

Pressrelease *Waldrappteam Conservation & Research*

November 2024

## **Record flight over 2,600 kilometres: the European Northern Bald Ibis project sets new standards in species conservation**

An international team of conservationists broke all records this year, guiding 36 juvenile Northern Bald Ibises on a 2,600 km journey from Upper Bavaria to Andalusia in just 52 days. The *Waldrappteam* used an ultralight aircraft to safely lead the birds across Germany, France, and Spain, ultimately releasing them into the wild in Andalusia. Never before has such a large number of birds been guided over such a long distance. This unique endeavour, which sets a new standard for species conservation, demonstrates the feasibility of reintroducing migratory birds to suitable habitats.

The team encountered diverse wind systems throughout the journey, from the powerful Mistral in the Rhone Valley to the persistent winds of the Spanish highlands and the fluctuating Levante and Poniente in Andalusia. This year, we collaborated with meteorologists at Austro Control GmbH to enhance flight planning and safety. Johannes Fritz, pilot and manager of the project, describes the situation: *“Leveraging precise weather forecasts, the team was able to optimize flight planning. Unlike last year, when four emergency landings were necessitated by strong winds, this year's route was executed without any such incidents.”*

At the beginning of the migration, the 36 juvenile birds followed the aircraft reliably. But that gradually changed. More and more often, some or all of the young birds remained at the take-off point despite multiple attempts and had to be transported in individual boxes in the car. Ultimately, all of the birds were transported for at least six of the 19 flight legs. Based on experience with similar problems during previous migrations, the team assumes that these 36 birds are able to find their way back to their breeding grounds despite their lack of flight experience. J. Fritz says: *“I am always fascinated by the complexity of the behaviour of these migratory birds. Even after 20 years of research, many of their behaviours are still difficult to interpret.”*

To mitigate the negative impacts of climate change on the Northern Bald Ibis population migrating to Tuscany, establishing a second wintering area in Andalusia became crucial. Rising autumn temperatures are causing the birds to delay their autumn migration. This hinders the birds' ability to cross the Alps on the way to Tuscany due to insufficient thermal updrafts. Consequently, an increasing number of ibises are stranding in the northern Alpine foothills, where the chances of survival are poor. In contrast, the route to Andalusia bypasses the Alps, allowing later migrants to reach a suitable wintering ground.

The new flight route to Andalusia also leads to a fusion with a sedentary population in Andalusia. Miguel Angel Quevedo, who heads the Andalusian *Proyecto Eremita*, says: *“The fusion of the two populations offers far-reaching opportunities to ensure the long-term survival of the Northern Bald Ibis in Europe. That is why the Waldrappteam was welcomed in Andalusia by politicians, journalists and many enthusiastic Northern Bald Ibis friends.”*



The shared objective of both projects is to establish a European Northern Bald Ibis population spanning over 500,000 km<sup>2</sup>, encompassing both migratory and sedentary colonies. This diversity will enhance the species' resilience to environmental changes. As J. Fritz states: *"The migration to Andalusia and the collaboration between the two projects exemplify a best-practice approach to reintroduction. To counter the impacts of climate change, bold visions, cross-border cooperation, and innovative solutions are essential."*

Project information:

The reintroduction of the Northern Bald Ibis in Europe is part of a European LIFE-project (LIFE20 NAT/AT/000049; LIFE NBI), which is conducted by 10 partners under the leadership of Zoo Vienna. The reintroduced population currently consists of almost 300 birds, divided into four breeding colonies. Around 85% of the birds spend the winter in southern Tuscany and 15% in Andalusia.

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