

# Sherlock the vulture, man's new best friend

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Bird trainer German Alonso shows off Sherlock, a Turkey vulture currently being trained to detect human remains, at Walsrode's Bird Park. The vulture, usually able to detect decaying flesh at an altitude of 1.000 meters, is being trained to find the bodies of missing persons in wooded areas, or difficult terrain.

With a face like a turkey, a blood-red head, big beady eyes and large curved beak, Sherlock the vulture is no oil painting.

But police in Germany are hoping the bird could be the latest, low-tech weapon in their armoury: they want to harness Sherlock's incredible sense of smell to locate the dead bodies that sniffer dogs can't reach.

They want to attach [global positioning system](#) (GPS) tracking devices to Sherlock and get him to find the corpses of people who have disappeared in remote areas.

"It was a colleague of mine who got the idea from watching a nature

programme," policeman Rainer Herrmann told AFP.

"If it works, time could be saved when looking for dead bodies because the birds can cover a much vaster area than sniffer dogs or humans."

Birds generally rely mostly on sight to locate their supper. But vultures like Sherlock have a keen sense of smell and are able to detect the scent of rotting flesh from 1,000 metres (3,000 feet) up in the air.

He can even find remains in woodland or in thick undergrowth. And unlike sniffer dogs, who need regular breaks, Sherlock is indefatigable and can cover vast tracts of land.

He is being readied for his new mission at Walsrode south of Hamburg, the largest bird park in the world with 650 different species from all corners and every different habitat of the globe spread over 24 hectares (60 acres).

The bird, whose is more at home soaring over South America's Andes or the Atacama Desert than northern Germany's Lueneburg Heath, is being taught by trainer German Alonso to love the putrid smell of dead human flesh.

Every day Alonso puts pieces of meat in small cups, on top of a strip of cloth -- provided by the police -- that has been used to cover a corpse. Sherlock's mission is to locate these tasty morsels.

If time allows, Sherlock is persuaded to perform this feat as part of the park's daily shows to its many visitors.

"Sherlock has become pretty well known in Germany. He has been in lots of television programmes and newspaper articles," Alonso says.

"Sherlock now has a rough idea of what he has to do."

But the project still has some way to go. Alonso says that it won't become reality until there is a whole squadron of trained vultures with Sherlock in charge ready to take to the skies as a team.

"But it's hard to get birds, particularly tame, young ones," he said.

Turkey Vultures like Sherlock, also known as Turkey Buzzards, are rare in captivity. And they have to be tame in order to be trained so they have to be raised from chicks.

"What we need now to make progress is a group working together as a team," he said. "If we had a trio, led by Sherlock, then we could attempt more ambitious stuff," he added.

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