

The northern bald ibis measures between 70 and 80cm in length and its bill and the bare skin on its head are a reddish colour. It generally feeds on lizards, grasshoppers, beetles and insects. It is a social species, which traditionally breeds in colonies on cliff sites often near watercourses. From the Middle Ages, the ibis was considered a delicacy and hunted for food in Europe

FLY AWAY HOME

The northern bald ibis is a very rare bird. Imagine the importance of the discovery, earlier this year, of a new breeding colony in central Syria

Things could be looking up for the northern bald ibis, though it's not often that there's good news about one of the endangered species of the world. So it was an exciting moment for ornithologists and conservationists when a previously unknown colony of rare northern bald ibises, made up of three breeding pairs and a seventh lone adult, was discovered in central Syria this spring.

This is the first evidence of the birds in the region since a colony at Birecek in Turkey became extinct in 1989. Formerly, the northern bald ibis (*Geronticus eremita*) was widespread across the Mediterranean region and breeding colonies once existed in central and southern Europe, Syria, Turkey and Algeria. But they have suffered a serious decline over a long period and, before this

the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (MAAR), and funded by the Italian Government. The discovery came at the end of an extensive two-year programme of wildlife surveys aimed at producing a biodiversity inventory for the Al Talila Reserve, the first Syrian protected wildlife area, which will soon be open to visitors.

'Discovering this bird was like finding the Arabian Phoenix regenerated from the ashes,' said the survey team's leader, Associate Professional Officer and wildlife expert, Gianluca Serra. He went on to explain, 'The survey work through remote and rough terrain was some of the most exciting and challenging fieldwork we had ever experienced. Through it all, my Syrian colleagues... were optimistic that northern bald ibises still existed in the Al Badia or desert steppe of central Syria

One of the most significant ornithological discoveries in the Middle East for decades

new colony was discovered, the total world population was put at 220 individual birds confined to two colonies in north-west Morocco.

The reasons for the species decline are many and include human persecution; loss of non-intensively farmed agricultural environment; pesticide poisoning; human disturbance and dam construction. The birds are classified as 'Critically Endangered' by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List criteria, meaning that the species faces an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future, and that makes the new breeding group all the more encouraging.

The discovery of the new colony was first reported by BirdLife International, a global alliance of national conservation organizations which is, collectively, the leading authority on the status of the world's birds. Queen Noor is their Honorary President.

The new colony was found in spring this year by a team carrying out wildlife surveys on behalf of

because we had received reports of their presence from Bedouin nomads and local hunters.'

This is probably one of the most significant ornithological discoveries in the Middle East for decades and, as Dr Michael Rands, Director and Chief Executive of BirdLife International, says, 'This fantastic discovery gives new hope that the northern bald ibis can be saved.'

For more information about all sorts of birds, see www.birdlife.net

Sacred birds

The ibis was revered by the early Egyptians, and the sacred ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopica*) is still found in the Nile basin area. As the birds tended to appear at the rise of the River Nile, they were supposed to preserve the country from plagues and serpents. There have been numerous discoveries of the mummified remains of ibises wrapped in linen, especially at Thebes and Memphis. The god Thoth was often depicted with the head of an ibis.