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BRUNO WÄGLI

A Ph.D in contemporary history, enjoys nothing more than to go on extended photo trips to remote areas. He fell in love with southern Africa and its abundant wildlife: Namibia, Botswana, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and above all, Zambia are countries he likes to rediscover time and time again. Other favorite places of his include the northern and southern polar regions (Antarctica, Greenland, Spitzbergen), Alaska, and the Yukon. Bruno also keeps chasing new motifs in his home country of Switzerland, where the natural beauty of the Alps and of the many lakes and rivers never cease to excite him.



NICK DALE

Nick dreamed of becoming a photographer when he was 15, but his mother wanted him to go to Oxford instead! After working as a strategy consultant, he retired at 29 and went 'quality of life'. He's now a teacher, writer, speaker, judge and international award-winning wildlife photographer. He's visited 36 countries on all seven continents, but he now spends the most time in Africa, where he's worked as the Resident Photographer at various safari lodges in Botswana, Kenya and Tanzania.



JISS SOJAN

One of India's most accomplished travel and wildlife photographers, Jiss Sojan is a professional fine art wildlife photographer, mentor and a Nikon professional. In the last 10 years, he has pushed his limits as a photographer to do work that is compelling as well as scientifically essential. Jiss's deep-rooted fascination and dedication to the natural world has given him a diverse portfolio of photographic skills: whether it be macro photography, portraiture, wildlife or landscapes. He has trekked the highest reaches of the Himalayas in search of the exclusive snow leopard and brown bear. His work has been published in some of the most respected websites and publications. His work reflects his passion for environmental and wildlife conservation.

THE BEARDED VULTURE IS BACK!

by Bruno Wägli

On a cold February morning, standing on a windy ridge on a pass with a few brave, thickly hooded photographers with long lenses attached to their cameras, I'm hoping for an encounter with an exceedingly rare bird.

After about three hours, far down in the valley, we catch our first glimpse of something significantly larger than a chough or a golden eagle. Leisurely and without flapping its wings, solely relying on the thermal up winds, the king of the Alps soars out of the valley basin straight into the sights of the waiting cameras.

My first ever encounter with a bearded vulture will always remain an unforgettable experience.



A good thirty years ago, no bearded vultures (*Gypaetus barbatus*) could be found in Switzerland. At the beginning of the 20th century, they were brought to

extinction because they were said to prey on lambs, chamois and even babies. This was, of course, superstition and complete nonsense.



Juvenile Bearded vulture above
Plattenhörner, Valais, Switzerland
NIKON Z 8, NIKKOR Z 600mm f/6.3 PF VR
1/2500 sec, f/7.1, ISO 180



It required a lot of effort and determination for its reinstatement as the largest bird in the alpine wilderness. The first reintroductions took place in Austria in 1986, followed by France in 1987, and since 1991, bearded vultures have been successfully reestablished in the Swiss Alps. Today, there are around 50 breeding pairs in Switzerland.

Juvenile Bearded vulture; above Plattenhörner, Valais, Switzerland

*NIKON D4S, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR
1/4000 sec, f/9, ISO 800*

Juvenile Bearded vulture;
above Plattenhörner, Valais, Switzerland,
NIKON D4S, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR
1/2500 sec, f/9, ISO 800, -0.67



With a wingspan of 2.6 to almost 3 meters and a weight of 5 to 7 kilograms, the bearded vulture is impressive and considerably larger than the better-known golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), which has a wingspan of around 2 meters and usually weighs 3 to 5 kilograms. Young vultures have dark plumage.

At 4 years, their head, chest, and belly begin to turn white, while their backs remain gray black. All bearded vultures search for waterholes with sediments containing iron oxide. Extensive bathing in such puddles causes their breast plumage to turn bright orange red. The reason for this behavior has not yet been discovered.

Further characteristics are the beard that gives the Bearded Vulture its name, the long and pointed wings, the spade-shaped tail, and the red rings that appear around the eyes when the vulture is excited.



Adult Bearded vulture; above Gemmipass, Switzerland
NIKON Z 8, NIKKOR Z 600mm f/6.3 PF VR S
1/2500 sec, f/6.3, ISO 80

Adult Bearded vulture, Plattenhörner, Valais, Switzerland

NIKON D4S, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR

1/3200 sec, f/6.3, ISO 200, -0.67



Bearded vultures reach sexual maturity at the age of 5-7 years. They live monogamously and usually breed for the first time at the age of 9, which is why natural reproduction is terribly slow and why reintroduction is supported by targeted measures.

Bearded vulture couples often build huge nests in inaccessible niches in rocks. The female usually lays two eggs in late December or January in particularly harsh weather conditions. The young birds hatch in March, around the time the snow begins to melt and numerous carcasses of wild animals that have died during the winter are uncovered.

Only the stronger of the two young birds survives. They take off on their first flight at around 120 days, about 4 months of age.



Adult Bearded vulture looking curiously at photographers

*NIKON D4S, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR
1/2500 sec, f/6.3, ISO 200, -0.67*



**Adult Bearded vulture;
above Gemmipass, Switzerland**
*NIKON D4S, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR
1/4000 sec, f/6.3, ISO 200, -0.67*

This is the only vulture species that specializes in feeding on the bones of dead animals. Their handling of large pieces of bone is remarkable: the bones are dropped from a great height onto scree slopes until they shatter.

Due to their special diet, bearded vultures share their habitat with other alpine animals such as golden eagles, alpine choughs (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*), ravens (*Corvus corax*) and foxes. The Alpine accentor (*Prunella collaris*) and the snow sparrow (*Montifringilla nivalis*) can also be found in the same regions.

Alpine cough; Gemmipass, Switzerland
NIKON D4, NIKKOR 14.0-24.0 mm f/2.8 @ 19mm
1/2000, f/16, ISO 1000, -0.33



Adult Bearded vulture above Leukerbad, Valais, Switzerland

NIKON D4S, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR
1/2000 sec, f/6.3, ISO 200, -0.67


Bearded vultures can be observed in various places in the Swiss Alps, sometimes and with a lot of luck even while skiing or from a chairlift. The Gemmi Pass between the cantons of Bern and Valais has established itself as a hotspot. It lies at an altitude of around 2400 meters (about 149 mi) and can be reached by cable car from Leukerbad. If the conditions are right, you will find a group of photographers there – watching bearded vultures is often a group event.

Adult Bearded vulture; above Gemmipass, Switzerland

NIKON D4, NIKKOR 500mm 1/4.0 VR
1/800 sec, F/11, ISO 1000, -0.33



The best time of the year for sightings is usually February and March, when there is still plenty of snow to serve as a reflector. The skillful and persistent gliders often take advantage of the updrafts that arise along steep scree slopes or rock faces when enough sunshine warms them up. When searching for the remains of dead animals, they use their eyesight and fly at low altitudes.

A wide-angle photograph of a snowy mountain landscape. Two people, presumably photographers, are standing on a snow-covered ridge in the lower-left quadrant. The mountain slopes are covered in deep, uneven snow with some rocky outcrops visible. The sky is a clear, bright blue. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Photographing bearded vultures requires the right conditions, a lot of patience and a bit of luck, as their population is still very small. One often must wait for hours in the cold and icy winds for the majestic birds to fly by and not all my visits to their habitat have been successful.

**Photographers waiting for the
Bearded vulture; above Gemmipass**
NIKON Z8, NIKKOR Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S @ 290mm
1/3200 sec, 1/6.3, ISO 72

Adult Bearded vulture; above Gemmipass, Switzerland

NIKON D4, NIKKOR 500mm 1/4.0 VR
1/1250 sec. F/11, ISO 1000, -0.33



Sometimes one can see the birds, but they are too far away to capture by camera. But if you are lucky, the ever-curious bearded vulture sails directly over your head at a relatively low altitude, making a distinct noise. This experience alone is worth all the trouble.



Adult Bearded vulture; above Gemmipass, Switzerland
NIKON D4, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR
1/1250 sec, F/11, ISO 1000, -0.33



One is well advised to wear suitable outdoor clothing in several layers and appropriate footwear suitable for the mountains, even crampons depending on the location and weather conditions. Gloves are necessary and should allow you to operate the camera. A flask of warm tea and some energy bars should certainly find space in your backpack.

Juvenile Bearded vulture; above Plattenhörner, Valais, Switzerland
*NIKON D4S, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR
1/3200 sec, f/9, ISO 800, -0.67*

A camera with a high frame rate and a lens with a focal length of 400 to 600 millimeters are your first choice. A tripod with a gimbal can be set up, but I prefer hand-held photography. The decisive factor is the autofocus, which should be able to reliably detect distant birds and keep them in focus while in flight. It is particularly tricky when a young bird is in front of a rock face, as this can hardly be recognized by the human eye.

White-winged snowfinch; Gemmipass, Switzerland

*NIKON D4, NIKKOR 500mm f/4.0 VR
1/8000 sec, f/7.1, ISO 1000, -0.33*



Alpine accentor; Gemmipass, Switzerland

NIKON D4S, NIKKOR 500mm 1/4.0 VR
1/5000 sec, 1/8, ISO 1000



As always with birds in flight, I saw the best results with manual settings, a fast shutter speed and an open aperture. The lighting conditions often allow very low ISO values. Exposure compensation helps to make the snow appear white. As the vultures use updrafts, they fly at times of day when the sun is vertical, and the light is very harsh. This is not ideal and often requires compromises in the settings.

You can pass the time waiting for the vultures or eagles by photographing the trusty alpine accentors, snow sparrows and alpine choughs. Even if you do not spot a bearded vulture, you are sure to at least get some good pictures of those. And with a bit of luck, you may even come across an ibex on the road to the Gemmi pass!

Alpine ibex; Lötschental, Switzerland
NIKON Z 8, NIKKOR Z 600mm f/6.3 PF VR S
1/640 sec, f/6.3, ISO 3200



About the Photographer Bruno Wägli

Bruno Wägli, a Ph.D. in contemporary history, enjoys nothing more than to go on extended photo trips to remote areas. He fell in love with southern Africa and its abundant wildlife: Namibia, Botswana, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and above all, Zambia are countries he likes to rediscover time and time again. Other favorite places of his include the northern and southern polar regions (Antarctica, Greenland, Spitzbergen), Alaska, and the Yukon. Bruno also keeps chasing new motifs in his home country of Switzerland, where the natural beauty of the Alps and of the many lakes and rivers never cease to excite him.

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