THE Egyptian vulture is among the best scavengers and Europe’s most threatened vulture species. It is still continuing to decline. If drastic measures are not taken for its protection and conservation, within a few years the condition will get worse.

It is a long lived medium-sized raptor feeding upon a large variety of dead animals, including large carcasses, small and medium-size vertebrate and human waste and sometimes hunts for insects, rats, and other small aquatic animals.

It is distributed throughout southern Europe, northern and central Africa, the Middle East,
Transcaucasia, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. *Neophron p. percnopterus* and *Neophron p. ginginianus* are found in India and are local migratory species.

Also called Pharaoh’s Chicken because it is so often seen sculptured on the ancient monuments of Egypt, Egyptian vultures are solitary birds usually seen in pairs and groups at the feeding and roosting sites.

Egyptian vultures are thought to be very intelligent. The Egyptian vultures do not have large feet to raise the egg into the air to break, they carry the stone into the air and drop it upon the egg in a strong wave of head and neck. This makes them special as only a few animals along with man, use tools to achieve their aim.

Another peculiar behaviour of Egyptian vultures is their habit of showing coprophagy, hence the name “dung-eater”. Its bright yellow head is due to feeding upon human and other ungulate faeces which is an unusual source of essential carotenoids.

While foraging it has been observed that the juveniles or sub adults follow their parents while moving towards the feeding site. This
behaviour is not common and quite unusual in scavenger birds. Egyptian vultures roost or congregate in groups for hours on trees, monuments, electric towers, and buildings imparting benefits such as increased foraging success, decreased predation or danger, decreased thermoregulatory need etc. Egyptian vultures possess a well-defined bill which along with feeding purposes they often use for feather maintenance and preening. Bills are important tools for straightening, oiling and removal of dirt and debris of the body surface.

They also exhibit allopreening – a behaviour shown by Egyptian vultures in which one individual cleans the feathers of other individual. It has been reported in many animal groups and among other vulture species too such as Turkey vultures (Cathartes aura) and Californian condors (Gymnogyps californianus). It reduces the chance of presence of ectoparasites and sometimes it is a form of intra-social interaction.

Dust bathing/sand bathing is a specialised, maintenance behaviour performed by Egyptian vultures which is characterised by the act of moving around in dust or sand, with the purpose of cleaning feathers or skin, and removing ectoparasites. Also, individuals seem to “paint” themselves with soil containing iron oxide, turning their plumage a pinkish buff; hence the German name Schnutzgeier (“dirt-vulture”).

Vultures are poor flappers and therefore need to soar in order to fly high. If observed for quite a long duration they can be seen soaring as well as circling in the air. Egyptian vultures are very often seen soaring at great heights using the thermal current with their wings spread. They can easily soar for long periods without even flapping their wings. Soaring and circling in the dense forests, they easily locate carcass using their sense of smell.

Egyptian vultures also exhibit formation flying pair, especially during the breeding season in which one bird is slightly above another bird.

Opportunistic Feeder
The Egyptian vulture is one of the best scavenger birds, not only devouring
carcasses of dead animals, but also feeding on most types of offal or garbage. It has an opportunistic and diverse diet. Since it has a broad diet range, it is not as much susceptible to the poisoned carcass as other old world vulture species. These species can be found anywhere where food is available for them.

It often wanders about the streets of villages, looking through the heaps of refuse. Its teeth and claws are much too feeble to enable it to cope with the tearing up of a large carcass, and so never associates with the large vultures and mammals.

The Egyptian vulture not only eats dead animals, but also preys upon rats, mice, lizards, tortoises, insects and other pests that swarm in hot countries. It is often observed that as farmers plough up the ground worms, grubs, and similar creatures that are disturbed move on to the surface becoming prey to the Egyptian vultures.

Egyptian vultures have also been observed around slaughterhouses and bone mill factories where they feed upon crushed bones and very often seen pecking on cow dung and on droppings of goats and sheep.

It is also so attached to human beings that it has often been found travelling with rural caravans. It has also been seen feeding on soft tissue of human skull along the river side. River banks across north India are generally used to cremate the dead and therefore it is very common to see the dead remains along the river banks. It has also been seen feeding on soft tissue of human skull along the river side.

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Egyptian vultures have certain foraging advantages. The face is devoid of hair so the bare skin prevents blood and food from sticking to it. Using its long beak it can easily tear off small pieces of meat left by larger scavengers. It also feeds upon a variety of food available. This increases its survival rate as compare to other vultures species that look for large and fresh carcass, for example, Red headed vultures. Another advantage is that in addition to the food available for them they also look and hunt for food and sometimes prey upon rats, mice, lizards, tortoises, fish, insects and other pests.

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