

DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS OF THE CINEREOUS VULTURE *Aegypius monachus* IN CHINA

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INTRODUCTION

The Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) is popularly known in Tibet as "XiaGuo" or "Dog-headed Vulture" and in Northern China as "Mountain Eagle", "Gucha" in Qinghai. Records of its being kept in parks date back over a long time, but give no data on breeding. In Tibet the names "God Bird" or "God Eagle", and in Mongolia "Grand Eagle" show that it is an object of religious veneration. It is sometimes also called "Hairless Vulture", due to the naked appearance of the head and neck, covered with brown plumules.

There have been no taxonomic studies of the *Aegypius monachus* population in China, but one Japanese ornithologist, QingQi (1954), has given it subspecific status as *A.m. chinou*.

HABITAT

Observations in the wild and references in the literature give the breeding range of the Cinereous Vulture as follows:

Above 800m in high mountain areas with mixed forest in the Changbai mountains (Futong Sheng *et al.* 1984).

Above 2000m at Xinjiang in the Altay Mountains (Cheng Tso-Hsin *et al.* 1963).

Above 2000 on rocky, grass-covered mountain areas in Sichuan (Li Gei Yan *et al.* 1985).

3000m altitude in regions of alpine meadow and scrub in N-W Sichuan (Cheng Tso-Hsin 1965).

Above 1000m in regenerating forest and scrub on the loess plateau of northern Shangxi (Yao Jianchu 1985).

Between 500m and 3200m in areas of mixed forest, scrub and cultivation in South Shangxi (Cheng Gangmei 1976).

From 780m to over 3400m in mixed conifer and broadleaf forest (*Betula spp.*), with Alpine meadowland and scrub on the slopes of the Qinling Mountains (Cheng Tso-Hsin 1973).

Semi-arid regions with coniferous forest, scrub and meadowland in Ningxia (Wang Xian Tin *et al.* 1977).

770m altitude in an area of swamp, river, lake and desert around Lop Lake in Xinjiang (Gao Xingni *et al.* 1985).

Around 1000m altitude in desert areas of South Xinjiang (Qian Yan Wen *et al.* 1965).

Between 1000m and 4000m in semi-arid, arid and mountainous regions of coniferous forest, Alpine scrub and pasture in Gansu (Wang Xiantin 1981).

Between 3000m and 4500m in coniferous forest, Alpine scrub and pasture or semi-arid grassland in Qinghai (Ye Xiao Ti *et al.* 1988, 1989).

All in all, the breeding habitat of the Cinereous Vulture falls into two different eco-geographical types:

- 1) Mountainous forest and scrub between 780m and 3800m.
- 2) Arid and semi-arid Alpine meadow and grassland, between 3800m and 4500m.

FOOD

According to the data and personal observations in the wild, the food of the Cinereous Vulture is of two types:

- 1) Carrion, consisting mainly of the carcasses, including bones and skin, of animals found in the neighbourhood of the nest site. These include wild Yak (*Bos grunniens*), Blue Sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*), Tibetan Gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*), Ovis ammon, Kiang (*Equus kiang*), Woolly Hare (*Lepus oiostolus*) and Himalayan Marmots (*Marmota spp.*) together with domestic yak, sheep etc., and sometimes even the corpses of human beings.

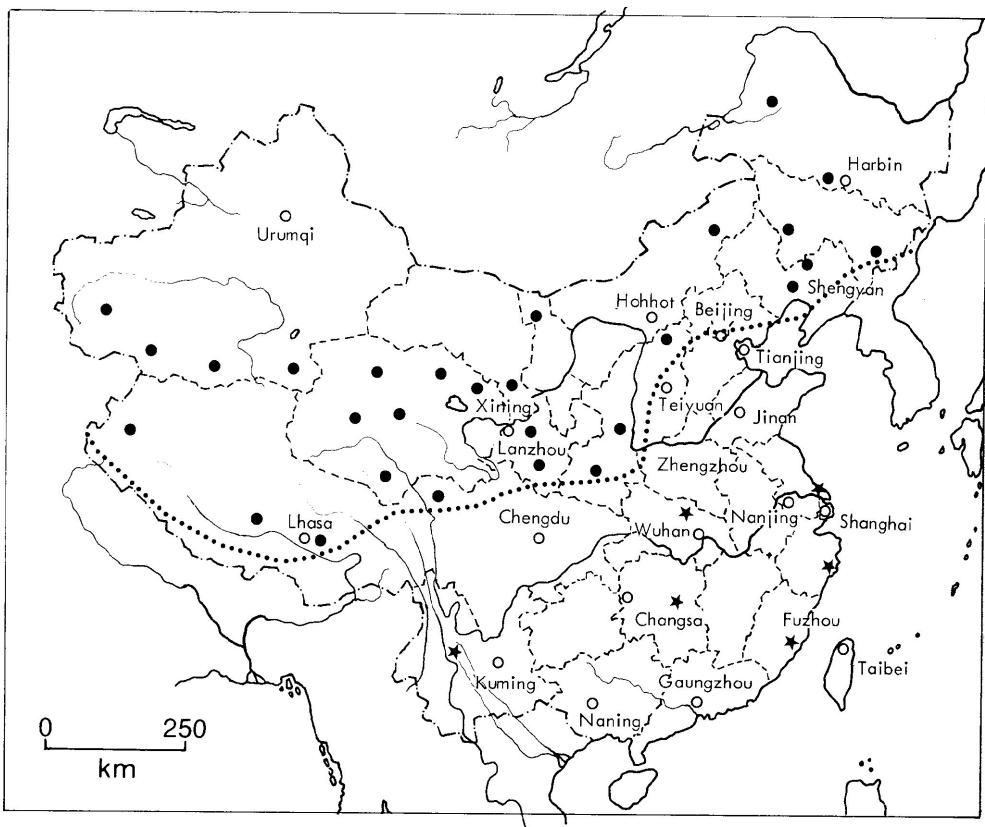
- 2) Live animals such as calves of yak and cattle, domestic lambs and puppies, pig, fox, lambs of wild sheep, together with large birds such as goose, swan and pheasant, various rodents and rarely amphibia and reptiles. Captive vultures in the Xining park zoo are fed on beef, sheep and milk etc.

DISTRIBUTION

Table 1: Breeding range of the Cinereous Vulture and regions outside of which it has been recorded.

Breeding Range	Areas where also recorded
Xinjian: Upper reaches of the Tarim River in south Tianshan, Lop Lake, Pishan to Minfeng, Shache in south XinJian (Scully 1875)	Xizang: West of Xizang mountainous region of south Xizang
Qinghai: Xining (including DaTung, Menyuan, Qi-Lian, Qinghai Lake, Tianjun, Yushu, Golog, Chindu, origin area of Chang Jiang, Qaidam).	Sichuan: Ya'an, Nanchong
Gansu: Tianzhu, Sunan, Subei, Aksay, Pingliang, Wushan, Lanzhou, Ganana, Jone, Maqu, Lintan	Shangxi: Wugong
Sichuan: Zoige	Hubei: Hong'an
Xizang: Lhasa	Jiangsu
Shangxi: Huangling, Shenmu, Fugu, Dingbian, Qinling, South Shangxi	Zhenjiang: Ninbo
North-east China:	FuJian: Fuging
Zhalang (Qiqihar), Shuangtiao (Sipin), Helong, Benxi, Da'wa (Panjin), Tieling, Jinzhou, Chaoyang, Neimongol, Ningxia.	Yunnan: Zhaotong, Mengzi
	Taiwan: Taoyuan, Jiayi

Figure 1. Map showing the distribution in China of the Cinereous Vulture, with the southern boundary line of its breeding range and concentration of population, of which the Qinghai-Xizang plateau forms the centre.



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9x.

It is suggested that this population, found at high mountain altitudes, may be an individual Chinese race of *Aegypius monachus*.

SIZE OF POPULATION

Table 2: Estimate of present numbers of Cinereous Vulture, based on contemporary counts and recorded data.

	Site	Date	Number of birds seen per 10 km	Grade	Estimated Total
XinJiang:	Lop lake	1985	1-4	++	40
Qinghai:	Qinghai Lake	1988-89	5-8	++	50
	Tianjun	1964	5-10	++	60
	Qilian	1989	6	+++	150
	Qaidam	1986	3	++	30
	Yushu	1987	5-10	+++	500
	Golog	1986-87	5-7	+++	300
Sichuan:	Zoige	1965	1-4	++	30
Northeast:		1981-88	1-4	++	250
	Changbei mountain	1984	1	+	20
Gansu:		1981	1-4	++	150
Ningxia:		1985	1-3	++	120
Xizang:	Lhasa	1988-89	1-4	++	60
Total					1760

Key: + = single bird
 ++ = between 1 and 4 birds
 +++ = between 5 and 10 birds

Within the breeding area there is an estimated total of *ca.* 1760 birds.

In Xizang and Qinghai the Cinereous Vulture is one of the species that feed on the corpses of humans put out on the "celestial burial platforms" when they die. Whenever this occurs, from 10 to 50, and sometimes as many as 100 vultures congregate to feed. In Longbotun, Yushu (main breeding site of the Black-necked Crane) 45 vultures counted, and in Batang (Yushu) nearly 100. A roadside count made between Yushu and Nangqen amounted to ca. 35 birds. Because the Tibetans worship the "Eagle" it is protected by them, so that Qinghai, Xizang and Ganan are refuge areas for the vulture. However, in recent years the use of chemical pesticides against rodents has led to the poisoning of a number of vultures and their breeding rate has declined. Many vultures are also trapped or shot for the trade in their feathers. The population is thus decreasing and it is becoming important for their habitat to be protected, research studies to be undertaken and captive breeding to be attempted. Ornithologists should press the Government to establish here a National Park for the vultures.

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