

CABANEROS: A CONSERVATION SUCCESS FOR RAPTORS IN SPAIN

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In 1978 we reported the efforts to safeguard Monfragüe, a very special area in Western Spain (Meyburg & Meyburg 1973). Its declaration as a *Parque Natural* (nature park) by the Government led to the establishment of the first large reserve in Spain to protect typical Mediterranean flora and fauna. Recently a second *Parque Natural*, Cabañeros, ecologically equally important, has been set aside in Central Spain after several years of struggle. It includes large tracts of primeval cork oak forest and natural vegetation almost undisturbed by man.

Situated in the north-west of the Province of Ciudad Real in the Montes de Toledo, Cabañeros has up to recently been the most extensive private estate in Europe (24,000 ha.). The highest elevation of its Sierra del Chorito is 1,045m above sea level; the climate is mild Mediterranean (precipitation 600mm per year). Here breeds the second largest known colony of Black Vultures in Spain and hence in the world. This very rare and declining species has disappeared from most of its former range in Europe (Meyburg & Meyburg 1984, 1987). Spain alone still has a sizeable population of several hundred pairs. In 1987, 78 pairs of vultures were counted in Cabañeros; 60 young fledged, four clutches were lost and 14 pairs failed to lay; but now this colony was acutely endangered by plans to create a training field for the Spanish Air Force and NATO allies. Part of this would be used as a bombing range, and the whole would become the largest training ground of its type in Spain. This plan had already been put forward several years before but had been dropped following massive protests. In 1986, however, the owner of Cabañeros found himself in financial straits which obliged him to make over his land to the Spanish state and the threat of its conversion for military purposes once again reared its ugly head. Various nature protection societies in Spain appealed to nature-lovers throughout the world to support them by writing letters to the Spanish authorities, urging them to abandon this plan and declare Cabañeros a National Park. During the III World Conference on Birds of Prey at Eilat in March 1987, a Resolution was unanimously adopted urging the protection of Cabañeros. There was always some hope that this could be successful, since the Spanish government was by no means fully agreed on approving the scheme. In particular, the autonomous administration of Castilla-La Mancha was strongly opposed to it.

The importance of Cabañeros does not only depend on the presence of the Black Vultures. It is also an area in which the fauna and flora of the Mediterranean have remained preserved in a unique fashion. In the course of the many months which we spent studying raptors in Spain, visiting many Black Vulture colonies in particular, we never came across a region so extensive and so perfectly untouched by man. Even the Nature Park of Monfragüe, which contains the largest known Black Vulture colony, does not present so well-preserved an aspect. The upper parts are covered with a dense scrub of *Arbutus unedo* and Tree Heather *Erica arborea*, whilst in the moister places there are magnificent stands of Cork Oak *Quercus suber* mixed with Ilex *Quercus ilex*, Spanish Oak *Quercus pyrenaica* and Lusitanian Oak *Quercus faginea*. This upland covers 12,000 ha. - half of the whole area. The remainder, down on the plain, is meadows and farmland. Among other rare species to be found here, one must mention the Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila (heliaca) adalberti* (3 pairs); Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* (3 pairs); Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* (8 pairs); Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* (3 pairs); Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*, Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*, Great Bustard *Otis tarda*, Pardel Lynx *Lynx pardino*, Otter *Lutra lutra*, Genet *Genetta genetta* and Mongoose *Herpestes ichneumon*.

The establishment of a military training field in Cabañeros would have violated the Bern Convention, signed by Spain in 1986 (Chapter III, Article 6, * b) since many of the species which breed there are included as strictly protected in Appendix II. It would also flout the EEC Bird Directive (79-409-CEE, Article 4) and the Spanish Law on Protected Species (Real Decreto 3181/1980, 30 December and Real Decreto 14971/1986 of 6 June). The proposed bombing range would certainly have led to environmental changes with a negative impact on the protected species listed above. Not only would animals have been killed but there would also have been inevitable forest fires and many animals would have left the area due to disturbance during the breeding season. Even if the vultures became accustomed to the training flights, more than 200 of these birds, each weighing up to 12kg, would have formed a major threat to low-flying aircraft and it would certainly have been necessary to eliminate the whole colony to protect human life and equipment.

At the same time as José Bono, President of the Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha, was initiating, a few days before the local elections, the procedure whereby Cabañeros could be established as a Nature Park, this area was being offered by the Ministry of Defence to NATO as a military training ground. Two days later, on 5 June 1987, it was stated in the press that it was legally possible to convert even a Natural Park into a military zone if this was justified for reasons of national security. On 6th June a petition urging the protection of Cabañeros and signed by 117 Spanish and international scientists was handed to the Government. On 7 June a Phantom Jet crashed in another military training area after colliding with a vulture, causing the death of two pilots. The Minister of Defence, Narciso Serva, declared on 7 August that no definite decision would be taken before September. On 13 October the Ministry paid the owner the 500 million pesetas remaining due, thereby officially confirming and concluding the purchase of the estate, and announced that this terrain was regarded as ideal for military manoeuvres. However, on 22 November 1987, during peak



Greeting display of a pair of Black Vultures *Aegyptius monachus*. Photo: B.-U. Meyburg

viewing time, Spanish television screened a documentary on Cabaneros which included the release of a Black Vulture there. The Prime Minister of Spain, Felipe Gonzalez, declared on 29 November in a radio broadcast that he hoped that Cabaneros would become a Natural Park.

Even so, the situation regrettably showed no signs of improvement. On 14th December 1987, 1,200 people demonstrated in Toledo against the establishment of a military training ground. On 24th December it was announced that Cabañeros would become simultaneously a wildlife park and training ground. However, after months of uncertainty and massive national and international protest, 25,615 hectares of Cabaneros were finally officially declared a Nature Park in a decree issued by the government of Castilla-La Mancha dated 11th July 1988.

This is a fine example of how, in a democratic country, it is perfectly possible for nature conservation interests to win the day. It should not be forgotten, however, that Cabañeros has been gradually shrinking from its original extent of almost 100,000 ha. Fortunately the major part of the Black Vulture colony breeds in this now protected central area. The military training ground originally planned here will be situated 20 km further west in Anchuras. It should further be remembered that the new training area is also of great ecological importance, although not to the same extent for the Black Vulture. Following recommendations by the Ministry of Defence, a government decree approved the establishment of a target range near the town of Anchuras (Ciudad Real Province) on 20 July 1988, declaring the area to be of importance for national security. The 67.5 km² training ground, formerly to be situated in Cabañeros, was selected by experts of the Ministry of Defence out of twelve possible sites. The essential prerequisite was that it lies approximately 270 km equidistant from the airforce bases at Torrejon de Ardoz, Moron and Talavera La Real, and is thus easily and economically accessible.

Out of the 67.5 km² only five will be for the use of the army, where a radio station, weather station, landing place for helicopters and staff accommodation will be constructed. Nature-lovers and the local inhabitants are also protesting against this development.

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