

Press Release Waldrappteam LIFE + 12-BIO_AT_000143

The flight with the Bald Ibis: Successful human-led migration 2014 finalized

On September 4, a group of 14 Northern Bald Ibises (*Geronticus eremita*) reached the southern Tuscany/Italy. The juvenile birds followed two foster parents in microlight aircrafts from Salzburg/Austria over the Alps and the Apennine. At the wintering area Laguna di Orbetello, a WWF Oasi, the young birds met their free-living conspecifics and can now live independently as migratory birds. The flights of up to 301 km nonstop and up to an altitude of 2,450 m msl are an unmatched record performance. The journey was filmed by a TV team with a helicopter. In addition, the flight paths of each bird were recorded by GPS data logger, 85,000 position points per individual.

The Northern Bald Ibis, one of the most endangered migratory bird species worldwide, was native in Central Europe until the 17th century, before it became extinct due to overhunting.

In the context of a wildlife conservation project **co-financed by the European Union (LIFE+ Biodiversity)** with partners is Austria, Italy and Germany, the Northern Bald Ibis shall be reintroduced as a migratory bird species in Europe. The basis for the reintroduction are hand-raised juvenile birds. **They were trained to follow a microlight aircraft, with their foster parents on board, to a suitable wintering area in the Tuscany/Italy.**

On August 25, the human-led migration started from 2014 Grödig in Salzburg with 14 birds and their foster parents Corinna Esterer and Anne-Gabriela Schmalstieg in a team of 16 people. Two aircrafts were piloted by the professional pilot Walter Holzmüller and the project manager Johannes Fritz. A **German film crew** followed on the journey to document the flights out of a helicopter for several German and Italian-TV productions.

The first flight was across the Alps. This was new territory for the team, because during previous flights the birds were led eastside around the Alps. The flight route led via Obertauern and Katschberg Pass to the airfield Nötsch in Carinthia, a total of 269 km with a maximum flight altitude of 2,450 m msl, flight time 4:47 hours. Because of heavy headwinds this stage designed especially difficult. Project Manager J. Fritz: *"Wind from south slowed the flight and caused considerable turbulence and downdrafts in the mountain range. For me it was probably the most difficult flight in my flying career. That the birds under these difficult conditions followed the aircraft at all is certainly the extremely close relationship with the two foster parents attributed."*

On August 28, the second stage led over the Karawank mountain range down to Jesolo at the Adriatic Sea, **following the Lido past Venice** toward an airfield at the southern edge of the River Po Delta, 301 km in 4:16 flight time. The air space of Venice was temporarily opened for the flight formation. When we passed by, the participants of the **Film Festival in**

Venice were able to observe the formation flight over the lagoon city, as was reported in the national media.

On August 30, we crossed the Apennines and **reached the Tuscany** (153 km in 2:34 hours). At an airfield north of Florence, we had to pause for several days due to bad weather.

On September 04, we flew the **last leg**. The airspace of **Florence** was temporarily opened for us, so we could cross. From there the route led over to **San Gimignano**, the famous “town of towers” in Tuscany. A strong wind was driving us forward with up to 105 km/h. This is an extremely high value compared to the active airspeed of the aircraft and birds of about 40 km/h. Shortly before the city of Siena we lost contact to some of the birds during a stopover. With the remaining birds, we reached the wintering area (221 km in 3:24 hours). After some hours, the lost birds were found back at the starting point North of Florence and transferred to the wintering area.

The total duration of this ninth human-led migration conducted by the Waldrappteam so far, was 11 days, only half as long as the fastest migration before. J Fritz: *"The fantastic course of the migration is certainly attributable in particular to the foster mothers Corinna and Anne. Despite high burden, they did their work with a lot of dedication and joy and were able to build a very strong relationship with all the birds."*

During the flights, the positions of all birds were recorded in one-second intervals using **GPS data loggers**. This data set with a total of **85,000 data points per bird** throughout the whole migration journey is unique. In January 2014, the **basic research on bird formation flight with the Northern Bald Ibises** led to an influential cover story in the scientific journal NATURE. This research should be continued.

Kontakte: Email: info@waldrapp.eu
 Mobile Phone Project Manager Johannes Fritz: +43 676 5503244

Demo Video on YouTube, English Version: <http://youtu.be/fY053HyXQsQ>