alimoche común (*Neophron percnopterus*) son por lo general migratorias y viajan desde sus lugares de cría hasta las áreas de invernada en la región subsahariana del Sahel. En Sicilia, donde en la actualidad hay seis parejas reproductoras de esta especie, hay pocos informes sobre la presencia de alimoches en invierno. Se describe el avistamiento de un joven y dos adultos en Sicilia durante la temporada de invierno 2015–2016.

Palabras clave: *Neophron percnopterus*, Invernada, Sicilia

Resum

Hivernada de l'aufrany (Neophron percnopterus) a Sicília: noves dades.— Les poblacions continentals europees d'aufrany (*Neophron percnopterus*) són en general migratòries i viatgen des dels seus llocs de cría fins a les àrees d'hivernada a la regió subsahariana del Sahel. A Sicília, on actualment hi ha sis parelles reproductores d'aquesta espècie, hi ha pocs informes sobre la presència de aufranys a l'hivern. Es descriu l'observació d'un jove i dos adults a Sicília durant la temporada d'hivern 2015–2016.

Paraules clau: *Neophron percnopterus*, Hivernada, Sicília

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Populations of the Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) in continental Europe are migratory (and partially migrant in some areas: Mebs & Schmidt, 2006; Sánchez et al., 2015; De Juana & García, 2015; or resident in the Canary and Balearic Archipelagos: Cramp & Simmons, 1980; De Pablo, 2000), moving from their breeding territories to wintering areas in the sub-Saharan Sahel region (Meyburg et al., 2004; García-Ripollés et al., 2010; Grudev et al., 2012; López López et al., 2014a; Sanz-Aguilar et al., 2015; and more others).

The Italian population, considered to be 'Critically Endangered' according to IUCN criteria (Rondinini et al., 2013), is found in the central and southern Apennines and in Sicily (Sarà & Di Vittorio, 2003).

The species has experienced a sharp population decline throughout its range and is endangered worldwide (BirdLife International, 2015). In Sicily, the population size of these vultures has decreased since 1980. There are currently only six breeding pairs, constituting the largest population in Italy (Andreotti & Leonardi, 2009; Di Vittorio, 2011).

Although repeated tracking of Egyptian vultures has provided evidence of low phenotypic plasticity in timing of migration (López López et al., 2014a), and despite the fact that Brichetti & Fracasso (2003) considered the Egyptian vulture in Italy to be an irregular winter species, information (4–5 cases) about the winter presence of Egyptian vulture in Sicily is scarce and its presence is considered exceptional (Orlando, 1958; Sorci et al., 1972; Iapichino & Massa, 1989).

Recently, Ceccolini et al. (2009) reported the case of captive-born young released by hacking in the Puglia region and wintering in Sicily. During the wintering season 2015–2016, one young and two adults were observed in the territory of Trapani and Mazara del Vallo, Gela (Caltanissetta) and Corleone (Palermo). They were not marked or satellite-tagged but the two adults were distinguishable in the collected pictures by some feathering differences, especially in the tail. The birds were often observed near the waste dumps (especially in the case of the young), a predictable source of food that is a main determinant of ranging behaviour in this endangered species (López-López et al., 2014b). Regular and protracted observations during the November to February periods, with indicative sightings between 25 and 26 of December, from 18 to 25 of January, and in 2 of February allow us to exclude any hypothesis of late or early movements of migrants. All three individuals appeared to be in good physiological conditions (the authors, pers. obs.). They showed good plumage conditions, excellent flying capacities, standard behavior, and good body status.

Although this record of winter presence of vultures is exceptional, it could be not explained by the exceptionally high food availability and is more likely due to the exceptionally mild winter conditions. Indeed, the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) reports 2015 as the warmest year on record for more than 100 years. In effect, in the past, when the trophic conditions were probably better than today thanks to more intense and widespread agricultural activity (Sarà & Di Vittorio, 2003), very few observations of Egyptian vulture were recorded outside the breeding season in Sicily, supporting the sighting being more linked to climate than to food availability.

If such winter presence continues in coming years, new conservation strategies for the Sicilian population of this species, now under severe threat, should perhaps be considered.

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