

a vital food source for millions of people. Yet it is believed that only a small fraction of marine species have been examined and recorded by science. Advances in underwater exploration techniques are revealing new species all the time, many with extraordinary forms and characteristics.

Scientists from over fifty maritime nations, currently compiling a census of marine life, have so far identified about 15,300 species of marine fish, and the total is expected to rise to around 20,000 by the time of the final census in 2010.⁵ The range of creatures is great, from microscopic plankton to the world's largest mammal, the blue whale. It is reckoned that fifty per cent of the earth's oxygen is produced by photosynthesis in marine microbes. Little is known about the movements and migrations of this huge array of creatures. Whales cruising at twenty kilometres per hour could circle the globe several times in a year. Some species of fish have been found to migrate across the Atlantic using underwater volcanoes as staging posts.

The count of all marine life forms, including invertebrates, currently stands at around 210,000 species, and could increase to ten times that figure. Census researchers exploring abyssal sediments off Angola found more species per unit

area than any other aquatic habitat on earth; eighty per cent of the more than 500 species collected were new to science. How remarkable, then, that in a prescientific age it was already known to the inspired psalmist that the sea contains "things creeping innumerable"!

Symbol of His glory

The world's great oceans are truly a marvel of God's creation and of His provision for mankind. By their interaction with the circulation of the atmosphere they enable fertile life to flourish on the earth, facilitate travel and trade between nations, and provide a rich source of food for mankind. Yet most of their wonders are hidden to man's eyes in the fathomless depths! Can it be that they are there primarily for the private delight of the Creator Himself (Rev. 4:11)?

How appropriate it is that the future glory of God's Kingdom, to be introduced by the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, is prefigured by the splendour of the world's oceans: "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14)!

5. Census of Marine Life, <http://www.coml.org>.



Prophecy, History and Archaeology

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The Sinai Peninsula

6. The birds of Sinai (Part 2)

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IN THIS ARTICLE we conclude our look at some of the characteristic birds of the Sinai region by considering eagles and vultures.¹ Though the Hebrew word *neshar* is always translated 'eagle' in the AV, it appears to have been a general term used for large birds of prey, both eagles and vultures.² The word *neshar* is derived from the root 'to tear with the beak' or 'to lacerate', pointing to the powerful way in which these birds rip up and tear to pieces the carcasses of the animals on which they feed.

It should be noted that, as well as preying on live animals, eagles feed on carrion like vultures. Likewise vultures do not feed on carrion exclusively, but the largest species may take small

1. The details provided in this article are for the most part taken from *Purnell's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Animal Life* and *The Natural History of the Bible*, H. B. Tristram, second edition, 1868, SPCK.
2. Tristram prefers to identify *neshar* as the griffon vulture, to which the Arabic *nissr* specifically refers (*op. cit.*, p. 172).



Golden eagle (composite picture)

rodents and other prey. However, the feet of vultures are not as strong as those of eagles since they are not adapted to killing prey. A number of different species of eagles and vultures are to be found in the Sinai Peninsula and surrounding regions, and we will mention only one or two of the main species.

Some species

The **golden eagle** is present all the year round and is sometimes called 'the king of the birds' or 'the king of the crags'. It is the largest of the eagles, measuring up to thirty-six inches long, having a wingspan of just over eight feet and a middle claw about two and a half inches long. It feeds mainly on mammals but will also take birds and snakes, and its diet is also supplemented with a large amount of carrion. The prey is always killed before being carried away.

Vultures have large, broad wings that are highly adapted for soaring. The wing span for the largest may be up to nine feet. The **lammergeier** or bearded vulture, which is the largest vulture of the region (forty to forty-five inches long), includes Sinai in the area of its all-year

distribution, though it is now rare. It prefers high and remote mountains, where rocky ledges are used for nesting sites. This species is not gregarious and so does not join other vultures at a carcass. As well as feeding on carrion, the lammergeier takes live snakes, and also tortoises, which are dropped from a great height so that they are disabled and smashed. Bones are treated in the same way, with repeated dropping to get at the marrow. The slightly smaller **griffon vulture** is much more widely spread and likewise prefers rocky mountainous country.

The common but much smaller **Egyptian vulture** is seen only in summer, and winters in Africa. This vulture does not have a strong enough bill to rip open the tough hide of a carcass, so will wait its turn, with the larger vultures taking precedence. It is thought by some to be the gier eagle of Leviticus 11:18 and Deuteronomy 14:17. The suggestion is that the Hebrew name *racham*, derived from the root 'to love', has been used because the male and female are always found in pairs, apart from congregating at a food source. *Racham* corresponds with *rachmah*, the Arabic name for the Egyptian vulture.

Keen vision and swift flight

The larger eagles and vultures have exceptionally keen distant vision, and fly or soar to such great heights that they may be barely visible from the ground. They are also very fast flying. These features enable them to scan a large area when hunting for prey and to respond with great speed. As soon as a weak, wounded or dead animal is spotted, the vulture or eagle descends. Its distant neighbour, constantly scanning the horizon, notices this movement and immediately follows to the prey. This process is repeated many times, so drawing in a succession of more and more distant birds to feed on the carcass.

A number of passages of Scripture allude to these features: "The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth" (Deut. 28:49); "Behold, he [Nebuchadnezzar] shall come up as clouds, and his chariots shall be as a whirlwind: his horses are swifter than eagles" (Jer. 4:13). Job complained about the swift passing of his life in a similar vein, saying: "my days are swifter than a post: they flee away, they see no good. They are passed away as the swift ships: as the eagle that hasteth to the prey" (Job 9:25,26). Saul and Jonathan were described by David as being warriors that were "swifter than eagles" and "stronger than lions" (2 Sam. 1:23). The golden eagle has been observed flying at speeds up to 120 miles per hour.

The remarkably keen eyesight of vultures and other birds of prey is referred to in the book of Job: "There is a path which no fowl [Heb. 'ayit] knoweth, and which the vulture's [Heb. 'ayah] eye hath not seen" (28:7). The word 'ayit, translated 'fowl' in this passage, is derived from the root 'to attack vehemently' or 'to swoop down upon', and is therefore only applicable to birds of prey. Modern versions such as the NIV and NKJV have 'falcon' rather than 'vulture', as the Hebrew word 'ayah means 'the screamer', which describes the noise falcons make. Another passage where the Hebrew word 'ayit is used describes how Abraham drove away "the vultures" that "came down on the carcasses" of the animals sacrificed when God made a covenant with him (Gen. 15:11, NKJV).

Dwelling on the crags

The fact that eagles and vultures often build their nests on cliff edges is mentioned in a number of passages. Obadiah speaks of the abasement of prideful Edom in these terms: "Though thou exalt

thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the LORD" (v. 4). Likewise Jeremiah prophesied the downfall of Edom: "'O you who dwell in the clefts of the rock, who hold the height of the hill! Though you make your nest as high as the eagle, I will bring you down from there', says the LORD" (49:16, NKJV).

The Lord's description of the eagle in the book of Job is very striking: "Does the eagle mount up at your command, and make its nest on high? On the rocks it dwells and resides, on the crag of the rock and the stronghold. From there it spies out the prey; its eyes observe from afar. Its young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there it is" (39:27-30, NKJV). Can this description also apply to the vulture?

Micah 1:16 most likely refers to the natural baldness of a vulture rather than that produced by the moulting of an eagle: "Shave your heads in mourning for the children in whom you delight; make yourselves as bald as the vulture, for they will go from you into exile" (NIV). The vulture's long neck allows it to probe deep into a large carcass, and the lack of feathers on the head and neck means that there is no problem in having to preen bloodstained feathers. Even large vultures have some difficulty in breaking through the skins of large animals, so they will wait until the carcass is attacked by another animal or has started to decompose.

Eagles are said to live to a great age. This appears to be what David is alluding to when speaking of the Lord's mercies: ". . . Who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps. 103:5, NKJV). This passage has been paraphrased as, "Your youth is renewed, so that in point of strength you are like an eagle". Eagles in confinement have been known to live more than 100 years.

Supporting the young

A passage of Scripture that has occasioned some difficulty is Deuteronomy 32:11,12: "As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the LORD alone led him [Israel]" (NKJV); and similarly Exodus 19:4: "You have seen . . . how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself". Eagles have never been observed carrying their young. In fact the weight of a young bird at an age when it attempts to fly would be too great a burden for the eagle to

carry. The passage appears to mean that the parent birds aid with their wings the young ones' feeble and imperfect attempts to fly until they gain sufficient practice and confidence to be left on their own:

"The parent bird will fly around, and sometimes very closely underneath the young bird with the twofold aim of teaching it by example, and causing air currents that will help its flight";³

"Every now and again the young seem to panic, beat their wings furiously and plunge towards the earth. One of the parents then swoops down below the young and slightly to one side. The parent bird then beats with

its wings, and without touching its offspring causes updraft which stabilises the panicking young bird and causes it to rise gently".⁴

The two passages of Scripture quoted above emphasise God's great care and support for His people Israel when they were but a fledgling nation only recently delivered from bondage in Egypt.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

3. Letter "On eagles' wings", G. Wigzell, p. 230, *The Christadelphian*, Jun. 1998.

4. P. Cresswell, *ibid.* See also "The eagle and her young", Tony Benson, *The Testimony*, Sept. 1995, p. 360.