

NEWS AND EVENTS

BALD IBIS ADULTS TRACKED TO WINTERING GROUND

Story from: BirdLife News Alert

http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2006/10/bald_ibis.html

BirdLife partners in the Middle East, Africa and the UK have come one step closer to discovering what is preventing sub-adult Northern Bald Ibises *Geronticus eremita* returning to their breeding grounds in Syria. Using satellite tags, a group of ibises was tracked to the highlands of Ethiopia, where they were last recorded almost 30 years ago. Thirteen birds—two breeding pairs, six juveniles and three sub-adults—left the breeding site in Palmyra, Syria, in July. Ethiopian conservationists found the trio of tagged adult birds—plus a fourth adult—in the first week of October, although the birds are known to have been in Ethiopia since August. Mystery still remains as to where the subadult birds spend their time before returning to the breeding colony.

Despite breeding well in Syria where the birds are protected by Bedouin nomads and Syrian government rangers, the colony's numbers have not increased. Scientists fear that hunting, overgrazing or the heavy use of pesticides including DDT somewhere on the birds' migration route has been keeping numbers low.

"We are very hopeful that the other bald ibises from Syria are nearby and we will be making a second visit to the area next month to try to find them," said Mengistu Wondafrash, Team Leader at the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS, BirdLife in Ethiopia). "In Ethiopia, we will be doing all we can to implement conservation measures to help increase the numbers of this rare but special bird."

The Yemeni Environment Minister, Abdul-Rahman F. al-Eryani, also saw the birds while they were in Yemen. He said: "I was very excited to find that the birds could once more be seen in Yemen. We recognise the importance to our country of their migration and we will be waiting for them to return on their way back to Syria. We will do our very best to see them safely on their way."

"They have chosen their site well because Ethiopia is famous for its protection of wildlife and their last port of call was Yemen where the government is also supportive," said Chris Bowden of the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK), who has been involved with the project since the tiny Syrian colony—only the second remaining in the wild—was discovered four years ago. "We thought the birds would go to Yemen, Eritrea or Somalia and were surprised at the length of their journey—3,100 km—and the speed with which they covered the distance."

Northern Bald Ibises were last seen in Ethiopia in 1977, but their current site is remote and the terrain difficult, which may explain why they have not been seen since. BirdLife researchers will find out what local people know of past visits by the ibises to Ethiopia. Their work is being part-funded by the National Geographic Society.

Ibrahim Khader, Head of BirdLife Middle East, said: "We are optimistic that protection of the ibis in Ethiopia and Yemen will be good but the birds must still survive a perilous journey to get there each year, and it is our job to make that journey safer. If we can do that, this population will have a much better chance of survival."

Protection measures on the ibises' migration route could include replacing harmful pesticides and making hunters aware of how rare and vulnerable the species is.

Track the birds' progress at: www.rspb.org.uk/tracking/

RAKBANK sponsors Ras al Khaimah nature reserve study

The National Bank of Ras al Khaimah has generously sponsored a series of biodiversity studies at the Hulayla mangrove wetland in Ras al Khaimah. These studies have been coordinated by the Government of Ras al Khaimah's Environment Protection and Industrial Development Commission (EPIDC).

Information gathered is being used to prepare a proposal for establishing a Hulayla Nature Reserve, which will be presented in early 2007 to the Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler of Ras al Khaimah, His Highness Sheikh Saud bin Saqr al Qassimi.

Hulayla wetland is unique in the UAE and Arabian Gulf for the following reasons. It is a vital spawning and nursery ground for commercial fish, and is nationally and internationally important as a feeding site for resident and migratory birds.

It possesses a regionally unique coastal vegetation community and its scenic importance and rich archaeological heritage add further value and tourism potential.



Northern Bald Ibis and egrets in Yemen. (©Richard Porter)



Northern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus eremita*). (©Chris Gomersall/RSPB Images)



Greater Flamingo against a backdrop of the Ru'us al Jibal mountains (©Hanne & Jens Eriksen).



Mangrove, *Avicennia marina* (© R.Llewellyn-Smith/EPIDC).