

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 76 (2010)
Heft: [9]

Artikel: Golden eagle ; Bearded vulture
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944247>

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HELVE^{CH}IA

Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND

Golden Eagle

The golden eagle is one of Switzerland's biggest birds of prey, with a wing span which can go up to a little more than 2 meters. It feeds mainly off smaller birds and mammals, especially hares, marmots and foxes. Eagles have excellent eyesight: it has been shown that they can see a hare at a distance of one kilometer. They also eat carrion - often the victims of avalanches.



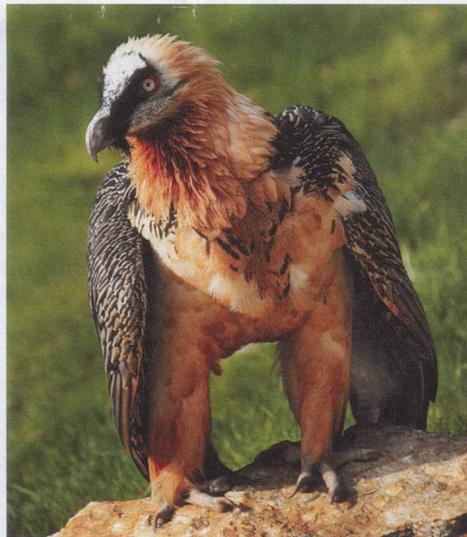
Golden eagle – Adler

Golden eagles like to live in open and semi-open areas at a height of between 1,500 and 3,000 meters, usually making their nests, or eyries, below the tree line, usually on rock ledges or, more rarely, in high trees. Each pair has several eyries.

Switzerland is thought to have about 300 breeding pairs, living in the Alps and its foothills. They are expected to spread to the Jura - indeed, the first birds have already bred on the French side of the border. At one time these eagles occurred even in the Swiss Mittelland.

Bearded Vulture

The giant bearded vulture, Lämmergeier, is a huge bird, with a wing span of 2.7 meters - even larger than a golden eagle. It takes its name from



Bearded vulture – Lämmergeier

the black bristles hanging at the base of the beak. The plumage is unusual: wild birds instinctively change the colour of the feathers they are born with by bathing in iron-rich water. This turns the white of their neck and underparts to rufous. These parts remain white in captive birds.

Its diet is also unusual, mainly consisting of bleached bones. Thanks to its elastic throat, it can swallow whole anything up to the size of cattle vertebrae; bigger bones are carried off and dropped onto platforms of rock from a height of 50-80 me-

ters until they break into manageable pieces. Bones are very nutritious, and since other animals cannot digest them the bearded vulture faces no competition for its food.

Just as unusual is the bird's breeding behaviour. Bearded vultures do not breed only in pairs, but also in threesomes, consisting of two males and one female. Both males mate with the female, and all three look after the nest and stay together throughout the breeding season. The reason for this is not known, but one theory is that it is easier for two males to defend the nest. There is often competition for suitable nesting sites, and the bearded vultures frequently take over nests built by golden eagles.

The hen usually lays two eggs, which hatch about a week apart. The second chick is much smaller than the first, and the older bird soon kills it, as there would not be enough food for both. The second egg is a reserve, in case anything happens to the first.

Giant bearded vultures are sustainably reproducing in the Swiss Alps again. They disappeared from their habitat a little more than a century ago after excessive hunting and as their food sources - deer and goats - became scarce. They were also persecuted by farmers, who believed they took lambs, and even babies - a physical impossibility, since the vultures cannot lift anything so heavy.

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