



Restoring the Dutch White Stork population- a charismatic species brought back by targeted conservation work

In the 1960s the last remaining wild White Stork pairs *Ciconia ciconia* raised their offspring in the Netherlands. They were the last heirs of a once viable population of about 500 pairs around 1910.

Following a successful Swiss example, VBN (BirdLife in The Netherlands) coordinated a reintroduction program to bring back the White Stork as a breeding bird. The program started in 1969 with a goal to re-establish a viable population of White Storks with all the characteristics of the 'original' population: self-supporting and wintering in Africa south of the Sahara. Similar programs have been undertaken in other countries in Northwest Europe.

In the first project stage adult birds were kept in captivity to breed under safe conditions in Liesveld. In the second stage, breeding pairs of their offspring were accommodated in very large flying cages at ten 'distribution stations', which were located in the former best breeding areas of the White Stork in The Netherlands. These stations were set up in the '70s and '80s. Hundreds of volunteers took great care of these pairs and their young, which were allowed to settle themselves. Artificial nests were built in the vicinity of the 'distribution stations' to provide suitable breeding locations. A feeding program guaranteed sufficient nutrients for the young birds if the environment couldn't provide enough food. The population growth was monitored with the help of a comprehensive field research program.

In 2008, the breeding population consisted of approximately 700 pairs. This was a great success, thanks to the volunteers and the public donations to the project. Nowadays countless people can enjoy each spring the bill-rattling sound of White Stork pairs on the rooftops or the impressive sight of migrating stork groups in the autumn.

As of 2010, the population goal has been achieved, but the White stork population is not yet fully self-sustaining in the Netherlands. Even for an opportunistic bird as the White Stork which forages close to human habitations, the remaining natural habitats produce insufficient food to raise enough offspring year on year. Habitat improvement has therefore become the keyword for the species' restoration program in the new Millennium. For Vogelbescherming Netherlands (BirdLife Netherlands) this is the final stage of the reintroduction program. Habitat improvement for White Storks results in a more attractive countryside with a range of wet, dry and herb rich

grasslands. This is a landscape highly valued by visitors but also by a variety of wildlife that find their home in these landscapes. Vogelbescherming Netherlands supports initiatives of the 'distribution stations' to realize habitat improvement in their vicinity.

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