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Pioneering Success for Climate-Adaptive Species Conservation: The Return of Dr. Saurier

A young female Northern Bald Ibis named “Dr. Saurier” has become the first bird of a new migratory population to independently fly from Andalusia back to the breeding grounds at Lake Constance. This event marks a major milestone in climate-adaptive species conservation.

New Migration Route to Andalusia

In 2023, two ultralight aircrafts departed from an airfield in Baden-Württemberg with 35 young Northern Bald Ibises—headed not to Tuscany, as before, but to the much more distant Vejer de la Frontera in Andalusia. The reason for this new route is climate change: due to increasingly prolonged warm periods, the migratory birds now start their journey later in autumn and face growing difficulties crossing the Alps because of the lack of thermal currents.

In Andalusia, after release, the young birds live with around 240 sedentary Northern Bald Ibises from the “Proyecto Eremita” colony, which has been established over the past 20 years. Until now, it was uncertain whether the birds with migration experience would return to their breeding grounds in southern Germany or permanently join the sedentary colonies. There were no prior experiences to draw on—this is the first attempt to merge birds with different lifestyles. Now it is clear: the concept works as hoped!

The Return of Dr. Saurier

On April 21, 2025, the female “Dr. Saurier”—a 2023-generation bird named by its foster parents (sex determined later via genetic testing)—left the wintering grounds in Andalusia. On May 25, she arrived at the breeding area in Überlingen on Lake Constance



after a flight of 3,200 kilometers. There, she joined fellow ibises that had returned from their wintering grounds in Tuscany.

Dr. Saurier is the first Northern Bald Ibis of this population to independently return from Andalusia to Central Europe. Discoveries along the Mediterranean coast up to Gibraltar suggest that ibises have been using this migration route for thousands of years—until the species was wiped out in Europe 400 years ago. Dr. Saurier has revived this ancient tradition, becoming a bridge between past and future.

Dr. Johannes Fritz, the project leader, states: *“Dr. Saurier’s return is a historic moment for the European LIFE project. This bird is a messenger of hope that this historical tradition can continue after four centuries.”*

On May 28, an emotional reunion occurred: Dr. Saurier encountered her foster parents, Helena Wehner and Barbara Steininger, in a feeding meadow near Überlingen. Since her release in December 2023, the bird had had no contact with them—yet she recognized them immediately and greeted them with the species’ typical head-nodding. The encounter was brief, as the birds are not meant to become accustomed to humans.

A Model for Climate-Adaptive Species Conservation

The migration to Andalusia represents a model example of climate-adaptive species conservation. The impacts of human-caused climate change are placing increasing pressure on many animal species. Many populations are already severely stressed by habitat loss and various threats. The added burden of climate change is one that many populations can hardly withstand.

The European Northern Bald Ibis population exemplifies this: electrocution from unsecured power poles and illegal hunting in Italy cause high losses. Climate change poses an additional threat—and without adaptive measures, the population risks extinction once more. In trying to prevent this, the Waldrappteam has now achieved a success that is groundbreaking for future-oriented species conservation.

Johannes Fritz emphasizes: *“No reintroduction effort can succeed today without taking climate impacts into account.”*

Background Information

For 25 years, the Waldrappteam has been working to reintroduce the Northern Bald Ibis. It has become one of Europe’s largest and most successful species conservation projects. The European Union is supporting the project for a second time under the LIFE



program. Implementation involves ten partners led by the Schönbrunn Zoo in Vienna.

In 2024, another 36 young birds were guided from Upper Bavaria to Andalusia over a 2,700 km route, and a further human-led migration is planned for 2025. Currently, Marie-Luise Batzdorf and Johanna Haas are raising 32 fledgling ibises in Taching am See (Upper Bavaria). Flight training will begin in a few days, and starting mid-August, the journey to Andalusia—expected to take 40–50 days—will commence. The project camp will be open to visitors from June, Fridays to Sundays, 3:00–5:00 p.m., or by appointment. More information is available on the project website.

Image Caption

(1): Flight Path

In 2023, Dr. Saurier followed an ultralight aircraft to Andalusia as part of a group of 35 young birds. In spring 2025, she flew back alone, choosing a largely different and more direct route. This is not a typical migration pattern for Northern Bald Ibises and shows the highly flexible navigation ability of these migratory birds.

(2): Dr. Saurier with fosterparents

Foster mothers Barbara Steininger (left) and Helena Wehner (right) welcome Dr. Saurier upon her arrival in Baden-Württemberg. In 2023, they raised the Northern Bald Ibis together with 34 other birds and accompanied them to Andalusia to release them. Northern Bald Ibises can recognize their foster parents even after many years.

(3,4) Dr. Saurier

Dr. Saurier (hatched in 2023 at Rosegg Zoo) is the first bird to independently fly back from Andalusia to the breeding area at Lake Constance.

