PRESS RELEASE
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WALDRAPPTEAM
CONSERVATION & RESEARCH

2,640 Kilometres to Andalusia: Human-Guided Migration 2026 Successfully Completed

30 young Northern Bald Ibises reached their destination areas in Catalonia and Andalusia after a 40-day migration across Europe. The successful journey confirms the effectiveness of a newly developed training concept following the setbacks of 2025.

Andalusia, Spain, 8 October 2026 – The 2026 human-led migration of Northern Bald Ibises has been successfully completed after 40 days, 19 stages and a total distance of 2,640 kilometres. Starting on 23 August at Binningen airfield in Baden-Württemberg, the route led through France and Catalonia to Andalusia.

All 30 Northern Bald Ibises that set out on the migration reached their designated destination areas. Fifteen birds were handed over to the care of Alive Fund in Catalonia. They are being kept in an aviary together with other sedentary juvenile birds and will be released into the wild together. The remaining 15 young northern bald ibises continued their journey southwards to Andalusia.

The successful migration is particularly significant in light of the major difficulties encountered in 2025. At that time, the juvenile birds did not reliably follow the aircraft and were eventually transported by vehicle, stage by stage, from southern Germany to Catalonia. The second part of the migration to Andalusia had to be abandoned.

Following this setback, the Waldrappteam fundamentally analysed and redesigned its training programme. Based on established learning theories, procedures were restructured and new training elements introduced.

The first clear indication that the new approach was successful emerged during flight training at Binningen airfield. Suitable terrain, excellent infrastructure, strong local support and unusually favourable weather conditions provided almost ideal circumstances for implementing the new concept. By early August, the juvenile birds – all of which originate from Rosegg Zoo in Carinthia, Austria – had developed into a highly motivated and reliable group.

> *"Following the experiences of the past year, this migration was far more than just another journey south. It was a crucial test of whether our completely revised training concept would work under real migration conditions,"* says Johannes Fritz, Director of Waldrappteam Conservation & Research and pilot. *"The fact that all 30 birds reached their respective destination areas confirms that the new approach works and is reproducible. This gives us a much stronger foundation for future human-guided migrations."*

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The beginning of the migration took place under difficult conditions. After several weeks of stable training weather, weather conditions changed immediately before the planned departure on 17 August. A first attempt to take off had to be aborted due to strong headwinds. It was not until 23 August that the group was able to leave Binningen. Even afterwards, unstable wind conditions repeatedly delayed progress during the first part of the journey.

Professional meteorological support from the weather experts at Austro Control once again played an important role. Their detailed forecasts and analyses supported flight planning and helped pilot Johannes Fritz identify suitable weather windows along the route.

On 13 September, the group reached Ordis in Catalonia. There, 15 northern bald ibises were handed over to the Alive Fund, while the team continued southwards with the remaining 15 birds the following day. Four consecutive days of flying took the migration as far as the Valencia region. Further stages eventually brought the group to the final airfield at Medina-Sidonia in Andalusia on 27 September.

Unfavourable wind conditions forced an early landing during the final stage, meaning that the birds had to be transported by vehicle for the remaining section of the route. Shortly afterwards, however, improved conditions allowed two additional orientation flights from Medina-Sidonia. These flights covered significant parts of the birds' future wintering area, from Villamartín in the north to the Atlantic coast near Barbate, enabling the birds to familiarise themselves with their future habitat.

> *"Reaching the Atlantic coast together with the birds was an extraordinary moment. Far below us was the historic Torre de Castilnovo, where the local northern bald ibises breed, while our birds were flying high above the Spanish landscape with us,"* says pilot Johannes Fritz. *"For me, this moment captured what we had achieved: we had succeeded in turning a difficult year into one of the most successful migrations in the history of the project."*

This success was made possible by an international team of 15 to 18 people led by Amelie Muntschick. At the heart of the team were the two foster mothers, Fabienne Tilg and Eszter Bajka, supported by Barbara Steininger. Since early April, they had cared for and trained the juvenile birds every day, eventually accompanying them for more than 2,500 kilometres.

The team included participants from several European countries. At the initiative of BIOPARC Valencia, four veterinary students from Valencia also joined the migration, along with a student from Beijing who participated as part of a scientific cooperation with Beijing Forestry University.

The migration was officially concluded on 2 October with a reception organised by the Junta de Andalucía and Proyecto Eremita. The event was attended by senior political representatives, including Adolfina Martínez Guirado, Regional Minister for Sustainability and Environment of the Junta de Andalucía.

The 15 young northern bald ibises now under the care of Proyecto Eremita in a release aviary will also be released into the wild in the coming months. Once they reach sexual maturity in their third year of life, the birds from the human-guided migration are expected to independently return to their breeding grounds in Baden-Württemberg.

Planning for the next human-guided migration has already begun. In 2027, the Waldrappteam plans to once again guide young northern bald ibises from Baden-Württemberg to Andalusia.

Photos: Download photos

Photo 1: Young northern bald ibis

Photo 2: Team of the 2026 human-led migration

Photo 3: Foster mothers Fabienne Tilg and Eszter Bajka (1)

Photo 4: Northern bald ibises with aircraft (1)

Photo 5: Young northern bald ibises in flight (1)

Photo 6: Northern bald ibises with aircraft (2)

Photo 7: Ground team assembling the aviary

Photo 8: Northern bald ibises with aircraft (3)

Photo 9: Young northern bald ibises in flight (2)

Photo 10: Foster mothers Fabienne Tilg and Eszter Bajka (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 leadership of Tiergarten Schönbrunn and is co-financed by the European Union.

Its aim is to establish a self-sustaining, migratory northern bald ibis population in Europe in the long term. Key measures include establishing additional breeding colonies, reducing losses caused by electrocution and illegal hunting, protecting suitable habitats, and developing new migration routes as an adaptation to climate change.