Vultures in Romania: their past and present

With special emphasis on the Griffon Vulture (Gyps fulvus) and the Egyptian Vulture (Neophron percnopterus)

Márton A. Kelemen*, Attila D. Sándor and Annette Mertense*****

* - Association for Bird and Nature Protection "Milvus Group"

** - Romanian Ornithological Society – Bird Life Romania

*** - Carpathian Wildlife Foundation

Romania hosted four breeding species of vultures in the past. The intensive direct persecution along with the use of poisoned baits (and other factors) wiped out all four species by the end of the 20th century. In the last 40 years there is no confirmed observation of Bearded Vulture or Cinereous Vulture. The other two species (Egyptian Vulture and Griffon Vulture) regularly occur in small numbers in the country, but there is no hard evidence of breeding in the last 10 years. In the present paper the historic situation of the four vulture species in Romania is briefly presented, with emphasis on the Griffon and Egyptian Vultures.

1. Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*

It bred formerly in the high mountain regions of the Southern Carpathians, no hard proof about its presence as a breeding species in the Eastern Carpathians, but cannot be excluded the historical breeding in some of the rocky mountains of this area. The species was a rare and localized bird already in the mid 19th century, when ornithologists warned that poisoning, direct persecution and extensive trophy hunting may hinder the status of the species in the Carpathians. Three traditional breeding sites were known, the Bucegi/Fagarasi mountains, the Retezat-Parang group and the Domogled-Cerna group. The species disappeared from Domogled-Cerna area in the second half of the 19th century, the last known nest is from Cerna valley, 1878 (*Iacobi 1957*). In Fagaras it lasted a little bit longer, the last known nest was in Dambovita valley in 1887 and at Galbenare in the Bucegi mountains in 1886 (*Iacobi 1957*).

In Parang the last known nest was observed in 1873, but there are observations of birds up to 1910 (*Iacobi 1957*). The species survived the longest period in the Retezat mountains, the last known successful breeding occurred in1928, at Stanuleti (*Teleki 1929* and *Iacobi 1957*), in the same winter one of the adult birds was shot (*Linția 1954*). Birds were seen there until the 20th of January 1933, when ***the last*** bearded vulture was seen in Romania (*Iacobi 1957*).

2. Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

Breeding in the forested areas of the Carpathians and lowlands, the species used to be fairly common all over the country. Large colonies were breeding in the forests of Dobrogea (especially in Babadag Forest). The distribution of the species followed large forest patches, but solitary birds or small groups were observed from the steppes to the alpine region. The species was highly appreciated as trophy, both as hunting bag as well for oological collections. Although its breeding sites were much more confined to dense forests and usually bred solitarily, egg collectors described many nest all over the country. The population of this species collapsed suddenly in the late 1950's and early 1960's, when large scale poisoning against wolves started. Still, in 1956 more than 10 birds at one carcass was not an unusual sight in S and SE Romania. Last proven breeding in Transylvania comes from 1950 (Giurgeu Mountains), in southern Moldova from 1954 (Mihalciuc 1973) and in Dobrogea from 1957. The species was observed in Romania last time in the Retezat Mountains in 1966 (Filipascu 1966).

3. Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

The Griffon Vulture was definitely the most frequent vulture species in Romania, but probably with a smaller distribution range than that of the Cinereous Vulture. There

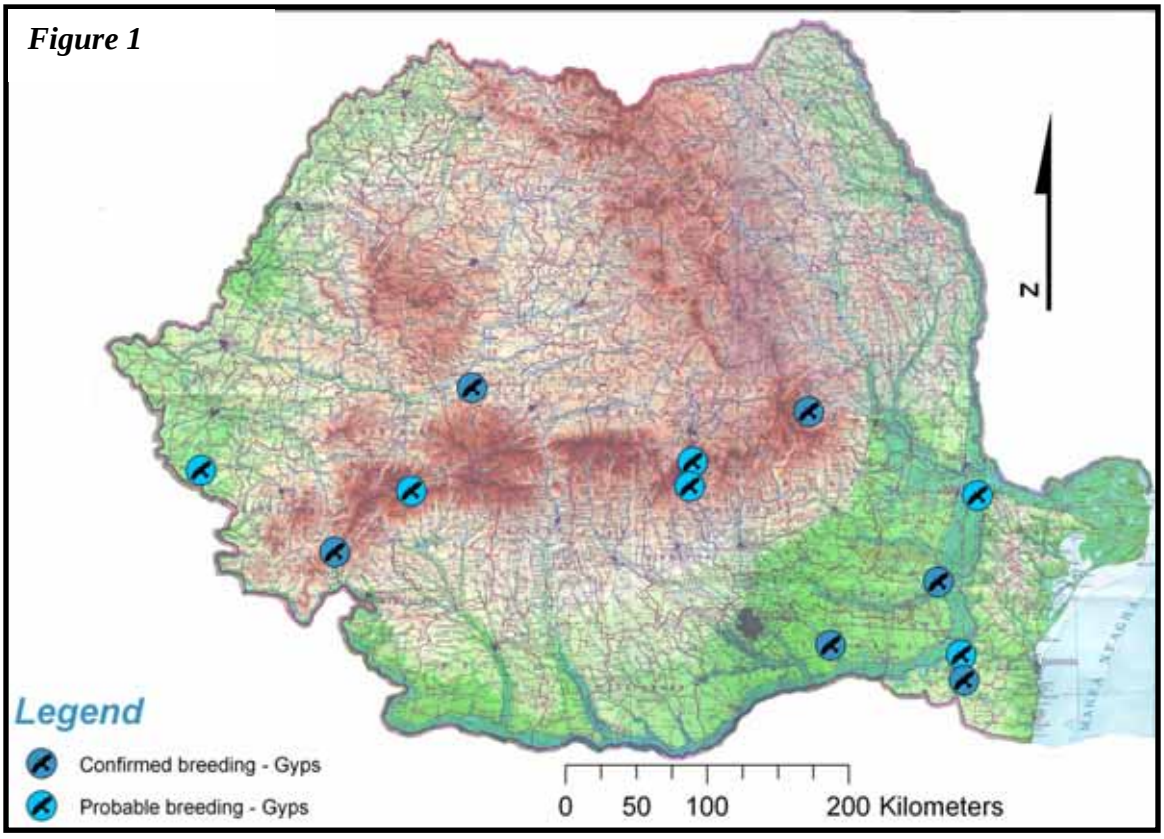
Foto: Dick Forsman
Source: www.dickforsman.com

is no relevant information with regards to the historical breeding population size in Romania; however the literature offers some insight in the situation of the last century. Very large aggregations of Griffons were documented for example in the Retezat Mountains (700-800 specimens on one place, in mid August 1927) (*Linția 1954*), where in 1917 it is considered a very common species "especially after the fledging of the nestlings" (*Linția 1954*). Despite of the fact that in the beginning of the 20th century every author mentions it as a common species, there are very few concrete data concerning the breeding of the species.

Breeding

Our database dedicated to vultures contains 68 observations about the species. These are only data certainly coming from Romania, while the origin of some museum specimens

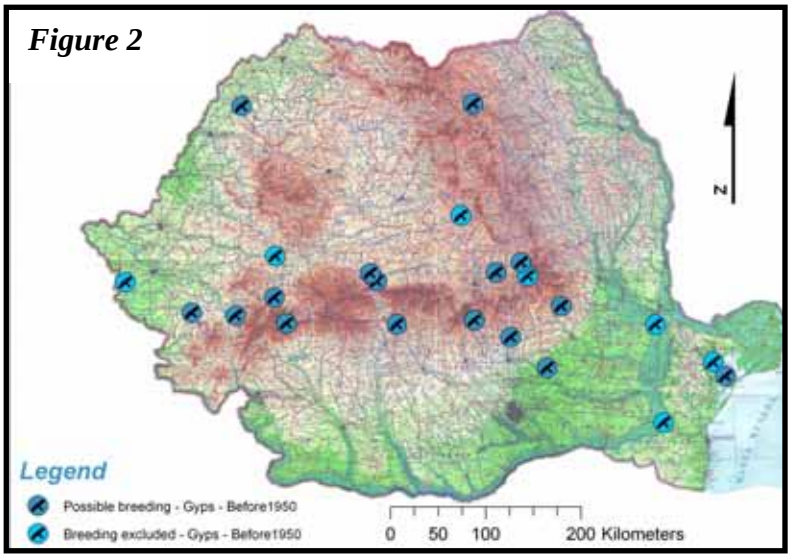
Figure 1



and published information could not be surely identified, thus these were excluded from the database. Yet very few elements of this database offer concrete evidence of breeding with exact location. Only 6 such concrete data exist from Romania, most of these are linked to collecting eggs or nestlings, or published because of unusual breeding behavior

(such as the solitary breeding of a pair in white-tailed eagle nest in the Danube floodplains at Ostrovul Strambu in 1903) -(*Linţia 1909, 1944, 1954, Mihalciuc 1973, Stein-Spiess 1956*). There is very little information about size or exact location of the colonies. Further 6 observations are probably referring to breeding birds, but without concretely confirming incidence of breeding (*Dobay 1938*, *Linţia 1931, 1944, 1954*). Figure 1. shows the location of these confirmed and probable breeding sites. The scarcity of the information is probably due to the formerly very common status of the species, which resulted in neglecting the existent knowledge about the species. Figure 2. presents the location of the published observations up to 1950. On this figure we presented the data which are definitely not about breeding birds and also those cases where – even if the breeding theoretically cannot be excluded – its incidence is not probable. The two kinds of data are graphically differentiated on the map.

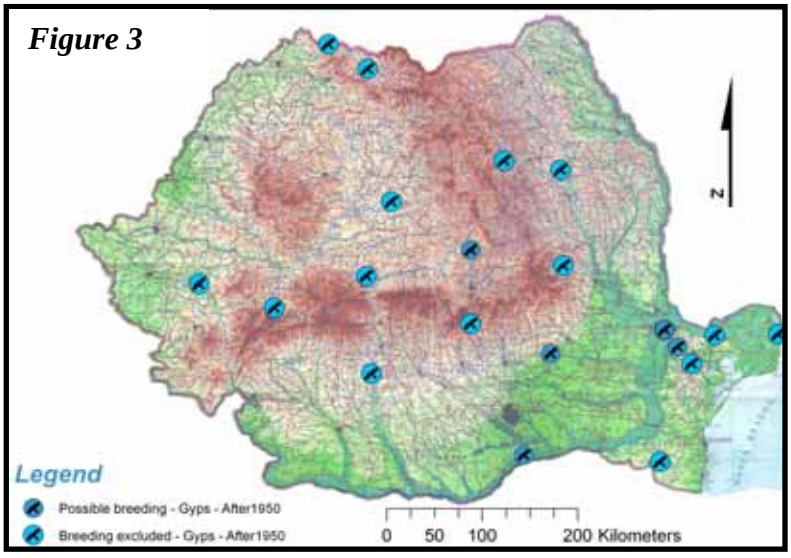
Figure 2



Recent observations

There are only 24 observations from 1950 until the present days. It is worth to note that in the more than 30 year period between 1964 and 1997 there is only one record of a dead (starved) juvenile in Cristeşti on 16th of August 1976 (*Kohl 1983*). Eleven of these observations were

Figure 3



made in the last 10 years. In Romania the number of birdwatchers able to provide undoubtful data increased if compared to the situation of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980's. Yet this change is definitely not large enough to explain the distribution of the observations during these decades. The reasons for the increased number of observations in the last 10 years is not clear for us, as there was no significant increase in the Griffon populations of the neighboring countries (*according to the information provided on the 2nd BVAP Workshop*, *small increase in the anyhow little Serbian and Bulgarian populations, decrease in Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia, etc*.). Figure 3 is presenting the observations from 1950 up to the present days.

Since the late 1960's and concluding from our database there is no sign of the breeding of the species in the country. On Figure 3 the "possible breeding" means that the breeding could not be excluded because of the observation's the timing and/or age of the specimen(s) observed.

4. Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

The Egyptian Vulture persisted for the longest period as a breeding species in the Romanian fauna. The species was breeding mainly in the extreme South Eastern and extreme South Western part of Romania. Confirmed breeding occurred exclusively on warm, South facing rocks, in the sub-mediterranean climatic zone of Romania.

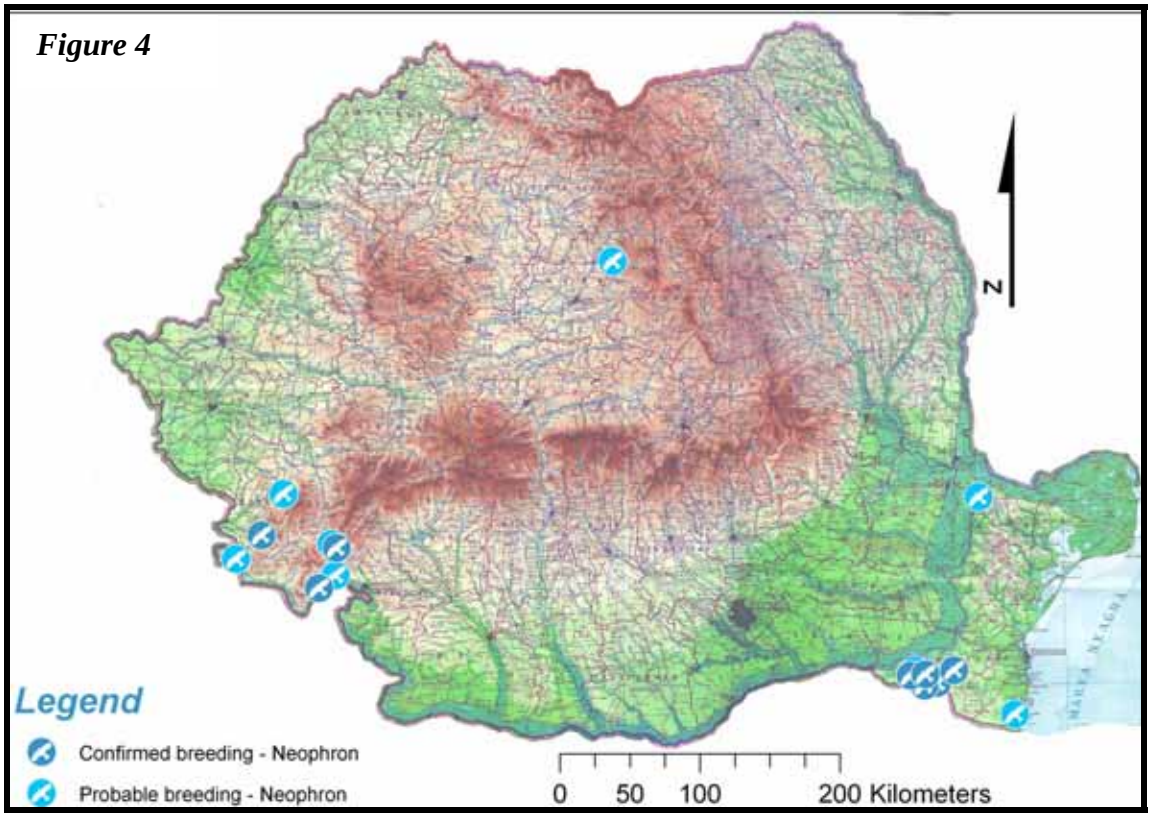
Foto: Dick Forsman
Source: www.dickforsman.com

Breeding

The Egyptian Vulture was probably always a scarce and localized breeder in Romania. It was a rare breeder in the Cerna-Domogled area as well as in the Danube

Gorge. The latest confirmed breeding published from South-West Romania is very old, originating from 1930 (*Linția 1944*), but very probably breeding persisted in the region up to the 1970-80's – in this period adults were still observed during breeding seasons (*Hargens 1983, Munteanu 1983*). The other former stronghold of the species was Southeastern Romania, with the most persistent breeding pairs in the gorge of Canaraua Fetei, near the small town of Băneasa. The confirmed breeding of the species is documented in the area until 1983, when a nest with 2 nestlings was still recorded in the gorge (*Hargens 1983*). The Egyptian Vulture probably was breeding there even longer (supposed to nest even in 1992 *Gogu-Bogdan pers.com*., and adults still in the area in

Figure 4



1994 *Petrescu 1999*) in the region. Bulgarian ornithologists dealing with Egyptian Vulture in North Eastern Bulgaria supposed that even in recent years there were breeding pairs on the Romanian side of the border. Despite regular checking of the traditional breeding areas the nesting could not be proved in recent years, nor birds were recorded in these areas in the last few years.

Recent observations

The rare, but regular observations of the Egyptian Vulture in recent years are almost exclusively concentrated in the Southeastern part of Romania, Dobrogea (*in the last 40 years more than 80% of the observations*). In Dobrogea there are yearly observations of the species from the last 5 years – in some cases incidence of breeding cannot be excluded. Observations from the former Southwestern stronghold of the species are very scarce. There is one recent observation on the 19.06.2005 of an adult bird in suitable breeding habitat in south west (Ulrich 2005).

The status of the Egyptian Vulture in Romania is not well defined for the moment. It is possible that the species is still breeding irregularly in very small numbers. Even if there is a very small population, (according to the negative trends in Bulgaria) very urgent efforts are needed to identify these potential nesting habitats to undertake serious conservation actions.

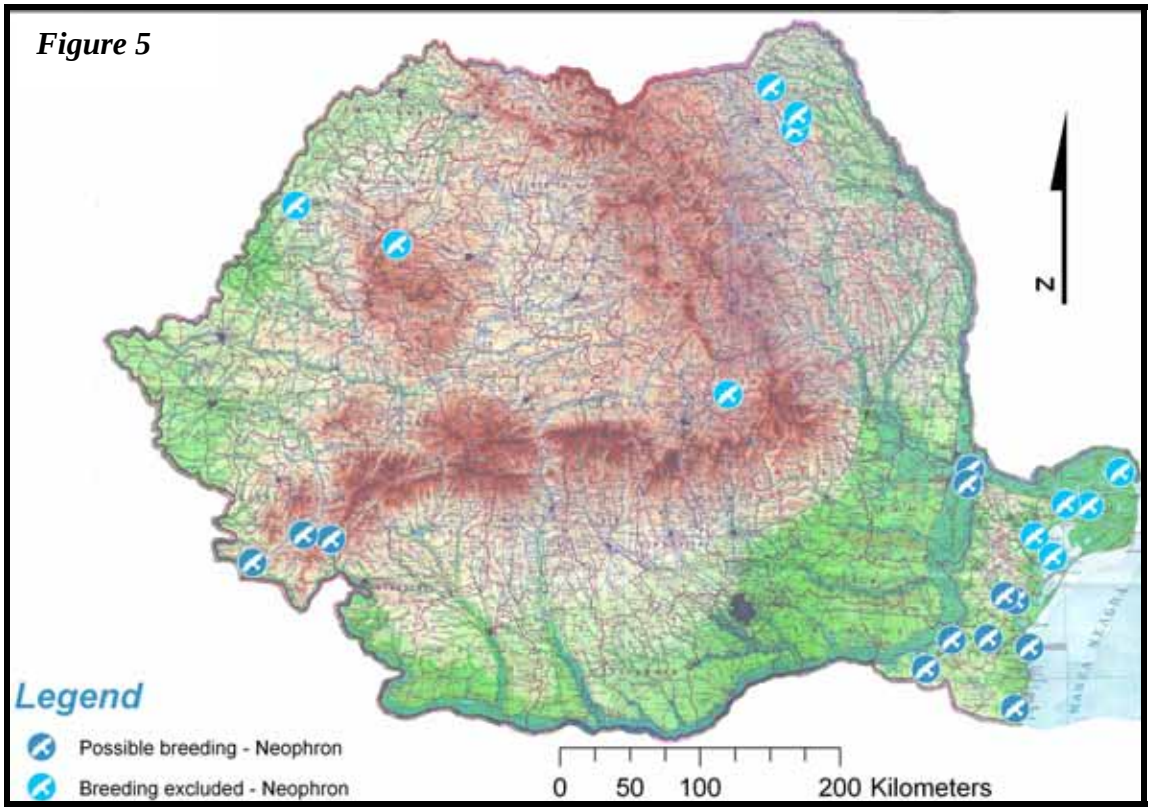


Figure 5 – all the records where breeding is excluded or it's very unlikely, from our dedicated database