

# Bearded vulture dissected at Wageningen

**The rare bearded vulture that visited the Netherlands at the end of April ended up dead next to a railway. Animal ecologists Hugh Jansman and Ralph Buij examined the bird.**

The bearded vulture is the largest species of bird in Europe with a maximum wingspan of about 2.80 metres. Only two bearded vultures have been spotted in the Netherlands before. One did not survive an encounter with a wind turbine. This visitor – the first to have been born in the wild – also met an unhappy end.

**‘What we find in their bodies says a lot about the ecosystem as a whole’**

The accelerometer in the bird’s GPS transmitter reported a flatline (=no more movement) in an ominous location: the railway near the Oostvaardersplassen nature area. Hans Pohlmann, chair of the Vulture Conservation

Foundation, found the vulture dead. ‘Given the cloud of little feathers, she must have been hit by a train and thrown about 20 metres,’ he concluded. Hugh Jansman carried out a post-mortem, assisted by Ralph Buij, a researcher and big fan of birds of prey. That examination confirmed Pohlmann’s assumption. ‘The skull, the wings, the legs: everything was broken. It must have been an enormous blow,’ says Buij.

## Shot

They also saw damage in the bird’s coat of feathers consistent with being hit by lead shot. But Buij now knows that didn’t happen. ‘Later, my colleague Sander Moonen and I put the bird through the X-ray machine. It showed one fragment of lead shot, and in a place in the body that makes it likely the vulture ingested the lead shot with its food.’

Another interesting find in the post-mortem was a piece of deer leg that the bird had apparently only just eaten and that had pierced the vulture’s skin due to the force of the impact. The leg was almost entirely intact – the fur and hoof were undamaged – and impressively large: 43 centimetres in length. ‘We were all amazed to find such a large object.’

Organ samples, for instance taken from the liver and kidneys, will reveal whether this bearded vulture has more surprises in store. ‘Large birds of prey like this are at the top of the food chain,’ explains Buij. ‘Toxins accumulate in their bodies. That makes them incredibly interesting for ecological research. They are a kind of early warning system. What we find in their bodies says a lot about the ecosystem as a whole:



Ralph Buij shows the impressive wingspan • Photo Sander Moonen / Hugh Jansman

what kinds of chemical contamination are there and how bad is it? If populations of birds of prey start to deteriorate, that means there are problems further down the food chain.’ That makes it a golden opportunity to be able to examine such a large bird of prey, he says. ‘Most large birds die anonymously.’

## Naturalis

It is not the first time that a bearded vulture has ended up on a Wageningen dissecting table. In 2021, Jansman and his team examined the wind turbine victim. But it is still an impressive beast, says Buij: ‘A bearded vulture is a colossal bird.’ It is not yet known whether this bird will end up stuffed in a museum like the previous bearded vulture. ‘But Hugh has deliberately been very meticulous in his examination, so stuffing the bird is possible. And Naturalis has already emailed us. So who knows?’ ME