

by Cressida Stevens

## **New Partnership To Protect Underdog Species From Direct Threats - Four leading NGOs have joined forces through Restore Species to tackle illegal and unsustainable hunting & trade as well as poisoning of animal species worldwide.**



*Extinctions can be prevented when we have the right commitment. Restore Species—a cooperation between BirdLife International, Wildlife Conservation Society, Fauna & Flora International and TRAFFIC—holds enormous, innovative potential with each of the four partners committing their extensive network of experts, community contacts and vast experience to long-term, strategic collaboration. Cressida Stevens gives details.*

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What do bulbous-nosed Saiga antelope, big-horned Urial sheep, bizarre-beaked Helmeted Hornbills, Caribbean iguanas and African vultures all have in common? As well as being in grave danger of extinction, all suffer at the hands of humans from one or more of three main threats: illegal and unsustainable hunting and trade, and poisoning. Yet if you were to ask someone on the street about the plight of these animals, they would likely be oblivious.

Thankfully, four leading conservation NGOs have joined forces to conduct a large-scale rescue mission for classically overlooked species that are in dire need of deliverance. “Even within protected areas, species can still be directly targeted and face immediate risk of extinction in our lifetimes,” says Roger Safford, BirdLife’s Preventing Extinctions Program Manager. “But healthy populations can be restored if we tackle the root threats that are having the most severe impacts.”



Two magnificent male Kashmir markhor males (*Capra falconeri cashmirensis*, Lydekker 1898; Imran Shah photo). For comprehensive information on markhor, urial, argali and all species and subspecies of wild sheep and goats, refer to *The CIC Caprinae Atlas of the World* by Gerhard Damm and Nicolas Franco.

Restore Species is a collaboration between BirdLife International, Fauna & Flora International (FFI),

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the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and TRAFFIC. The partnership has identified key 'underdog' species that are most affected by one or more of these three direct threats, and in urgent need of help. The pooled resources and expertise will create a powerful saving force.

As an example, let us take you to Central Asia's vast mountain ranges - the realm of the 'mountain monarchs'. With muscular frames and huge, impressive horns, the Urial and Argali sheep, *Ovis vignei* and *Ovis ammon* respectively, and the Markhor and Asiatic Ibex goats, *Capra falconeri* and *Capra sibirica*, make a remarkable catch for hunters. Over-hunting is driving their declines, along with disease and competition for resources with livestock.

Trophy hunting schemes are in place and, though controversial, have proven extraordinarily effective in encouraging local beneficiaries to protect their populations. However, poor management of these schemes often means illegal killing still prevails. Stephane Ostrowski, Ecohealth and Conservation Adviser for WCS Inner Asia, says trophy schemes can prove useful to conservation: "When practiced conservatively, this activity can support conservation efforts, buying time to install better wildlife management and governance, and change minds towards more respectful attitudes to wildlife" (**Editor's note:** *for more information on the conservation and sustainable use of the wild sheep and wild goats of Central Asia, please read Community-Based Wildlife Management in Central Asia and Introduction to the New Central Asian Sustainable Use & Livelihoods Specialist Group, published by Conservation Frontlines*).

Through community-based conservation, WCS has helped local partners reduce the poaching of Markhor goats in Gilgit-Baltistan Province of Pakistan and widespread application of these methods should make a big difference for the future of targeted populations of the 'mountain monarchs'.

Next, a familiar tale for BirdLife supporters: the vulture crisis. Whether these valuable scavengers are deliberately targeted by poachers to obtain body parts for 'belief-based use', or the unintended victims of targeted killing of carnivores that prey on livestock, the result is the same - just one poison-laced carcass can attract, and kill, hundreds of them. Of the 16 vulture species that inhabit Africa, Asia and Europe, 11 are in serious danger of extinction.

Rebecca Garbett, African Vulture Conservation Manager at BirdLife International explains that, while our work is making great headway, coordinated action is the vultures' best hope of a future. "Our Restore Species partners cover almost all of the vast ranges of these birds: it is exactly the kind of challenge that this partnership was set up to tackle."

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Red Headed vulture, aka Asian King vulture, Indian black vulture or Pondicherry vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*) is Critically Endangered and mainly found on the Indian subcontinent, with small disjunct populations in some parts of Southeast Asia. Photo Credit: Phearun Sum, BirdLife International

Illegal wildlife trade is a hugely lucrative business with long arms that reach through protected area boundaries, and compounds the threats already faced by many of the species covered by Restore Species. Through analyses of trade records combined with market surveys and observations of increasingly silent forests, TRAFFIC, BirdLife and others have uncovered a crisis in the Asian bird-trading business.

Soaring demand for forest songbirds, coupled with easier access to their habitats and lack of trapping legislation puts many species in danger. Birdkeeping in countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam is as culturally established as dog ownership in the west, so action must allow this intrinsic local custom to continue in a sustainable way.

“Concern about this age-old culture-turned-problem has never been higher than it is today”, says Kanitha Krishnasamy Director for TRAFFIC in Southeast Asia. “This gives us the opportunity to turn the tide – governments and conservation organizations must collectively work to shift the needle from evidence to influence and impact.” Restore Species will work to monitor trade levels of priority bird species, support law enforcement, create trapping-free sites throughout Southeast Asian forests, and use a range of approaches including evidence-based behavior change to reduce demand.

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Another focus is on the unsustainable trade in the dazzling endemic reptiles of the Caribbean. Highly sought-after as pets, unfortunately the rarest species fetch the greatest profits, such as the Union Island Gecko *Gonatodes daudini*, a tiny, Critically Endangered reptile with jewel-like markings that is confined to just 50 hectares of forest in St Vincent and the Grenadines. But Dr Rebecca Drury, Program Manager of Conservation Partnerships at FFI, says its chances are improving: “Since the patrols started in Union Island, a sharp drop in signs of reptile poachers has been reported. We are confident that, with the measures in place on the ground and the international actions we are taking, its status will improve.”

All these species play fundamental parts within their ecosystems. Argali and Asiatic Ibex are important prey species for Snow Leopards *Panthera uncia*, and vultures curb the spread of disease among wildlife. Furthermore, with the recent revival of trade in the casques of Helmeted Hornbills *Rhinoplax vigil* comes collateral damage of countless other birds as poachers shoot at any flying large bird, especially other hornbill species. Rescuing these ‘underdogs’ will therefore have positive knock-on effects for wider biodiversity, though they are of course absolutely worth saving in their own right.

Richard Grimmett, Director of Conservation, BirdLife, summarizes the importance of this new partnership: “We can prevent extinctions when we have the right commitment. Restore Species holds enormous, innovative potential with each of the four partners committing their unique strengths and vast experience to long-term, strategic collaboration.” With such an extensive network of experts, community contacts across the globe and supporters’ generous donations, these animals are finally receiving the attention they deserve.

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*Banner Photo: Male Saiga (Saiga tatarica), Photo Credit Navinder Singh*