



Researchers discovered a tiny breeding population of rare Northern Bald Ibises (Walldraps) in Syria in 2002. These birds may be the last of this critically endangered species that still migrate. To find out where they go, three birds were trapped, fitted with satellite transmitters, and followed to Ethiopia. Above, one of the tagged ibises. At right, the author listens for a radio signal.

# IBIS QUEST

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAGAN H. SEKERCIOGLU

*Tracking down rare Northern Bald Ibises  
in the hinterlands of Ethiopia*

The day I arrived in Ethiopia, researcher Yilma Dellelegn Abebe of the Ethiopia Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS) was just leaving the capital city, Addis Ababa, to search for three Northern Bald Ibises in a remote, roadless area of the country. These critically endangered birds had been satellite-tagged earlier in Syria by a team of researchers from Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), BirdLife Middle East, and Cambridge University. According to the satellite signals, they had crossed into Ethiopia the previous month and were frequenting an area only some 80 kilometers to the northeast of us.

Also known as the Wall-drap, the Northern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus eremita*) was once common in the Mediterranean area, but the birds now stand in imminent danger of extinction, with fewer than 300 individuals existing in the wild. Until 2002, the only known populations were in Morocco and Turkey, and these birds were nonmigratory. Then researchers found



RAF ABERTS



*Without proper conservation measures, the Northern Bald Ibis has a 50 percent probability of becoming extinct in a decade.*

*Ethiopian villagers (above) crowd around the researchers and point to field-guide illustrations of the kind of ibises they see in the area. Local people are often valuable sources of information on the wildlife they encounter.*

a tiny breeding population in the desert of Syria. They managed to trap two males and one female from the Syrian population and attach both satellite tags and radio-telemetry transmitters to the birds so their migratory route and wintering location could be traced. These were the birds that Yilma hoped to locate.

My friend Claire Spottiswoode, an ornithologist from South Africa, had delivered radio-tracking equipment to Yilma to help find these birds with the help of Raf Aerts, who was doing forestry research in Ethiopia. Knowing that I had extensive experience radio-tracking tropical forest birds for my doctoral research, Yilma invited me to join the bald ibis expedition.

I was excited about this expedition, particularly because the Northern Bald Ibis has been a major conservation symbol in my native Turkey for many years. Unfortunately these

birds now live in a semi-captive state in Birecik, southeastern Turkey. Although they were widespread in Europe during the Middle Ages, the distribution of the bald ibis has been shrinking for centuries in parallel with the spread and intensification of agriculture. Without proper conservation measures, this species has a 50 percent probability of becoming extinct within a decade. Although there were still thousands of Northern Bald Ibises in Turkey in the 1950s, most of these mainly insectivorous birds were wiped out as a result of DDT spraying campaigns in the 1960s. Fewer than 100 individuals exist in the country now, and they no longer migrate. The last three birds to migrate left Birecik in 1989 and died after they returned. The remaining ibises were brought into captivity soon after. Currently, they are let out of their cages during the breeding season, but are lured back into them with food as the migration period approaches, for fear that they

will leave and never come back. It is likely that these birds no longer know how to migrate, so finding a migrating population of seven birds in the Syrian Desert four years ago was a major ray of hope. The only other population consists of about 280 nonmigrating birds in Morocco, so the Syrian birds are probably the last migrating bald ibises. I was dying to see them, but they lived in a remote, undisclosed location in the middle of the Syrian Desert.

However, the RSPB/BirdLife/Cambridge University team succeeded in capturing three of them and was using the satellite tags they had placed to track the whereabouts of these mysterious birds. The ibises had headed down the Rift Valley to Yemen and, after a few weeks, crossed the Red Sea to settle in the Ethiopian highlands for the winter. The purpose of our expedition was to find these wintering grounds. The area had many bird species mostly or entirely limited to Ethiopia, and I was also looking forward to finding the likes of Blue-winged Goose, Wattled Ibis, Black-winged Lapwing, White-collared Pigeon, Somali Wheatear, Thick-billed Raven, White-billed Starling, Swainson's Sparrow, Brown-rumped Seed-eater, Abyssinian Siskin, and Ankober Serin. Equally exciting was the chance to see Gelada baboons,



the males of which have huge canine teeth and manes more impressive than those of lions.

Within a few hours of arriving in Ethiopia on October 2, I left Addis Ababa with my driver Sisay Sayfu, and joined Mengistu Wondafrash, head of EWNHS, Yilma, Raf, and the rest of the team in Debre Birhan (The Mountain of

*It took hours of driving cross-country through jagged rocks, muck, and mire for the researchers to get to the area where the satellite data indicated the birds should be. They drove in a convoy of three four-wheel-drive vehicles and got stuck several times (left).*





Author Cagan Sekercioglu (in white T-shirt and binoculars) and the research crew celebrate the discovery of the bald ibises with breakfast. From left to right, Tadesse Wegdersse, Raf Aerts, Hadgu, a local villager (in wool cap), Yilma Dellelegn Abebe, Tewabe Ashenafi, and Mengistu Wondafrash.

Light), a city 2,600 meters above sea level and about 130 kilometers northeast of the capital. Although we had GPS coordinates of the birds' location, obtained by a satellite the previous week, the area had no roads. Despite his years of off-road driving experience in Ethiopia, Raf had failed to reach them, so we decided to try another route.

The next morning, I got up at 6:00 A.M. to go birding with Yilma and was delighted to see all but three of the local specialty birds in the course of two hours. We set out from Debre Birhan at 9:00 A.M. and got onto a dirt road heading southeast toward Denneba, where Kenea Gadisaa, regional head of the Bureau of Agricultural and Natural Resources (BOANR), joined us, along with Tadesse Wegdersse and Tewabe Ashenafi. According to the map, we could drive only up to Arbi Gebeya (Friday Market), after which it was another 13.5 kilometers to the area where the ibises were most likely to be. After an hour, our convoy of three four-wheel-drive vehicles got off the dirt road onto a rough track which at times disappeared in fields of *tef*—the iron-rich and highly nutritious grain used to make the pancakelike *injera*, staple of the Ethiopian diet.

In Arbi Gebeya, we were glad to see that we could drive farther, albeit on a rough track with sharp basaltic rocks reminding me of the highly volcanic past of the highlands. A few times we had to stop, and with local people's help, filled the muddy holes with rocks until the vehicles could get through without sinking. After a few hours, we finally reached the end of the track, which ended on a small plateau overlooking a valley with a stream and small lakes—ideal ibis habitat. Surprisingly, we did not get any flats during the atrocious drive, but the Land Rover's suspension had been damaged and would need to be repaired. The hour was already past 4:00 P.M. It was going to get dark in two hours, and according to the coordinates we had, we were still 6.5 kilometers from the center of the 4 square kilometers where the birds were spending most of their time, according to the satellite data.

Most disconcertingly, we could not receive any signals with the radio-tracking equipment we had. During the past five years, I had radio-tracked more than 400 birds in Costa Rica. The fact that we could not receive a signal from any of the tags suggested that the problem was with the receiver. Although theoretically it should

have worked, the only signal we received was Radio Addis, which came in loud and clear. This greatly amused the villagers surrounding us, who also thought my telescope was road-surveying equipment. A very brief signal that seemingly came from Sultan, one of the tagged birds, was most likely random interference. Of course, it was possible that the batteries had died prematurely and the radio tags on the birds were no longer functional.

It was late, and the broken Land Rover had to go back to Debre Birhan for repairs. Raf, his assistant Hadgu, Sisay, and I decided to stay in the nearby village of Woke. Our dinner consisted of *biskits*—balls of dough fried in oil. Not having had lunch, we were overjoyed to get four *biskits* per person. The hospitality of the villagers did not end there: we were treated to a traditional coffee ceremony that night. Coffee is thought to have originated in the Ethiopian province of Kaffa, and the drink has a central place in the Ethiopian culture. A woman first slowly roasted the coffee beans on a metal pan over a wood fire. After that, another woman pounded them for 20 minutes with a mortar and pestle while the water came to a boil then brewed the strong, dark beverage over the fire. I was surprised to be served coffee in brand new china, in a village that mostly consisted of mud huts and animal corrals. The coffee ceremony is not for the caffeine-sensitive or the time-constrained. It takes nearly two hours to go through the three rounds of coffee, and it is rude to leave before the third cup has been drunk. Fortunately, I was too exhausted from the long day for the caffeine to have much impact.

Not having brought my sleeping bag, I decided to sleep in the cramped backseat of my vehicle. I was tortured by chiggers and mosquitoes and was definitely not dressed for the cold at an altitude of nearly 3,000 meters. After a long, tormented night in which exhaustion, hypothermia, and Lariam (the antimalarial drug I was taking) competed to induce the most bizarre nightmares, I was more than ready to get moving when my watch went off at 5:30 A.M. on the morning of October 4.

We soon set out toward the southwest. About four kilometers from Woke, we reached a lake with Greater Flamingos, Sacred Ibises, Hadada Ibises, endemic Wattled Ibises—but not the Northern Bald Ibises we were seeking. Nor did we receive any radio signals from the birds. At the lake, Mengistu, Yilma, Tadesse, and the others caught up with us, after getting the Land Rover fixed and driving back to Woke. We set out again toward where the birds were satellite-located about a week earlier. Twenty minutes later, at about 9:15, I saw some tantalizing, big, dark birds near a pond, and upon checking them with binoculars was amazed to see that they were the bald ibises. Unable to



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believe our luck, finding them four kilometers away from where they spent most of their time, I said: "There are some interesting ibises over there." Putting my scope on them, I could indeed see they were the same species I had watched flying over Birecik cliffs the previous year. I could even see one bird's leg bands and the antenna sticking out of its back feathers. I jumped up and down with triumph and must have looked like a deranged chimpanzee to the shepherd watching us from a distance.

*A villager roasts coffee beans during the elaborate coffee ceremony. Coffee is thought to have originated in the Ethiopian province of Kaffa and has a central place in the nation's culture.*



*Cagan Sekercioglu and the other researchers finally found the three satellite-tagged ibises along with one untagged bird along the shore of a remote pond (above). At right, below, sits an "Ethiopian" African Stonechat—one of the many interesting local birds the author saw during the search for the bald ibises.*

We were all ecstatic to have found them in the middle of nowhere, since the radio telemetry equipment we had was definitely not receiving any signals from the birds even when we were within 50 meters of them. According to the satellite data, the birds frequented an area of about 100 square kilometers, and they could have gone even farther since being last located the previous week.

We had been very lucky. This was a lush, cultivated valley with small lakes and a stream, and from the droppings and feathers, it was obvious that the birds were using a rocky outcrop on the lakeshore as their roosting site. They were hanging around near some huts and were not afraid of people. We could see all three of their leg bands (HL, HH, KL) and all of the birds still had their transmitters. With them was a fourth ibis that, naturally, had no bands or radio, and could be placed on the life list of even the most strict bird lister. Sadly, our hopes that the three tagged birds would lead us to a good-sized flock were not realized, and we wondered if we were looking at the entire migrating bald ibis population in the world. Given that these easily visible and approachable birds winter only 80 kilometers from Addis Ababa but were thought to be extinct in the country, we wondered what other biological marvels await discovery in the vast, mostly roadless hinterlands of Ethiopia.

Although Ethiopia is one of the world's poorest countries, its biological, cultural, historical, and culinary wealth belies its stereotypical image as a land of famine and death, and the Ethiopian home of the bald ibis is lush and

fertile. However, 95 percent of the country is deforested, the fertile soils are eroding rapidly, and the Ethiopian people and wildlife need the urgent support of wealthier nations. Only then can we ensure the future of the unique and fascinating biological and cultural diversity of this amazing country. I am still hopeful that the wealthier nations will do their share and one day the Turkish bald ibises will join the Syrian ones on their migration to Ethiopia. ■

*Cagan H. Sekercioglu is a senior research scientist at Stanford University. His Ethiopia Bird Education Project is supported by the Christensen Fund.*



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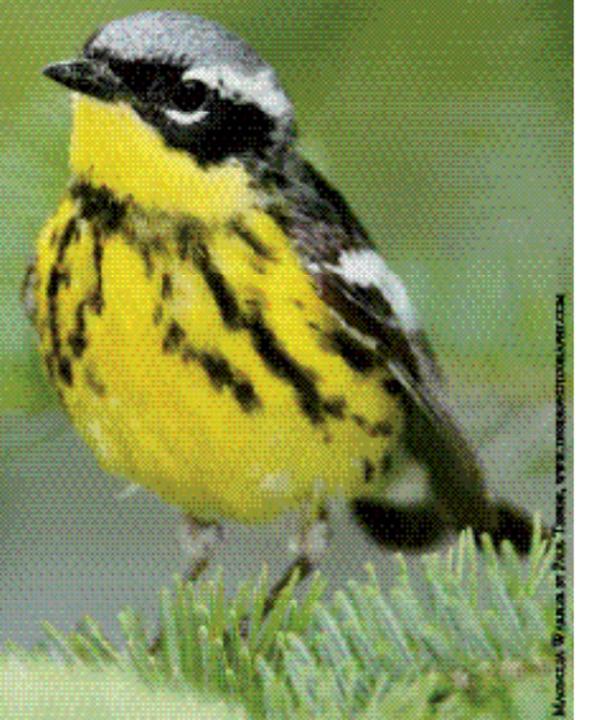
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