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FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND

Alpendohle – Alpine Chough

The Alpine Chough is a bird in the crow family. It breeds in high mountains from Spain to Central Asia, India and China, and it may nest at a higher altitude than any other bird. The eggs have adaptations to the thin atmosphere that improve oxygen take-up and reduce water loss.



The Alpine Chough – Alpendohle

The Alpine Chough has glossy black plumage, a yellow bill, red legs, and distinctive calls. It has a buoyant acrobatic flight with widely spread flight feathers. The Alpine Chough pairs for life and displays fidelity to its breeding site, which is usually a cave or crevice in a cliff face. It builds a lined stick nest and lays three to five brown-blotted whitish eggs. Although it is subject to predation and parasitism, and changes in agricultural practices have caused local population declines, this widespread and abundant species is not threatened globally. Climate change may present a long-term threat, by shifting the necessary alpine habitat to higher altitudes.



The flight of the Alpine Chough is swift and acrobatic with loose deep wing beats. Its high manoeuvrability is accomplished by fanning the tail, folding its wings, and soaring in the updraughts at cliff faces. The rippling preep and whistled sweeeoooo calls are typical of the Alpine Chough. It also has a rolling churr alarm call, and a variety of quiet warbles and squeaks given by resting or feeding birds.

The Alpine Chough is a high-altitude species normally breeding between 1,260-2,880 metres in Europe. It has been found nesting in the Himalayas at 6,500 m, higher than any other bird species. It has been observed following mountaineers ascending Mount Everest at an altitude of 8,200 m. It usually nests in cavities and fissures on inaccessible rock faces, although locally it will use holes between rocks in fields, and forages in open habitats such as alpine meadows and scree slopes to the tree line or lower, and in winter will often congregate around human settlements, ski resorts, hotels and other tourist facilities. Its penchant for waiting by hotel windows for food is popular with tourists, but less so with hotel owners.

Nesting typically starts in early May, and is non-colonial, although in suitable habitat several pairs may nest in close proximity. The bulky nests are composed of roots, sticks and plant stems lined with grass, fine twigs or hair, and may be constructed on ledges, in a cave or similar fissure in a cliff face, or in an abandoned building. The clutch is 3-5 glossy whitish eggs. The young birds are fed by both parents, and may also be fed by other adults when they have fledged and joined the flock.

It feeds, usually in flocks, on short grazed grassland, taking mainly invertebrate prey in summer and fruit in winter. The chough will readily supplement its winter diet with food provided by tourist activities in mountain regions, including ski resorts, refuse dumps and picnic areas. Where additional food is available, winter flocks are larger and contain a high proportion of immature birds. It will hide food in cracks and fissures, concealing the cache with a few pebbles.

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