

Successful start of the second human-led migration to Andalusia

On 13 August 2024 at 08:15, an ultralight aircraft together with 36 juvenile Northern Bald Ibises finally took off from the training camp in Taching am See, Upper Bavaria, where they have spent the last few months preparing for their long upcoming journey. In the first four days, the formation already covered a distance of more than 403 kilometres and has now reached Hütten-Hotzenwald airfield on the south-western border of Germany. From here, the journey will continue towards France.

This is the 17th human-led migration with Northern Bald Ibises as part of their reintroduction project. This year's team consists of 17 people from Germany, Austria and the United States and it has a big job ahead of it, as the destination of their journey lies in Vejer de la Frontera in Andalusia, around 2,800 kilometres away. Never before have humans led migratory birds over such a long distance. Project manager and pilot Johannes Fritz: *'We want to cover this distance in around 22 daily stages of around 130 kilometres. On about the same number of days we will have to stay on the ground due to the weather conditions or just to take a break. This means that we are looking at a total duration of more than six weeks.'*

The 36 juvenile Northern Bald Ibises all hatched at a breeding colony at Rosegg Zoo in Carinthia and were raised by this year's foster parents Helena Wehner and Barbara Steininger. That makes a record number of birds that they were able to motivate to follow the aircraft this year. This was only possible due to the imprinting of the chicks on their foster mothers and extensive training throughout the summer at the training camp.

In previous human-led migrations, the birds were led by two pilots in identical aircraft, each with a foster mother as co-pilot. This year however, the birds will be led by just one aircraft instead, in which one of the foster mothers will sit in turn. J Fritz: *'This migration is also a great personal challenge for me as a pilot and for the two foster mothers. Every flight requires constant concentration in order not to lose any birds and to avoid dangerous collisions with the aircraft. The reduction to just one aircraft is in line with our objective of further optimising human-led migration from an ecological and economic perspective.'*

Experienced pilot Marco Gotterbarm-Dangel from the 'Black Sheep Paramotor' flying school and two other pilots will take part in the journey and sometimes accompany the flight formation with another aircraft. An additional, more manoeuvrable and economical aircraft will also be tested for its migration suitability. J Fritz: *'The training of young pilots, the testing of new types of aircraft and the reduction to one aircraft are in line with our goal to make our reintroduction method applicable to other migratory bird species in the future. We are convinced that human-led migration can also ensure the survival of other endangered migratory bird species in the future by changing migration routes and establishing new populations.'*

Since last year, the destination of our human-led migration has been the wintering area in Andalusia. In preceding years and decades, a total of 277 juvenile ibises have been led to Tuscany in Italy instead and released within the wintering area there as part of two LIFE-Projects



supported by the European Union. These birds have been the founders of the Central European population of now more than 250 Northern Bald Ibises. They migrate annually from Tuscany to four breeding areas in the Alpine foothills, and fly back to Tuscany with their offspring after end of breeding season. It is the world's first migratory bird population established by humans. However, due to the prolonged warm periods in autumn, this population is increasingly threatened by climate change. Given the delayed departure in the breeding areas, it is increasingly difficult for them to find enough thermals to cross the main alpine ridge later in the year. If they fail to do so however, their life is in serious danger in winter. In contrast, the birds can reach the new wintering area in Andalusia without having to cross mountain barriers. These human-led migrations to Andalusia are therefore an attempt, as part of the second LIFE project led by Zoo Vienna, to compensate for the threat posed by climate change and to ensure the sustainable survival of the Northern Bald Ibises in Europe.

The second wintering area in Andalusia was established in cooperation with the Andalusian partner project 'Proyecto Eremita'. Their aim is to establish a self-sustaining, sedentary Northern Bald Ibis population in Andalusia, which now numbers around 250 birds. The juvenile birds from our reintroduction project benefit from the experience of these sedentary birds, which increases their chance of survival.

The lack of mountain barriers on the way to Andalusia is also a significant relief for human-led migration. However, local wind systems pose a major challenge on this route, for example in the Röhne Valley, in the border region between France and Spain or in Andalusia in the well-known 'Levante'. J Fritz: *'Last year, we gained our first experience with these wind systems. They repeatedly put us in dangerous situations with our 45 km/h slow aircraft, forcing us to perform unplanned landings. This year, experts from Austro Control's aviation weather service are advising us as part of a cooperation. For me as the pilot in charge, this is an essential basis for flight planning and therefore a major contribution to the safety of our flights.'*

The team will also be accompanied by an American film team for the entire duration of the migration, in order to document the journey in detail. The flight formation will be followed by a helicopter for around half of the stages to achieve good shots in the air. During the training period in the camp, the birds were therefore already familiarised with the presence of a helicopter.

And for the first time, all birds are equipped with GPS trackers during the migration. They transmit the positions of all 36 Northern Bald Ibises at 15-minute intervals, which enables the team to quickly find and collect birds that get lost during a flight stage. The birds' positions are also published on the free Animal Tracker app and allow anyone to track the birds' flights.

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