



WILDLIFE

# CONSERVATION

## FOLLOW THAT BIRD: REAL-TIME DATA ON MIGRATING BIRDS, COMING TO A PHONE NEAR YOU

BACK

BY CHELSEA WALD JUNE 20 2014



White storks can migrate 8,000 kilometres in about a month. Now you can watch this astounding feat of endurance in real time - and contribute to the scientific study of it - using a new app called **Animal Tracker** from the Max Planck Institute of Ornithology in Germany, one of the world's foremost ornithology research centres.

The institute already collects data from hundreds of tagged animal species around the world on a special platform developed by a team led by ecologist Martin Wikelski. For the app's launch, three of those species - about 60 individuals - will appear on the Animal Tracker app: white storks (Africa, Asia and Europe), northern bald ibises (Europe) and osprey (Americas). But eventually the app could give users access to information on dozens of species (not only birds) and tens of thousands of individuals, says ecologist Daniel Piechowski, the project's coordinator. "This will grow steadily for the next ten, twenty years."

### EDITOR'S PICK



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By Kelly Starzak on 30 05 2014

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**MOVE OVER MAMMALS, THREATENED AMPHIBIANS**

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The app not only shows users where the birds currently are, but also runs short animations on where they've been. For example, a white stork named Nele near Berlin is likely better travelled than most Germans: it starts its fall migration in Germany and soars over countries such as Romania, Turkey, Egypt and Sudan to get to Mozambique. An osprey named Rodney in Washington, D.C. sees more of the city in two weeks than most residents probably do in a year.

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You could think of it as a new kind of zoo – with wild instead of caged animals. But the Animal Tracker team's primary goal is to get help with their research by enlisting amateur birders as well as other members of the public, like school groups. "It's too time and labour consuming to send out scientists from our institute to observe all the birds worldwide," Piechowski says. Among other things, users can input photos and information

AMPHIBIANS  
NEED  
CAMERA  
TRAPS TOO

one month ago

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about the birds' behaviours, like whether they are sleeping, foraging or interacting.

How will this help? For example, the institute is especially interested in the social aspects of white stork migration. When birds leave for their migrations, do they go with parents, siblings or unrelated animals? Do they fly the whole way with those same companions, or do groups break off and reform along the way? Do they forage together during stopovers? "This is obviously information you can only get from direct observations," Piechowski says.

Questions like these are crucially important when it comes to understanding the lives of migratory species and the very nature of migration. In fact, the institute's goal is to be able to follow some individuals from cradle to grave, documenting their lives in unprecedented detail.

A big assist will come from the **ICARUS Initiative**, which is expected to install a data uplink on the International Space Station by the end of 2015, allowing for much faster and more reliable transfer of information from the GPS trackers on the animals. Currently, the trackers transmit to cell phone towers, which means animals can get out of range. "We lost quite a number of individuals somewhere in the Sahara," Piechowski says. "We don't know exactly what happened because there's just no cell phone [service]."



It's hoped the app will boost the northern bald ibis reintroduction project, which has involved hand-raising the critically endangered birds and teaching them how to migrate ... by following a microlight!  
Image: J Fritz.

The app could have consequences for conservation, too. Above all, it could help increase public awareness. The public can follow a wild animal and even know its name and personality traits, says Johannes Fritz, who leads the **northern bald ibis reintroduction project** that is included in Animal Tracker. "You don't need them in a [zoo] enclosure ... because you can present a wild bald ibis as an individual. Facing the

you can present a wild bald ibis as an individual [using the app]." Fritz's long-running project aims to bring the critically endangered ibises back to Europe (where they've been extinct for hundreds of years), by teaching captive-bred individuals to migrate.

Fritz also hopes that the app will help curb illegal hunting, **which is a problem** for his project's reintroduced bald ibises in Italy. If more bird enthusiasts, as well as school groups and the media, know where the birds are, poachers might have fewer opportunities to target the rare ibises. But it's also possible that the app could actually increase illegal hunting by showing poachers where animals are. (Hunting is not a problem for the other birds currently on the tracker.) "We're not sure yet," admits Piechowski. Only time will tell.

The app is free in the Apple iTunes and **Google Play** stores, and also **online from the institute**.

Top header image: C. Falk



## CHELSEA WALD

CHELSEA WALD IS A FREELANCE SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT WRITER BASED IN VIENNA, AUSTRIA. SHE HAS A SMALL DOG WHO, LIKE HER, MUCH PREFERS TRAILS TO SIDEWALKS. [VIEW MORE FROM THIS CONTRIBUTOR](#)



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