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Lost colony revives hopes for rare ibis

Brian Unwin
and Paul Brown

A new colony of northern bald ibises, a bird perilously close to extinction, has been discovered in a remote Syrian desert.

A survey team has discovered seven birds: three pairs incubating eggs and a lone seventh adult, according to the conservation group BirdLife International.

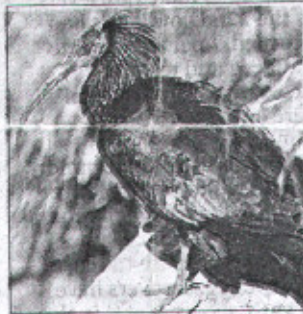
Gianluca Serra, team leader of a wildlife survey being carried out for the Syrian government likened the discovery to "finding the Arabian phoenix regenerated from the ashes".

The species has been technically extinct in the Middle East since the late 1980s when the birds from the region's only known colony at the time, at Birecek in Turkey, were taken into captivity to protect them.

There is only one colony outside the Middle East — 220 birds at Souss Massa National Park, near Agadir in Morocco. Their future is in doubt due to plans to build a holiday resort nearby.

Northern bald ibises (scientific name *Geronticus eremita*) are related to herons and are the size of large gulls. Their dark metallic bronze-green feathers do not extend to their heads, and elongated neck hackles give the appearance of a shaggy ruff. Their curved bills are used to probe the ground for insects.

Mr Serra said the fieldwork had been challenging because



Rare: the northern bald ibis

of the remote, rough terrain: "Throughout it all, my Syrian colleagues were optimistic that the ibis still existed. We had received reports of their presence from Bedouin nomads and local hunters, such as Adib Assaed of Palmyra, who was instrumental in locating the birds."

Two bird-watching and ecotourist guides have been appointed to guard the colony 24 hours a day and study the birds. Joint funding for this and advice has been provided by Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Northern bald ibises became extinct in Europe in the seventeenth century because of human depredation but there are hopes of a comeback.

Next summer 20 zoo-bred birds are due to be released in the Austrian Alps, with a team of scientists "showing" them how to go wild — including teaching them to migrate from Austria to Italy by leading them in a microlight aircraft.