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## TARGET NORTHERN BALD IBIS: ILLEGAL HUNTING STILL CAUSES ONE THIRD OF THE LOSSES IN ITALY

The reintroduction of the Northern Bald Ibis is one of the largest and most popular animal conservation projects in Europe. Partners from Austria, Italy, Germany and now Switzerland are involved for twenty years in protecting this endangered species. Experts of the *Waldrappteam* manage this European project, which is the first successful attempt to re-establish a migratory population with a new migration tradition. It is therefore also an important and highly regarded pilot project for urgently needed conservation initiatives with the rapidly increasing number of endangered migratory bird species.

The extensive GPS-monitoring of the releaser population proves that illegal hunting causes about 30% of the losses in Italy. Johannes Fritz, manager of the release project: *"About one third of the losses in Italy are caused by illegal hunting. This substantially affects the population development and endangers the survival of the population year after year. In 2021 alone, we have concrete evidence for seven birds killed."* Since for about half of the losses the cause of death cannot be determined, it must be assumed that the actual number of birds shot in Italy in 2021 is significantly higher.

The kills occur almost exclusively during the hunting season in the Italian hunting regions. Additionally, the accidents happen primarily in areas of traditionally intense bird hunting. These are strong indications that the illegal shootings are primarily caused by official hunters who hold a hunting license. This is also indicated by the only case so far in which a perpetrator could be convicted and prosecuted and who was a licensed bird hunter and a member of *Federazione Italiana della Caccia*. In 2017, a criminal trial with this hunter has been concluded and he was sentenced to a fine and the loss of his hunting license. In 2022, following civil proceedings, he also had to pay a fine to the project operator. In this way a precedent could be set, with hopefully a deterrent effect.

The cases so far indicate that the perpetrators do not intentionally hunt Northern Bald Ibises. It is much more likely that the shootings are spontaneous and arbitrary. This was also confirmed by the convicted hunter. Johannes Fritz: *"It must be assumed that other protected migratory bird species are also killed to a similar extent as the Northern Bald Ibis. This is an alarming realization that requires urgent action in view of the rapidly increasing rate of species extinction."*

One in five European bird species is currently at risk of extinction. The Red List of endangered species includes an extraordinary high number of migratory birds, with illegal hunting undoubtedly being one of the main reasons for this.

A significant proportion of Northern Bald Ibis kills happen in a definable area along the Tyrrhenian coast of Tuscany. The crime scene of the convicted hunter was also in this area, which is known as a heavily frequented migration route for many bird species.

Johannes Fritz: *“We therefore set a letter to the Italian Ministry of Ecological Transition urgently asking for the implementation of efficient measures against illegal bird hunting in this area. In particular, we consider it urgently necessary to identify a further so-called black spot in Tuscany along the Tyrrhenian coast within the framework of the Italian National Action Plan to combat offenses against wild birds published in 2017.”*

Numerous partners including the European Union support the Northern Bald Ibis reintroduction project. After successful implementation of a first European LIFE+ project from 2014 to 2019, a second LIFE project started in 2022, with 10 partners in four countries. The new project has a term of seven years and is under the direction of Zoo Vienna this time. It aims to establish a self-sustaining European population with more than 360 individuals in a total of seven colonies. The existing and planned colonies lie north and south of the Alps and they should share the WWF Oasi Laguna di Orbetello in southern Tuscany as the common wintering area.