Sardinia’s carrion cafes save griffon from slim pickings

Italy
Tom Kington Rome

The menu of rotting carcasses at Sardinia’s latest restaurant is proving a smash hit, serving a range of meats to the delight of local griffon vultures. Two decades ago the option of eating abandoned cow carcasses vanished when mad cow disease forced farmers to burn the bodies. In 2014, Sardinia copied an idea from France and Spain for vulture restaurants, where carcasses are left for them inside electrified fences that keep out dogs and wild boar. “Attracted by carcasses, boar stick around to eat crops while dogs eat the sheep and pick up a parasite from the innards they can pass on to humans,” Berlinguer said. “Vultures don’t transmit it.” Farmers love the scheme because they save on the cost of transporting carcasses to incinerators. They also plan to make money from the bird-watchers lining up to see the vultures, with wingspans of up to 9ft. “The pens have to be put at the far corner of farms because of the smell,” Berlinguer said. She explained that 15 vultures can polish off a sheep carcass in an hour while a cow takes them up to a week. Cow carcasses left in the Sardinian pens must be drug-free after countless veterinary drug diclofenac. The number of local Griffon vultures has risen to up to 270, including 63 brought from Spain and Holland. Kites, eagles, buzzards and harriers are turning up for a bite too. Egyptian vultures, of which there are only about 13 pairs left in Italy, have also been seen in the area, raising hopes that their numbers will rise. “Vultures provide a vital service by getting rid of carcasses and stopping the spread of disease,” Berlinguer said. “The carcasses release nutrients into the ground. “These birds have a bad reputation but they do an important job by creating a circular ecology, reminding us that in nature, nothing gets thrown away.”

The griffon vulture, with a 9ft wingspan, was once a common feature across southern Europe but many were poisoned with wingspans of up to 9ft. “The pens have to be put at the far corner of farms because of the smell,” Berlinguer said. She explained that 15 vultures can polish off a sheep carcass in an hour while a cow takes them up to a week. Cow carcasses left in the Sardinian pens must be drug-free after countless veterinary drug diclofenac. The number of local Griffon vultures has risen to up to 270, including 63 brought from Spain and Holland. Kites, eagles, buzzards and harriers are turning up for a bite too. Egyptian vultures, of which there are only about 13 pairs left in Italy, have also been seen in the area, raising hopes that their numbers will rise. “Vultures provide a vital service by getting rid of carcasses and stopping the spread of disease,” Berlinguer said. “The carcasses release nutrients into the ground. “These birds have a bad reputation but they do an important job by creating a circular ecology, reminding us that in nature, nothing gets thrown away.”