

WALDRAPPTTEAM CONSERVATION & RESEARCH

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## Record flight at the beginning of the fifteenth human-led Ibis migration

On the 16 of August, shortly before noon, an unusual formation landed on a meadow north of the Schönachhof campsite in Gerlos: 29 juvenile Northern Bald Ibises flanked by two ultralight aircrafts. The key data of the first leg of the 2022 human-led migration: 162 kilometres in 03:24 hours at an altitude of up to 2096 metres above sea level. This means that the two pilots, project manager Johannes Fritz and professional pilot Walter Holzmüller, with the two foster mothers Helena Wehner and Lisa Kern as co-pilots successfully completed a record flight.

Project manager Johannes Fritz, head of the Waldrappteam Conservation and Research enterprise: “This is the first time we were able to fly such a long stage at the start of the human-led migration. It was a smooth flight against the wonderful backdrop of the mountain range Tennengebirge and the Hohe Tauern National Park. The birds were highly motivated and in very good condition.”

This is the fifteenth human-led migration in the 20-year existence of the successful species conservation project. With this year’s 29 individuals, there are a total of 280 young birds that have been led to the wintering site in Tuscany and released there as part of 15 migrations. Currently, the wild population consists of around 200 birds. For years, these wild birds have been breeding independently in three breeding areas, where a total of 40 juveniles fledged in spring of 2022. The 29 birds raised by the human foster parents will be integrated into the wild population following their release and will contribute to increasing the population size even more.

This year's human-led migration is one of six migrations planned as a part of a European LIFE project started in 2022. Over a period of seven years, ten partners from Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, under the direction of Schönbrunn Zoo, aim to set up four more breeding colonies and create an independent European Northern Bald Ibis population. This severely endangered, charismatic migratory bird should become a permanent part of the European native fauna once more, 400 years after its extinction.

The first flight began in Seekirchen am Wallersee, where the birds have been cared for and trained by the two foster mothers since the beginning of May. The route led east past the city of Salzburg, via Abtenau to Bischofshofen, then west through the Pinzgau region and over the 1628 metre high Gerlos Pass, finally arriving in the town of Gerlos. The team of 15 people set up camp in Gerlos and erected a large aviary in which the birds will remain until the start of

the next leg of the journey. Unfortunately, due to the weather forecast which predicts Foehn wind and rain, it will most likely take a short while before the next flight takes place.

Johannes Fritz: “The earliest possible start of the second flight is on Saturday, August 20th. That is when the highest obstacle of the journey will need to be conquered: the 2246 metre high Pfitscher Joch mountain pass on the border between Austria and Italy. In order to successfully fly over the mountain pass, stable weather conditions and thermal updrafts are necessary.”

The team still has four to six flight stretches with a total distance of around 700 km ahead of them before they reach the wintering location in the WWF Oasi Laguna di Orbetello. In recent years, the total duration of the trip has averaged to 17 days. The arrival in the wintering location can therefore be expected at the turn of the month. Current information on the status of the trip will be posted regularly on Facebook and Instagram. One will also be able to find links to follow the flights in real time

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Picture (1) Human-led migration team 2022. The foster mothers Helena Wehner (left) and Lisa Kern wear in yellow cloths, the pilots Johannes Fritz (left) and Walter Holzmüller wear a flight uniform.

Picture (2) After the start in Seekirchen am Wallersee, country of Salzburg.

Picture (3) Flight along the mountain range Tennengebirge; the birds start to form a flight formation to save energy.

Picture (4) Flight along the mountain range Tennengebirge; foster mother Helena Wehner interacts with the birds.

Picture (5) Flight over the valley Pinzgau, country of Salzburg.