Title

For the first time in the last three years, the Middle East's only breeding population of Critically Endangered Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* has reared two healthy young, which have left the nest and begun their migration to their non-breeding grounds. Northern Bald Ibis (NBI) is currently the most threatened bird in the Middle East, with just one breeding pair left of the tiny colony that was found near Palmyra, Syria, in 2002. Until this momentous rediscovery, the species had not been seen in the region for 70 years. "We're delighted to report that the fledging of two chicks has reignited our hopes for the recovery of this bird", said Chris Bowden, the RSPB's international species recovery officer, who coordinates the Northern Bald Ibis programme for BirdLife International. "The Syrian Desert Commission has successfully protected the birds and their breeding grounds." He added: "As we trace their migration route across the Middle East, we have colleagues across the region poised to monitor them on their journey. However, local difficulties are confounding our efforts. One of our Yemeni colleagues was forced to wait nine hours for fuel before starting to search for the birds!" Since the 2002 rediscovery, conservationists have sought to give the birds protection by working with local people, and using state-of-the-art technology to track their movements outside the breeding season. This research has identified the adult's wintering grounds in the highlands of Ethiopia, but where the juveniles go still remains a mystery. The NBI was once widespread across North Africa and the Middle East. The only other fully wild nesting population occurs on Morocco's Atlantic coast, near Agadir. "The outlying birds in Syria will be an important addition, but only if the population can be sustained", Chris Bowden said. Meanwhile, Spanish Partner SEO/BirdLife has launched an appeal to secure the world's largest remaining population. Morocco's Souss-Massa National Park region is crucial for Northern Bald Ibis, as all the country's breeding colonies occur here. Over the last 14 years SEO/BirdLife has supported a dedicated team of local wardens, who are deeply involved in the protection and scientific monitoring of the species. Now they are calling for additional support so this team can continue their vital work. The nest sites are located on coastal cliffs within the National Park and Tamri area, with an estimated 110 breeding pairs in 2009. There are several roosting sites, and most of the coastal steppes and fallow fields are used as feeding areas. The main known threat is the growth of tourism, and related disturbance to breeding and feeding habitats. Additionally, some birds have been killed by poachers. The Souss-Massa National Park works with SEO/BirdLife on NBI conservation and sustainable management activities. The main institutions which have supported this successful project are the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), *Territori i Paisatge* Foundation, Swarovski, and the Spanish National Parks Authority. Recently, the NBI conservation plan has gained the support of the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation and Dublin Zoo. A National Species Action Plan has been drawn up, including priority actions to be implemented to secure and further improve the growth of the population. Tagging individuals with coloured rings and satellite transmitters is a priority action. Satellite tagging has proven to be extremely useful in determining the movements of the tiny NBI population in Syria. Two adult birds carry tracking devices, and their daily progress can be followed at: www.rspb.org.uk/ibistracking For more background visit www.iagnbi.org To make a donation to help with wardening click here

There have been many partners and organisations involved in the efforts to prevent the extinction of Northern Bald Ibis

- Syrian General Commission for Al Badia Management and Development is leading the efforts in Syria and is the BirdLife Species Guardian.
- BirdLife International Middle East coordinates much of this work including the implementation of the Action Plan and has funded several of the activities
- International advisory Group for Northern Bald Ibis (IAGNBI) has provided ongoing expertise and input.
- IUCN Jordan office is an implementer of the Action Plan and has supported Gianluca Serra's expert input over recent years (also often as a volunteer)
- Waldrappteam (Austria) has provided technical input and additional resources in 2010

- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB - BirdLife partner in UK) has provided satellite tags and expertise, and funded other costs
- The Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation has been a key donor to the emergency action plan and ibis conservation program as a whole. It is the Species Champion for Northern Bald Ibis under the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme.
- The British Birdwatching Fair and Netherlands Embassy in Damascus have also supported the programme in Syria
- National Geographical Society grant funded work in previous years.
- Austrian Zoo Association (OZO) provided funds in 2010
- Saudi Wildlife Commission (SWC) has helped in surveying stop over areas last year in Saudi Arabia and they are supporting the monitoring program this year.
- Other donors include AECID, VBN (BirdLife in the Netherlands), *Territori i Paisatge* Foundation, Swarovski, the Spanish National Parks Authorityand the Save Our Species Fund
- Finally, the Syrian First Lady, H.E. Mrs Assad has shown personal interest and commitment to the programme.

This news is brought to you by the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme