

CONTINUING EFFORTS FOR THE SURVIVAL OF THE SYRIAN NORTHERN BALD IBIS COLONY

BirdLife International – Middle East Division and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife Partner -UK)

The Northern bald ibis *Geronticus eremita* is classified as Critically Endangered, the highest threat category according to IUCN criteria (BirdLife 2000), with the only remaining wild colonies known in Morocco (150 pairs) and Syria (2 pairs). The Morocco population is stable and under good conservation management. The Eastern race, formerly found throughout the Middle-East and latterly only in South-east Turkey, was re-discovered in Syria in 2002 having been believed to be extinct in the wild.

No observations of Northern bald ibis had been documented from Syria since 1928 (Aharoni 1929) despite attempts by ornithologists to search for them (Kumerloeve 1984, Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962, Hoyo Calduch 1989), leading to the conclusion that the species had gone extinct.

The discovery in April 2002 of one breeding colony in the Palmyra region was therefore arguably the most significant ornithological discovery in the Middle East for 30 years. A search for further colonies within the Syrian steppes in 2003 proved fruitless (Serra 2003, Serra et al 2004). The tiny colony consisted of three pairs, each with one chick. The following year, breeding performance doubled due to protection and monitoring efforts with the three pairs rearing seven chicks. In 2004, the colony declined to two breeding pairs, each with two chicks. The colony contained 5 individuals by 2005 when they had an unsuccessful breeding season. Encouragingly seven birds including three young returned in 2006 and the two pairs reared four young. The young returning birds were the first evidence of fledged birds successfully negotiating their unknown migration route.

The colony migrates after the breeding season to, until recently, unknown wintering grounds. Migration starts in mid July and they return to Palmyra around mid February. The BirdLife/RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) project in cooperation with MAAR (Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform) managed to trap and satellite tag three adult birds in June 2006. This tagging initiative has



Fig 1: Northern Bald Ibis ©Birdlife International

revealed the wintering ground to be Ethiopia, with brief stop-offs in Yemen and Eritrea, via Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Sudan (Lindsell et al in press). An RSPB expedition was organized in winter 2006 to monitor and detect the wintering ibises in Ethiopia in cooperation with Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS). The expedition was partly funded by Chester Zoo, and Ornithological Society of the Middle East (OSME). The expedition revealed that birds winter in the highlands of Ethiopia and there are no threats affecting the colony. Unfortunately, juveniles were not found with adults during the expedition. A juvenile was subsequently tagged in 2007, and was shown to remain in Syria around the breeding grounds and further North. Unfortunately that tag stopped transmitting prematurely for unknown reasons. Further attempts to tag other juveniles are an urgent priority. This successful tagging initiative has enabled us to

undertake conservation action for the species in the wintering grounds, countries on the migration route, as well as in the breeding grounds in Syria.

Conservation action to date has focused on reducing the negative influences on breeding success, but it is recognised that for such a long-lived bird adult survival is also likely to be an important limiting factor on the population size. We feel where the adults' winter is probably relatively safe. The wintering ground of the juveniles remains unknown, however, and further tracking data will complete this picture hopefully ensuring conservation of the bird throughout its range.

The Syrian bald Ibis has been in decline for several centuries. Therefore, ensuring the survival of the last wild colony is essential to the conservation of biodiversity not only on a national but also on a global scale. These few bald ibis survivors have become a symbol of the extreme degradation of the Syrian Al Badia (desertic steppe), a biodiversity rich landscape which is presently found in an advanced stage of desertification. There is a need for immediate action to address these wider ecosystem-scale land degradation problems if the bald ibis is to survive in the wild in the long-term. In Syria hunting is also a major threat to the tiny population, and overgrazing has reduced habitat quality in feeding areas. In 2005 breeding performance was zero; local rangers reported predation as the cause. We envisage the Ibis as a great flagship species whose preservation may lead to the conservation of other diverse wildlife and ecosystems.

BirdLife International through its Middle East division in cooperation with the RSPB (BirdLife Partner in the UK) has led the bald ibis conservation work in Syria in close cooperation with MAAR, and the Syrian Society for the Conservation of Wildlife (SSCW). The breeding area in Syria was declared a protected area in 2004 by MAAR and also an IBA by Birdlife in 2007. The Palmyra project in Syria has initiated a research and protection programme in collaboration with local communities and also secured a comprehensive wardening program. Having identified the migration route and wintering grounds, BirdLife and RSPB in cooperation with the Syrian authorities are currently looking to conduct research into feeding and breeding biology as well as its habitat requirements, and will continue to monitor numbers and breeding success. Protection of key breeding and roosting sites is an ongoing action conducted by MAAR in cooperation with local communities living in and around the colony.

References:

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