

NORTHERN BALD IBIS IN SAUDI ARABIA: LAST STEP FOR ITS SURVIVAL

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The Northern Bald Ibis was once widespread across northern Africa, the Middle East and even the Alps (IAGNBI 2010). By 1997 the bird's population had fallen to fewer than 50 pairs, largely confined to coastal cliffs within the National Park, near Agadir in Morocco (IAGNBI 2010). This long-term decline has been driven by human disturbance and persecution, especially hunting, as well as habitat loss and pesticide poisoning (BirdLife International 2000). Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremite* is a Critically Endangered species (IUCN 2010 and CITES1), which was considered to be surviving only in Morocco until 2002. It had in fact been declared extinct from the whole of Eurasia in 1989. Northern Bald Ibis (NBI) breeds in Morocco and (to a lesser extent) Syria, but a tiny breeding population of 15 pairs also persists at Bireçik in Turkey. Although this population underwent a large decline between 1970–1990, it was stable between 1990–2000 (Serra et al 2003). Despite it having been declared as extinct in Syria soon after the 1930s, a relict colony of 3 breeding pairs was discovered in the Syrian desert, not far from the oasis of Palmyra, in 2002 (Serra et al. 2003). A high mortality rate due to hunting within Arabia has been recently assessed to be one of the greatest threats for the NBI colony in its eastern range.



Fig 1. Map of bald ibis sightings in Saudi Arabia.

Breeding and feeding ecology of the NBI relict colony have been studied across several breeding seasons (Serra et al. 2009; Serra et al. 2008). In 2006, 3 breeding adults were fitted with platform transmitter terminals (PTTs), which enabled their migratory route through the western Arabian peninsula to be tracked and this led to the discovery of their wintering grounds on the Ethiopian highlands (Lindsell et al 2009). Two additional subadult ibises were also tagged in spring 2009 (Serra personal comm. 2010).

In Saudi Arabia NBI is generally considered to be a very rare passage migrant (BirdLife International 2004 and Jennings 1981), while 12 records of the birds were reported between 1990 and 1991, totalling 25 birds, of which the largest flock was 15 on 30 July 1991 just 6 km away from the National Wildlife Research Center (Schulz and Schulz 1992). These records concluded that the eastern population of the NBI was more numerous than originally thought.

In 2006 the tagged NBI individuals named Zenobia and Salam came from Syria to the southern part of Saudi Arabia in Madinah and Al Baha. In 2007 the same individuals were reported from Al Baha and stayed more than 10 days there. In 2008, two birds named Sultan and Zenobia were moved from



Fig 2. Bald Ibis near the NWRC in Taif, Saudi Arabia (©X. Eichaker ©NWRC).

Syria via Tabuk in the north to further south, while Salam and Odeinat were found in Jizan area in 2008 and 2009. During 2009 these two individuals also stopped in Taif for two days, while moving further south of Saudi Arabia in Jizan area (IAGNBI 2010 and Serra personal comm. 2010).

In 2009 a tagged subadult bird (Julia) was killed during her first day of southward migration, at a farm in northern Saudi Arabia. The possible killing of Turkish tagged young in August 2009 in northern Saudi Arabia also occurred. It is clear that if this trend of ibis mortality rate due to hunting during migration is not reverted the ibis colony of Palmyra will vanish in the next 1-2 years.

From 2006 until 2010 we have been checking the tagged birds in collaboration with the Middle East BirdLife Secretariat. In 2009 NBIs were reported killed by the local people in Saudi Arabia and since then the Saudi Wildlife Commission (SWC) is making extra efforts to protect this bird while on migration. In March 2010, all the sites were checked where the Bald Ibises were recorded over the last 20 years and recommendations made that when tagged birds leave their winter breeding site the SWC will be alerted by BirdLife Middle East and provide data of birds movement so necessary and appropriate actions can be taken. These include providing information brochures in Arabic to local people in all those areas where birds occur and raising conservation issues with hunters. Minimizing the risks associated with uncontrolled hunting along the migratory route is a priority and a major emergency conservation measure currently being undertaken.

A fully referenced version of this article can be found on the WME website.

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