ETHIOPIAN WOLF

RACE TO RESCUE THE WORLD'S RAREST DOG

Why hope for this endangered canine rests with a radical vaccination project

SIBERIAN SOLITUDE
A winter alone with bears, moose and otters in Russia's Far East

GREAT WHITES IN THE UK?
Discover the apex predators that patrol our waters

GIANT OTTERS
Why mob rule beats caiman cunning in the Amazon

SPY ON THE WILD
Spectacular winners of our camera-trap competition revealed
BRING OUT THE BODIES

Providing livestock carcasses to feed vultures is not just a conservation necessity, reports Mike Unwin – it’s also a great way for tourists to see these raptors in the flesh.

Lunchtime in the Spanish Pyrenees. It’s 39°C in the shade, with the cicadas hard at it and the midday sky blue and empty. I watch from beneath a stunted oak tree as Oscar Diez Sánchez hauls the trailer clear of the Land Rover and releases the latch. Out tumble the goodies: an avalanche of entrails, heads and hooves – 200kg of offcuts from the local abattoir. Next comes the garnish: a deluge of blood and offal from a 50l plastic drum. “That should do it,” says Oscar, peeling off his gloves and stepping back to squint at the sky.

A single bird appears far above us, its square silhouette identifying it immediately as a griffon vulture. Others soon drift into view. “Watch,” says Oscar. We stare upwards as the numbers increase: 10, 20, 50 – each new arrival sucked into the thickening spiral of raptors. Within five minutes, some 350 vultures are circling overhead, their shadows forming a dizzying carousel around us on the dusty hillside.

DINNER IS SERVED

Once we retreat a safe distance, the birds start to descend. First come the outliers: ravens flapping into the pines, kronking excitedly, and red kites angling low over the feeding site. Then the first vulture bounces down and bounds forward, its long neck protruding and wings mantled. The next is seconds behind. In no
Just outside the Pyrenean village of Alinsa, griffon vultures gather for their weekly feed of offcuts, offal and bones.
There are an estimated 25,000 pairs of griffon vultures in Spain. Numbers have increased greatly since the 1970s thanks to measures such as banning poison-bait carcasses.

This scene of scavengers scrapping over a carcass is like something from the Serengeti, and I half expect to see a hyena come loping into the fray. It’s only when I look back across the sunflower fields to the red-tiled rooftops of Aínsa and its chocolate-box Pyrenean backdrop that I’m reminded I’m in Europe. Just three hours’ drive from Barcelona, in fact, and in prime summer-holiday territory.

OSCAR’S WILD RESTAURANT

Not that a vulture restaurant meets everyone’s idea of holiday fun. But Oscar, director of local conservation group Fundación para la Conservación del Quebrantahuesos (FPCQ – Bearded Vulture Conservation Foundation), is not doing this for my entertainment.

These birds need help. The Spanish population of the Eurasian griffon vulture may have soared (as it were) in recent decades – its persecution now largely confined to history – but changes in farming practices have brought other problems. As ‘extensive’ livestock farming, in which animals are left to roam the mountainside, gives way to a more ‘intensive’ model, with animals imprisoned in sheds, so the vultures no longer find the steady supply of wild carcasses on which they once subsisted.

What’s more, today’s EU farming regulations, prompted partly by the BSE crisis, mean that carcasses may no longer be left to decompose in the countryside. Nature’s great clean-up merchants are finding less to clean up. Hence the FPCQ – with dispensation from the authorities, donations from the local abattoir and the use of an abandoned town dump – is giving the birds a helping hand.

The vultures are soon on their way, flapping off the hillside and onto the thermals of the canyon, rising effortlessly back into the blue. The site is picked clean. Only the smell now lingers, along with a couple of ravens. Two Egyptian vultures – latecomers – circle twice overhead and carry on. One bird, however, is absent. Indeed, Oscar tells me that the quebrantahuesos – the very species for which his organisation was founded – only sometimes drops in at his restaurant. In the UK, we know it as the bearded vulture, or by the misnomer ‘lammergeier’ (lamb-killer), and at such close quarters this huge raptor would be an impressive sight.

But I’m not too disappointed. Only yesterday, wandering...
through the mountain village of Escuaín, a passing shadow alerted me to a bearded vulture gliding overhead. Its rakish flight silhouette – diamond tail and slim wings drooping towards the tips – was unmistakable, as were its mustard-yellow underparts and slate-grey back, sunlit against a dark forest backdrop. Through my binoculars I could even make out the piercing amber eye and eponymous tufty moustache.

**THE BONE COLLECTOR**

My first bearded vulture was a thrilling sight, and a rare one: the species occurs very sparsely throughout its range, with the 400 or so individuals in the Pyrenees representing some 80 per cent of the European breeding population.

As well as a dashing appearance, this bird exhibits unique behaviour. Rather than crowding into carcasses, it cracks large bones by dropping them from up high onto rocks, then picks out chunks of marrow – hence the local name *quebrantahuesos*, meaning ‘bone-breaker’. It uses the same trick with tortoises, which some claim may explain the bizarre demise of Aeschylus in 455BC, reputedly brained by a tortoise that an ‘eagle’ dropped on his head.

Killer of ancient Greek playwrights or not, the bearded vulture – once persecuted almost to extinction – has become emblematic of the Spanish Pyrenees. A neat logo of its distinctive contours now emblazons everything from shop windows to hiking maps. It also marks the signposts that lead me through the steep, cobbled streets of Ainsa – gateway to Ordesa y Monte Perdido National Park – where, tucked into the ancient ramparts, I find the Eco Museo, complete with model *quebrantahuesos* guarding the entrance.
WILDLIFE SPOTTER PYRENEAN CHAMOIS

NAME Rupicapra pyrenaica.
In Spanish, rebecho or gamuzo.
ID TIPS Tawny-brown summer coat (blackish-brown in winter), pale facial stripes and short, dark horns.
BEHAVIOUR Inhabits the higher reaches of mountain habitat. Females form large herds of up to 30 individuals with their young, while males are mostly solitary, except during the autumn rut.
DIEIT In summer, a range of herbs and flowers; in winter, lichens, mosses and young pine shoots.
LIFE-CYCLE Kids are born in April and May, and are weaned after two or three months. Females may remain with their herds for life.
DISTRIBUTION Also found in the Cantabrian Mountains and in three small populations in Italy.
STATUS Least Concern.

“Sí, sí,” Oscar tells me in his office upstairs, “our quebrantahuesos are doing well.” He explains that Spain’s population today is the highest for 100 years, and indicates on a wall map how an intensive conservation programme, under the auspices of the Natura 2000 Protected Areas network, has helped expand the raptor’s breeding range across the Pyrenees. Plans are underway to re-establish a former population in the Cantabrian Mountains to the west and, eventually, to restore the historic range across the whole of the Iberian Peninsula. Oscar goes on to list the numerous challenges that remain – poison baits and wind farms among them – but his optimism is infectious.

SEIZE THE DAY
Back downstairs in the busy museum, the Sala de Quebrantahuesos boasts everything from a reconstruction of the bird’s huge stick nest to videos of its celebrated bone-dropping. And I find much more than just bearded vultures: a towering diorama showcasing the wealth of local wildlife – from chamois scaling the summits to gentians flowering in the alpine meadows and black woodpeckers hammering on the ancient pines.

There’s only so long you can spend looking at painted mountains, however, when the real thing looms invitingly outside the windows. Ordesa y Monte Perdido National Park protects some of the Pyrenees’ most impressive peaks, including the 3,335m Monte Perdido. In winter it is the snowy playground of skiers; in summer, hikers can explore a network of trails deep into the heart of one of Europe’s most dramatic wildernesses.
EVERY HIKE BRINGS A BEARDED VULTURE, PEERING DOWN FROM HANG-GLIDER WINGS AS THOUGH SIZING UP MY BONES.

And so, over the next few days, I hit the trail. The mountains unfold beneath my boots in a series of zones, each with its own character and — as in the diorama — wildlife. On the lower slopes, crested tits trill from the pines and Pyrenean brook salamanders hang suspended in shaded pools. In the alpine meadows, a confetti of butterfiles — frillylaries, swallowtails and the occasional big, creamy-winged Apollo — dances over a floral carpet, while fresh spoil heaps reveal marmot burrows. And, high on a scree slope, I disturb a wallcreeper. Slumped against a boulder, breathing hard, I watch as this elusive mountain gem flutters in indignant circles above my head.

Best of all are the raptors. Griffon vultures circle the peaks like the pterodactyls of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*. But I also see Egyptian vultures, their black and white wings unmistakable, honey buzzards, red kites, peregrines and eagles — short-toed, booted and golden. And every hike brings a bearded vulture or two, peering down from hang-glider wings as though sizing up my bones.

There is surely no more impressive display of birds of prey anywhere in Europe, and its appeal to visitors is not lost on the locals. These are tough times for Spain, especially here in the mountains; it is becoming ever harder to scrape a living from farming, and young people are deserting the villages in droves. Tourism is vital to the ailing economy. Okay, so not all tourists are birdwatchers; they come for the tapas, the swimming holes, the ruined monasteries and — let's face it — the sunshine. But few are oblivious to the wildlife: you need only watch the café crowds in Ainsa's Plaza Mayor cranng up to admire the vultures overhead. And this is great news for conservationists such as Oscar and his lammergeier foundation.

EYES ON THE PRIZE
My last day finds me labouring up the imposing massif of Montañes. I pause for a breather and a swig of water. Above the hum of insects and the warble of a rock thrush I hear the hollow clack of bone on stone. A shadow passes across the scree opposite and, sure enough, I see a bearded vulture gliding down to the boulder field. It retrieves its prize, evidently still intact, and launches out into space to try again. My binoculars pick out the glint of tumbling bone. Another sharp report echoes from the rocks below and the great bird descends again, this time disappearing behind a shoulder of cliff. It's an impressive sight; and one that with luck — and a little help from Oscar and his team — will be thrilling visitors to these wild peaks for generations to come.