Proyecto Eremita

WALDRAPPTEAM
CONSERVATION & RESEARCH

Presse release *Waldrappteam Conservation & Research*
September 20 2023

Positive interim results of the first human-led migration with Northern Bald Ibises from Baden-Württemberg to Andalusia

35 juvenile birds, 2 aircraft, 3 countries, 14 flight stages and 1.604 kilometres of flight - that is the positive interim balance of the human-led migration from Baden-Württemberg to Barbate and Vejer de la Frontera in Andalusia. We have never flown so far and with so many birds. The trip started on August 21st from Binningen airfield in Baden-Württemberg. Just two days later we flew over the Rhine near Mulhouse and thus the border into France, and on September 8th we crossed the border into Spain near Perpignan. After a break of several days due to the weather, we finally continued our journey today and are now west of Valencia.

The 35 juveniles show peculiarities that made training in Baden-Württemberg more difficult and now also led to problems during migration flights. Helena Wehner, geographer and foster mother for the fourth time: "*This year, our birds are very well imprinted on us two foster mothers and therefore trust us very much. Nonetheless, unlike previous years they usually fly at a considerable distance from the aircraft*."

This habit of the birds to keep a distance to the aircraft during flights also leads them flying at low altitudes. This poses a challenge for the pilots. The aircraft need to fly at a sufficient altitude for safety reasons, whereby they sometimes have to increase the distance to the birds even further. In such situations, the flight team had lost some of the birds already three times. 17 birds were lost in hilly terrain in the Rhone Valley near Montélimar on August 31st. In Spain, on the approach to an airfield near Barcelona, a paraglider with a backpack motor approached the formation and chased away three birds. And on the way to a site near the mouth of the Ebro river we lost contact to 27 birds. This happened in a hilly terrain, when we had to fly largely inland around the control zone of the airport Reus, and was possibly caused by a bird of prey attack.

Johannes Fritz, head of the Waldrappteam Conservation and Research company and one of the two pilots: "*Lost birds are very likely to fly back to the place from which we started that day. That's how it was in all these cases. We found all the birds safe and sound, except for two birds that we are still missing after the last incident. We always receive great support in our search from ornithologists and other Northern Bald Ibis friends. We are very grateful!*"

Apart from birds being temporarily missing, the four weeks so far have been very successful. However, this time was challenging for the 14 people involved. The team camps with tents and vehicles on airfields and landing strips and is largely self-

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sufficient. At times the fresh water has to be brought in canisters and the necessary power supply has to be ensured with battery cells and a generator. Despite the sometimes difficult circumstances, the constant setting up and dismantling of the camp and the variable weather conditions, everyone is still very motivated even after four weeks.

The migration to Andalusia takes place in close cooperation with the operators of the Spanish partner project Proyecto Eremita, in particular Zoobotánico Jerez and Junta di Andalucia. Numerous other institutions, such as the Bioparc Valencia, the Réserve Africaine in Sigean and the Bioparc de Doué-la-Fontaine in France, also support the team with flight planning, storing and providing frozen food or searching for missing birds.

There are still a good 600 kilometres of flight between the team's current location and the target area of Barbate and Vejer de la Frontera in Andalusia. We hope to complete the remaining route in the next three weeks and complete the migration at the beginning of October. After arrival, the birds are housed in an aviary for a few weeks to get them used to the area. They are then going to be equipped with GPS transmitters and released into the wild in the habitat of the resident population. Miguel Quevedo, veterinarian from Zoobotánico Jerez: "*The Andalusian Proyecto Eremita team is eagerly following the current migration and is very much looking forward to the arrival of these birds. This new, close cooperation with the Waldrappteam also opens up important new perspectives for our Northern Bald Ibis project*."

Both European Northern Bald Ibis populations are increasingly affected by the climate change. For the migrating birds, the onset of autumn migration is steadily shifting towards later in the year due to the increasing autumnal warm period. As a result, the birds are increasingly failing to cross the Alps due to a lack of suitable thermals. Consequently, they remain in the northern foothills of the Alps where they can hardly survive the winter. Therefore, they have been caught and transferred across the Alps. On the other hand, in the sedentary Andalusian population the increasing dryness and heat in early summer impairs breeding success. The new, largely barrier-free migration route from the northern foothills of the Alps to Andalusia should open up new perspectives for both populations. This is intended to ensure the long-term survival of the rewilded European Northern Bald Ibis in times of climate change.

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