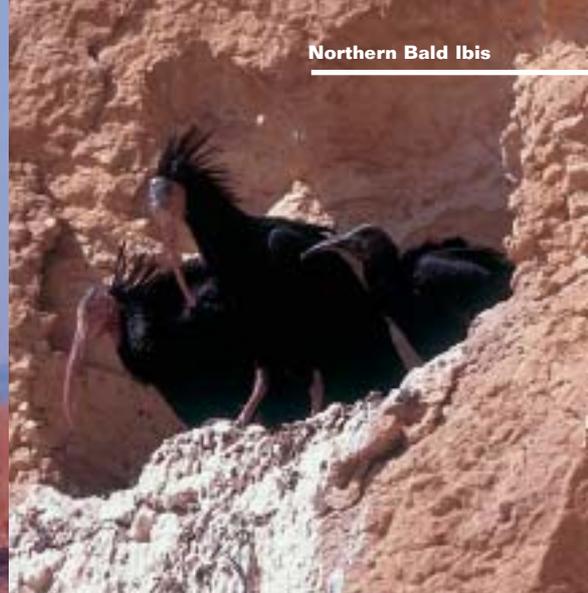




The discovery of Northern Bald Ibises in Syria

Following the demise in 1989 of the colony of Northern Bald Ibises at Bireçik, Turkey, to leave just captive individuals, continued sporadic sightings of birds in the Middle East led many to suspect that wild birds still nested somewhere in the region. However, it wasn't until 2002 that a colony was found, in Syria. Gianluca Serra, of the Palmyra project tells the story.



Credit: Gianluca Serra UN-FAO GCP/SYR/009/ITA

The Northern Bald Ibis was reported as fairly common over the Syrian desert steppe region at the beginning of the 20th Century, but was believed to have gone extinct around 1928. Birds were infrequently sighted in Yemen, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia and Palestine during the 1980–90s, although searches in the Syrian steppes during the 1960–90s failed to locate them.

This discovery of a remnant colony of Northern Bald Ibises in 2002 was the culmination of an exciting two-year intensive programme of wildlife surveying implemented by the Palmyra Wildlife Team within an Italian funded FAO project on Rehabilitation of Rangeland and Conservation of Wildlife in Talila, Syria.

A confession...

For about two years I had been highly skeptical of Adeeb's claim of having seen 'that bird' as he pointed to a Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* in the field guide. "Are you sure, Adeeb?" "Of course, I have never seen such a strange bird before, and I will never forget it".

Adeeb is an experienced hunter from Palmyra, Syria, a village close to the world famous archaeological site. He had trained as a birdwatching guide whilst participating in a wildlife survey of the Syrian steppe under an Italian-funded, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) implemented project (UN-FAO GCP/SYR/009/ITA). The project began in 1996 to help the Syrian authorities initiate biodiversity conservation through the development of the country's first natural reserve at Al Talila, and the ecological rehabilitation of its buffer zone.

In spring 2002, I asked Adeeb to show me the exact location of his claimed Northern Bald Ibis. When we arrived there, I pressed him further, asking for more details of a bird he claimed to have seen at a distance and without binoculars. Eventually he confessed "OK, I actually killed one of

the eight birds I saw here, in April 1998. It looked so strange to me that I took it back to Palmyra to show to my hunting companions. Nobody had seen anything like it before. I even cooked it but found it disgusting."

To his surprise, instead of scolding Adeeb, I leapt gleefully around. The next day I questioned a local shepherd who, without prompting, gave me a clear description of five Northern Bald Ibises he had seen a few days earlier. I grew increasingly excited; it certainly looked as if, contrary to the scientific literature, Northern Bald Ibises hadn't gone extinct in the region in the 1930s.

A month later, I was watching a small colony of three pairs and one lone adult Northern Bald Ibis, incubating eggs on the ledges of a remote limestone cliff...a relict colony, the last wild survivors of the eastern population of Northern Bald Ibises. I could hardly believe my eyes.

The hunt begins...

Following Adeeb's revelations and my meeting with the Bedouin shepherd, I organised a systematic search of suitable habitats over an area of about 17,600 km²,

Opposite: The Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* can be regarded as a significant ecological indicator of the status of Al Badia's ecosystems

Inset: The nesting cliffs of the relict colony discovered by the Wildlife Team

Credit: Gianluca Serra UN-FAO GCP/SYR/009/ITA

Above: The Endangered Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx* was reintroduced to Al Talila reserve, the first functional protected area in Syria

relying heavily on local knowledge for guidance. BirdLife's Mike Evans, the author of *Important Bird Areas in the Middle East*, encouraged me to proceed with my quest, and provided me with the necessary literature.

A standard questionnaire was prepared for interviewing Bedouin nomads and village hunters. It was designed so as not to give clues to the interviewee as to our expectations and consisted of standard questions and four bird photographs, one of them Northern Bald Ibises. 16 local hunters and 31 nomadic shepherds answered the questions satisfactorily and correctly



Above: The Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* is a passage migrant and wintering bird in the Syrian Al Badia

Below: A monitor lizard, *Varanus griseus*, is the largest reptile found within the Al Badia and still survives within Al Talila reserve

The Project Wildlife Team implemented a comprehensive two-year fauna survey aimed at compiling an inventory and photographic record of Al Talila reserve and its surroundings, with the long-term aim of developing the reserve as an ecotourist destination and to produce material for conservation education and awareness raising. Species of invertebrates, reptiles, birds (more than 250) and mammals were identified within the Palmyrean Al Badia. A beetle new to science was found at Al Talila and has been named in its honour: *Aphodaulacus talilensis*.

The Wildlife Team included Gianluca Serra, Mahmud Abdallah and Ghazy Al Qaim (trainee reserve managers), Ahmed Jeber Abdallah, Talal Fayad, Mohammed Al Mohammed and Mnaur Ali (trainee natural history guides) and Adeb Saad (trainee birdwatching guide).

identified the Northern Bald Ibis photograph. They reported a total of 68 sightings, dating from the present day back to the 1930s. The majority referred to the bird by its local name of 'an-nuq'.

Concurrently, a systematic search for old Northern Bald Ibis nesting sites revealed 15 relict localities of varying size. Some of the sites had considerable deposits of guano, suggesting they had been in use for many years. We discovered two particular former nesting colonies whose location matched the description given by Aharoni of two colonies numbering 500 and 300 breeding pairs respectively in 1910.

The real population decline

Our research led to a very different picture to that currently accepted of the demise of the Northern Bald Ibis in Syria. Far from becoming extinct around 1928, it seems the Northern Bald Ibis was still common in the Palmyra desert up to 20 years ago, and was even abundant only 30 years ago. Indeed, a Syrian Ministry of Agriculture decree in 1967, aimed at protecting birds considered beneficial to agriculture, includes a description of a bird that fits the Northern Bald Ibis. It is ironic that whilst the attention of conservationists

was focused during the 1970–80s on saving Bireçik's Northern Bald Ibises, a viable population of several hundred breeding pairs probably existed only some 200 km to the south, in an area of less disturbed habitat.

One lesson we have learned is that far too much reliance was placed on the data collected by one observer, Aharoni, in the early 20th Century, leading to the false belief that Northern Bald Ibises became extinct around 1928. Another lesson is that local knowledge can be crucial when searching for rare and threatened wildlife. The information we collected in 2002 gives us real hope that there are further

breeding colonies still to be discovered in the Syrian steppe.

The inexorable decline of ibises within the Syrian steppe probably occurred because of a combination of uncontrolled hunting, chick removal and habitat degradation. Removal of chicks for food is probably an old practice, but uncontrolled hunting and habitat degradation have intensified in the last 30–40 years, the latter fuelled by technological change, population growth and changes in grazing practices. These threats coincide with the start of the ibises' decline and the loss of several game species from Syria, such as Ostrich *Struthio camelus*, Cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* and Leopard *Panthera pardus*.

Protection programme and data collection

Immediately following the discovery of the colony a 24-hour guard was established over the nesting site. This site, like all the recognised relict nesting sites and those currently used by the species in Morocco, was on a sheer, fragile and rapidly eroding limestone cliff. The guard camp was in operation for 11 weeks until the birds left the breeding area. Three guards from the local community were hired, and observation of the nests carried out daily. Droppings and pellets were collected under the nests on several occasions, while the birds were absent. Analysis of these, combined with direct observation of feeding birds and invertebrate and reptile sampling of feeding areas, revealed a mixed diet of beetles, grasshoppers, juvenile frogs, ants, scorpions, solifugids, lizards and snakes. Three chicks fledged successfully, a comparable breeding success to that of the Moroccan colonies (C. Bowden *pers. comm.*), showing that the colony, despite its small size, is a vital one.

Seven feeding areas were found, the closest at the base of the cliff and the furthest about 27 km distant. Three habitat types were used as feeding areas: stony undulating plains, cultivated areas and an irrigation reservoir. Although the annual rainfall has been below average within the Palmyra area since 1997, the area occupied by the birds received considerable rainfall during the winter of 2001–2002 and, unusually, during the late spring of 2002. This may have been responsible for the birds breeding in 2002. Interestingly, the ibises left the breeding area when the reservoir dried up. We can speculate that the construction of two small dams in the area during the 1960–70s ensured a regular food supply and may be the reason the birds have continued to survive there, despite surrounding habitat degradation.



Conservation aspects

The birds in the recently discovered colony are invaluable because of their unique genetic make-up. These seven survivors of the eastern population are the only ones presently known still to be migratory, unlike the remaining birds in Turkey, all of which were born in captivity and have presumably lost this knowledge.

The BirdLife Middle East Division and the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) were consulted soon after the discovery of the ibises in Syria. BirdLife has a great deal of expertise in the conservation of Northern Bald Ibises, gained over many years of working with this species in its last colonies in Morocco. Representatives visited the Palmyra project to discuss the next steps to be taken. The first priority is to stabilise the relict population, through protecting their feeding and breeding areas. Further surveys must be carried out to locate any other remaining colonies of the birds, and more data on the ecology of the species in Syria are needed. Local law enforcement agencies must be involved to ensure no hunting of the birds takes place, overgrazing of habitats, particularly within a 5 km radius of any nesting colonies, must be discouraged, and agreements must be set up with authorities managing irrigation reservoirs to ensure suitable feeding areas are maintained. Local people should be trained as guards and rangers, and in the longer term the birds' wintering grounds must be located and suitably protected. Importantly all stakeholders should be involved at all levels of the decision-making that will affect the future of this charismatic species.

The eyes of the conservation community will turn towards Syria as the responsibility for ensuring the continued existence of this Critically Endangered species now falls upon the shoulders of the

Above: Nomadic Bedouin pastoralists co-existed with ibises until as recently as 20–30 years ago

Credit: UN-FAO GCP/SYR/009/ITA

Syrian authorities and people. Hopefully they will become proud of this rare bird still surviving in their country and the Northern Bald Ibis will become the symbol of a new conservation concern in Syria. A piece of their natural heritage and a fascinating aspect of Arabic culture is threatened as the life style and cultural heritage of the Bedouin nomads comes under increasing pressure. As the rangelands ecosystem collapses and the productivity of the land declines, these people will be forced to abandon their traditional nomadic way of life through livestock grazing. The conservation of ibises is strictly linked to the future prospects of these people.

Gianluca Serra, Palmyra project (UN-FAO GCP/SYR/009/ITA)

Update on Bald Ibises in Morocco

World Birdwatch readers will be aware of the plans by Club Med to build a holiday development in the immediate vicinity of the main winter feeding grounds of the critically endangered Northern Bald Ibises at Tifnit, Morocco (see *World Birdwatch* 23(3): 2; 24(3): 2). The latest news is that Club Med has withdrawn from this development, at least for the time being. Although the official reason for this is not disclosed, the reduced tourist demand following 11 September, and two reports by the Berne Convention Secretariat, which were based largely on monitoring data collected by the national park/BirdLife team, and came out essentially against tourist development projects at Tifnit, may have been influential in their decision.