

## Wild words

**“THOUGH WE MAY NEVER AGAIN WITNESS THE ABUNDANCE OF VULTURES ACROSS SOUTHERN ASIA, WE MAY, AT LEAST, BE ABLE TO PREVENT THE TOTAL EXTINCTION OF THESE BIRDS.”** The RSPB’s Chris Bowden on the news that 10 Asian vulture chicks have fledged in captivity this year.



## Going down

# 59%

The decline in large mammals such as wildebeest and buffalos in 78 protected areas throughout Africa between 1970 and 2005, according to scientists from the Zoological Society of London and Cambridge University.

# Death on the plains

**Mystery surrounds deaths of thousands of rare saiga antelopes that roam Central Asia.**

Conservationists trying to save one of the world’s most endangered antelopes are to start a public awareness campaign in one of its key ranges following a series of setbacks in the past year.

The strange-looking, trunk-nosed saiga, which once shared the steppe plains of Central Asia with mammoths and woolly rhinos, has suffered an estimated 95 per cent decline in numbers since 1995, largely due to uncontrolled poaching.

There are only five wild populations in the world, and a number of recent events have conspired to increase the pressure on the species. The Russian population was hit by the very hard winter (and possibly increased poaching), while one population in Kazakhstan declined by 47 per cent last year, probably also because of poaching.

Then, in May of this year, 12,000 saigas, mostly females that had recently given birth and their

calves, were found dead in the Urals of western Kazakhstan.

The animals had all died of pasteurellosis, a bacterium that lives naturally in healthy individuals but can cause illness and rapid death if the animal’s immune system is compromised, either by another infection, poisoning, stress or malnutrition.

Prof EJ Milner-Gulland, chair of the Saiga Conservation Alliance, said that it was still not known what the trigger for the outbreak had been, and because there had been no more deaths since the end of May, it was possible they might never find out.

“The saiga population is very vulnerable to these mass mortality episodes because it has been so heavily depleted,” she added. “You can’t stop poaching with just law enforcement, you need local people’s support too, and that’s why a public awareness campaign is important.” *Michael Rank*

### TAKE ACTION

The Saiga Conservation Alliance is fundraising for the campaign [www.saiga-conservation.com](http://www.saiga-conservation.com)



Exactly why these rare saiga antelopes died may never be established.



## MARK CARWARDINE WILD THOUGHTS

Is nothing sacrosanct? It’s hard to believe, but the Tanzanian Government has decided to go ahead with plans to build a commercial highway through the northern end of the Serengeti. It will completely bisect the path of the great migration of at least 1.3 million wildebeest and zebras.

I’m not denying that a road link between East African ports and the fast-developing Central African countries isn’t important for this impoverished region, but it doesn’t have to go right through one of the most important protected wildlife areas in the world.

Imagine what this means. As soon as the construction work is finished, the road will need to be expanded, and in no time at all, it will be a six-lane highway, with a railway line running alongside it, and thousands of heavy trucks and speeding cars will be crossing the Serengeti every day.

Then they will need to build a fence to avoid collisions.

Wildebeest and zebra numbers will collapse, so the big cats and other predators that follow them will virtually disappear. And that would mean the end of the greatest wildlife spectacle on the planet.

Meanwhile, the transport of livestock through the park will inevitably transfer devastating diseases to wildlife, and easier access to critical areas will lead to increased poaching.

What is the Tanzanian Government thinking? Doesn’t it realise that the migration is more fundamental to the future of the region than a politically motivated short-cut?

But we’re not much better in Britain. Over the next decade, billions of pounds are going to be spent on environmentally disastrous road-building schemes. The proposed Mottram-Tintwistle Bypass will destroy part of the Peak District National Park, while construction has already begun on the Weymouth Relief Road that will devastate the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and a key Site of Special Scientific Interest, to name just two arbitrary examples.

What is the point of having protected areas such as these – and the Serengeti – if you’re not going to protect them?

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist and tv presenter, and will be presenting a *Last Chance to See* rhino special with Stephen Fry later this year.



Double trouble: roads can spell calamity for wildlife such as zebras.

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