

PRESS RELEASE

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Power Line Electrocution and Fire Risk: Unprotected Power Poles Pose a Double Threat

82 young Northern Bald Ibises are currently particularly vulnerable to electrocution. But the threat extends far beyond species conservation: bird electrocutions can trigger vegetation and forest fires – a highly relevant and growing risk in the face of rising temperatures, extreme drought and increasingly dry landscapes. Waldrappteam is therefore issuing an urgent international appeal to policymakers and electricity grid operators to rapidly, consistently and comprehensively make dangerous medium-voltage poles safe.

Mutters, 25 August 2026 – The 2026 breeding season has been exceptionally successful for the European Northern Bald Ibis population: a total of 82 young birds have fledged in the four breeding areas of Burghausen, Kuchl, Überlingen and Rosegg. But precisely now, the inexperienced juveniles are entering a particularly dangerous phase. They are exploring new feeding areas and frequently use medium-voltage poles as resting places.

Uninsulated medium-voltage poles are among the greatest threats to the European Northern Bald Ibis population. If a bird simultaneously touches an energised and a grounded component, or two conductors at different voltages, an electrical current can pass through its body, causing electrocution.

The persistent heat and drought across large parts of Europe are also bringing another serious secondary risk into sharp focus: **bird electrocutions can trigger vegetation and forest fires.** If a bird's plumage catches fire during an electrocution and the burning bird falls into dry grass, scrub or forest litter, it can immediately start a fire. Making dangerous power poles safe is therefore far more than a species conservation measure – in the face of increasing heat, drought and fire risk, it is also becoming increasingly important for protecting habitats, infrastructure and people.

Electrocution is one of the greatest preventable threats

Electrocution accounts for around 40 percent of mortality among Northern Bald Ibises. Similarly high mortality rates have also been documented for numerous other bird species, including storks, eagles, kites, buzzards, owls, vultures and corvids.

The risk can be significantly reduced with relatively simple technical measures. Lines can be insulated around poles, conductors and other energised components can be covered, or perching structures can be designed so that birds cannot simultaneously touch components at different electrical potentials and thereby complete a circuit. These protective measures are technically proven, can be implemented quickly and are cost-effective in relation to their protective benefits.



“More than 40 percent of Northern Bald Ibis mortality is caused by electrocution – hardly any other individual conservation measure can have such a significant impact for numerous threatened bird species with such manageable effort,” says **Johannes Fritz, Director of Waldrappteam Conservation & Research.**

Bird electrocutions can trigger vegetation fires

International studies show that bird electrocutions can indeed cause fires. In Spain, at least 30 such fires were documented over a period of twelve years. A US study recorded a total of 44 vegetation fires caused by bird electrocutions between 2014 and 2018. The largest documented fire affected more than 4,000 hectares. The actual number is likely to be higher, as fire statistics often list the cause simply as “power line”.

“The current extreme drought poses an increased risk that bird electrocutions could also trigger fires. Policymakers and grid operators have a responsibility to prioritise making dangerous poles safe now and to establish binding legal frameworks – in the interests of species conservation, but also to protect habitats, infrastructure and people,” says **Bernhard Gönner, Project Administrator of the LIFE Northern Bald Ibis project at Schönbrunn Zoo.**

Germany and Switzerland show that electrocution deaths can be prevented

Germany legally requires grid operators to make dangerous medium-voltage poles bird-safe and to retrofit existing structures. As a result, only isolated cases of Northern Bald Ibises dying from electrocution have been recorded in recent years in the German breeding areas of Burghausen in Bavaria and Überlingen near Lake Constance. In other European countries where the birds are present, however, numerous Northern Bald Ibises continue to die on unprotected poles.

Switzerland has also taken important legislative steps: new power lines must be constructed to be safe for birds, both in terms of collision and electrocution, while existing hazardous structures are subject to requirements for retrofitting by 2040 at the latest. The examples show that electrocution deaths at medium-voltage poles are preventable. The technical solutions are known, effective and available.

As part of the European LIFE project, Waldrappteam is working with authorities and grid operators to identify and make dangerous medium-voltage poles safe. In Austria, high-risk poles in the vicinity of breeding areas in Upper Austria, Salzburg and Carinthia are being retrofitted.

Urgent appeal to policymakers and grid operators

However, localised retrofitting of individual high-risk poles is not enough. Waldrappteam calls on policymakers and electricity grid operators to rapidly implement binding programmes for the comprehensive safeguarding of dangerous medium-voltage poles.

What is needed are clear legal requirements, binding deadlines and the systematic, preventive remediation of entire high-risk areas. Dangerous structures must be made safe before more birds are killed or electrocutions trigger fires. Every pole made safe prevents avoidable deaths and protects birds, habitats and people.

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Photo 1: Juvenile bird killed by electrocution

Photo 2: Unprotected medium-voltage power pole

Photo 3: Northern Bald Ibises killed by electrocution beneath an unprotected medium-voltage power pole

Photo 4: Northern Bald Ibises on a bird-safe power pole (1)

Photo 5: Northern Bald Ibises on a bird-safe power pole (2)

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About the LIFE Northern Bald Ibis Project:

The project **LIFE20 NAT/AT/000049 | LIFE NBI** is being implemented from 2022 to 2028 by ten partner organisations under the coordination of Schönbrunn Zoo and is co-financed by the European Union. Its aim is to establish a long-term, self-sustaining and migratory Northern Bald Ibis population in Europe. Key measures include establishing additional breeding colonies, reducing mortality caused by electrocution and illegal hunting, protecting suitable habitats, and developing new migration routes as an adaptation to climate change.