

BirdLife's History in Objects: #6 ?The Hieroglyph?

Title

This bird was idolised by humans as a symbol of fertility and virtue, and for its association with the source of life. Isn't it ironic that it has struggled to breed and is today the most threatened species in the Middle East because of human pressures?

The Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* has had an eventful and turbulent relationship with man. Idolised yet mummified, celebrated and venerated yet beaten and eaten, collected then protected, hunted, poisoned, followed by pilgrims and tracked by scientists- this mythical bird is just over 200 mature wild individuals away from being lost forever.

With a large range that once spread across North Africa, the Middle East and Europe, conservation of the Northern Bald Ibis poses a great challenge for coordinating action. Fortunately, through the collaboration of national Partners in seven countries, the structure of the BirdLife International global Partnership has allowed for an organised and effective conservation effort. Work on this iconic species has even been the entry point for several new members of the BirdLife Partnership.

A dramatic cultural past



Originally described in central Europe in 1555, the Northern Bald Ibis was noted for the tastiness of its flesh, especially that of chicks from the nest before fledging. Clearly this was a factor, along with the conversion of its mountain meadow habitat into fields and pastures, that led to the extinction of the Northern Bald Ibis in Europe within 200 years.

It was not until the 1900s that a mythical black, iridescent, bird with a curved bill and bald head was rediscovered in North Africa and the Middle East. The mystery surrounding the new discovery of the Northern Bald Ibis was its downfall, as Museum curators and collectors from Europe- together with hunters -wiped out whole colonies in Algeria and Syria. With the conversion of habitats, the use of locust pesticides (600 birds found poisoned in 1959), climatic changes and increasing droughts, by the 1990s only four colonies remained of the western sub-population (one in Algeria; three in Morocco) and one tiny colony at Birecik, Turkey had gone extinct by 1989.

Cultural beliefs were the reason the species originally persisted at the city of Birecik, Turkey for so long, especially as the birds lived in such close proximity to the people. The Northern Bald Ibis was believed to have guided Noah and his children to a small house in a valley and was also followed by pilgrims to Mecca, thus was celebrated annually when it returned from migration. Unfortunately, with the expansion of the town and dissolution of cultures (such as a bridge construction causing the loss of traditional ferrymen who maintained the beliefs), the Northern Bald Ibises were once again subject to persecution. Children were seen throwing stones at nesting birds and even the simple act of putting up washing outside the houses facing the breeding colony caused adults to abandon nests.

The power of a Partnership

In 1993, the director of the Souss-Massa National Park, Morocco, home to three of the four western colonies, asked BirdLife to identify the measures needed to conserve the Northern Bald Ibis. A research programme was developed by the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) which provided the main technical input to the management of the park and the international species action plan. The relationship with Souss-Massa has continued with Spanish Partner SEO/BirdLife now taking the lead, as well as launching an appeal for the protection of the park. In 2011, around 100 pairs raised at least 130 fledged young. Long-term funding is now being sought to enable local wardens, who have been central to monitoring and protecting the ibises, and heightening the importance of the species in the public eye for 15 years, to continue their work.

Symbol of fertility

With Moroccan numbers growing, the discovery of a tiny colony in Syria in 2002 injected new urgency into the work for the Northern Bald Ibis. After the extinction of the Turkish colony, these birds are thought to be the last wild representatives of the genetically distinct eastern sub-population. A local Species Guardian was appointed and the birds are monitored and protected by BirdLife and its Partners, leading to the fledging of two young from one breeding pair in 2011. The people of Birecik believed the Northern Bald Ibis was a symbol of fertility: in this case it led to the birth of a new BirdLife Partner, the Syrian Society for the Conservation of Wildlife (SSCW) - a local NGO working on the species.

The species certainly is fertile in captive breeding programmes. Turkish BirdLife Partner, Dona Dernegi, is leading a long-term project to re-establish a fully wild population at Birecik. Numbers of the semi-captive population increased from 112 to 133 in 2011, and four juveniles were left free to migrate. Discussions are underway with the Ministry of Environment and Forestry to establish a Wildlife Reserve that protects the feeding grounds of the Birecik ibises.

Knowledge and wisdom

To conserve a species you need to fully understand its behaviour. RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) drew information from satellite tracking to fill in gaps in understanding regarding the migration of the Syrian population. Perhaps drawing inspiration from Thoth, the god of wisdom and knowledge who is depicted with the head of an ibis, the RSPB was able to locate the Northern Bald Ibis' wintering grounds in the Ethiopian highlands. The birds are now monitored across the seven countries they are known to use by national BirdLife organisations including the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural history Society and the Saudi Wildlife Commission.

The Ancient Egyptians regarded the Nile as the source and protector of life, so the ibis, which appeared in the region during the annual flooding of the river, was consequently idolised. The hieroglyph of the Northern Bald Ibis represented the word *akh*, which stood for excellence, glory, honour, and virtue. By collaborating together across the region, BirdLife Partners are now doing the honourable duty of protecting the very thing the Northern Bald Ibis once stood for, its life.

BirdLife International has grown into a global Partnership, working with 117 local Partners worldwide in order to make a sustainable difference for nature and people. This article is part of a series celebrating BirdLife International's 90th Anniversary.

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