

RETURN OF THE IBIS

The Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* is considered to be one of the most threatened birds in the world, in critical danger of extinction, according to IUCN The World Conservation Union. Its range formerly extended from the Atlantic to the Middle East, with populations in Morocco, central Europe, including the Alps, eastwards to Turkey and Syria.

A number of factors, among which were probably persecution, disturbance, and habitat loss especially through the intensification of agricultu-



150 captive-bred bald ibises were released in four batches by Tel Aviv Zoo. None survived.

In 1997 the Konrad Lorenz Institute in Grunau, Austria, began another project combining release and captive breeding with careful husbandry providing protection during adverse weather. This project continues and currently involves around 30 birds.

For years there has been a captive colony of

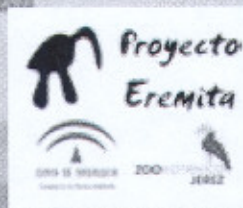
birds were injured by power lines, two of which subsequently died. The power line in question is being altered to prevent similar incidents happening again.

The main aim of the project is to study the success of the adaptation of the birds to the wild with a view to using these methods elsewhere.

The intention, however, at present, is not to allow the birds to become esta-



Photos courtesy of Proyecto Eremita



re, progressively led to a decrease in both range and population.

By the end of the 1980s there were only two populations known, one in Morocco and another, migratory population, in Turkey. The Turkish birds disappeared soon after, while in 2002 seven adult birds, including three breeding pairs, were found in Syria. While it is possible that other groups still exist in the Middle East, including Syria and the Yemen, the only known population of any size is in Morocco.



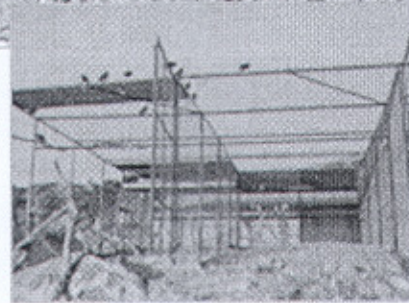
Here there are two nesting colonies, in Souss Massa National Park, and in Tamri, with around fifty nesting pairs in each. While these are now protected by the Moroccan authorities, disasters can happen, as evidenced by the loss of 40 individuals in nine days in May 1996, apparently due to disease. Therefore steps are necessary to p r e v e n t extinction.

The Bald Ibis is essentially a bird of open ground, from semi-desert to cultivation, feeding on invertebrates and small vertebrates, while nesting on cliffs.

Fortunately, the species breeds well in captivity, so re-introduction is a possibility. Sadly, past attempts have failed. Between 1983 and 1986,

Bald Ibis in Jerez Zoo, and it is these birds that are part of the Proyecto Eremita, run by a group of organisations led by the Junta de Andalucía and the Zoobotánico de Jerez, with the involvement among others of the Asociación para el Desarrollo Rural del Litoral de La Janda, all under the supervision of Jose Manuel Lopez Vasquez of the Junta de Andalucía's Delegación de Medio Ambiente. Ibises were reared in Jerez Zoo, and later in specially built flights in the Sierra del Retín, in the company of Cattle Egrets. The chicks were hand-reared by keepers wearing hats resembling the head of an adult ibis to prevent imprinting. Over 21 young birds were then allowed to fly free throughout the spring of 2004. Accustomed to the company of Cattle Egrets, they would follow wild ones which abound in the area to feeding sites. In order to prevent undue dispersal they were taken back into captivity and finally released, ostensibly for four years (until they reach breeding age) on 4th December 2004.

The Sierra del Retín area was chosen due to the suitability of the habitat – open fields, farmland, with cliffs in the area, and the presence of suitable food species. Sadly within weeks six



published in the wild so as not to introduce a species not known to have nested in Spain.

Recent developments in Gibraltar, however, may lead to a change in plan. The discovery of Bald Ibis remains in excavations at Gorham's Cave, Gibraltar by a team from the Gibraltar Museum, seems to indicate the presence of the species, possibly nesting in remote times on the cliffs of the Rock.

Now that there are free-flying Bald Ibises in the area, it would not be beyond the realms of possibility to see some over Gibraltar. The species can range regularly up to 70km during the non-nesting season. The Rock is 45km from the Sierra del Retín – as the ibis flies.



GIBRALTAR

NATURE NEWS

Gibraltar Ornithological & Natural History Society
Natural History Field Centre, Jews' Gate,
Upper Rock Nature Reserve, P.O. Box 243, Gibraltar
Tel 73639 - Tel 74023
e-mail: naturenews@gonhs.org

www.gonhs.org