

News

Article from our magazine Regulus: The white stork – the arrival of a new breeding bird in Luxembourg

By Patric Lorgé

Throughout most of Europe, the white stork is a well-known and much-loved species, in some regions it is even worshiped. It is said to bring luck and symbolizes the arrival of new life. For the first time ever, the white stork has successfully bred in Luxembourg in 2013.



The white stork (lat.: *Ciconia ciconia*, lëtz.: Wäisse Stuerk) may well be one of the best known bird species: with an average body size of 110 cm, a distinct black and white plumage colouration, bright red and bills and stilt-like legs, these birds cannot be mistaken for something else.

In many regions of Europe, white storks gradually lost their fear of humans and followed them into their farming areas and settlements. It is not unusual for storks to build their nests on rooftops, chimneystacks and telephone masts, sometimes right in the middle of cities.

Foraging usually takes place in extensively used wet habitats (e.g. wet meadows, floodplains, becks, and moorlands). In southern Europe they also hunt on insect-rich dry steppes.

On their search for food, they slowly walk across the ground, picking up their prey with incredible speed and precision. By far the greatest proportion of their food is made up of mice, worms and insects, such as grasshoppers, while frogs and fish make up a much smaller part.

Europe currently holds 75% of the global population, with a dramatic population decrease having been recorded between 1970 and 1990. Due to massive conservation efforts, the population has since stabilised and in some areas even increased slightly. Because none of the stork populations have reached their former levels yet it still figures on the IUCN Red List.

Agenda

29.07
Escapardenne et
réserves naturelles

05.08
Jardin méditerranéen à
Schwebsange

14.08 - 15.08
Assomption

18.08
Visite guidée
Schlammwiss by night

26.08
Porte ouverte à la
Schlammwiss

26.08
En route avec le berger



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The couple's nest was in a poplar tree, approximately 20 meters above the ground.

A flagship species for conservation...

The white stork is listed in Appendix I of the Bird Directive (79/409/CEE), which protects threatened wild birds in Europe. Conservation efforts involve the restoration of habitats, esp. the restoration of degraded wetlands. In many regions of France, Germany and Belgium, these restoration efforts have already proven very successful, with the white stork already breeding in nearby Lorraine, Saarland and Wallonia.

... setting foot in Luxembourg.

There are no official records of white storks ever successfully breeding in Luxembourg. While there have been several attempts to construct nests in recent years, these had never succeeded until now.

White storks are a regular sighting while migrating through Luxembourg (both in spring and autumn). Some individuals may even stay for a couple of days or even weeks if the habitat is of sufficient quality. The restoration of approximately 1400m of the Alzette river near Schifflange-Dumontshaff - as part of the European-funded Life project 'Revalorisation écologique de la vallée supérieure de l'Alzette' - made a big difference for the white stork in Luxembourg, to the point that the species is now almost a regular sight in this region.

To make the area even more attractive as potential breeding ground for white storks, artificial nests were set up recently. These supporting measures were initiated by natur&environnement and the municipality of Schifflange and were carried out in close collaboration with the Administration de la nature et des forêts. These artificial platforms make it easier for the white storks to build their impressive nests, which can be up to 2 meters high.

The first successful breeding in 2013

By the end of April one of these artificial platforms was occupied by a pair of white storks. The wet and cold spring, which probably caused many breeding attempts to fail throughout Europe, probably wasn't a problem for the Luxembourgish pair, as they started breeding very late in the season. On 7th June a total of 4 recently hatched chicks were counted inside the stork's nest. By early July, that number had dwindled to 2 chicks. This is not all that unusual, however, especially when considering the young age of the female stork. On July 8th the remaining 2 chicks were ringed under the critical eyes of Marco Schank, Minister for Sustainable Development, and Roby Biver, president of natur&environnement.



These large rings enable ornithologists to read the ring number from a safe distance without disturbing the birds. This allows them to collect valuable data.

White storks are long distance migrants, wintering in tropical Africa. To follow their migration routes, some birds are ringed with colour rings. Numbers on the rings can be read from a safe distance using binoculars or a telescope. With the information collected from such ringing schemes, scientists have been able to establish that white storks breeding in Western Europe migrate through France and Spain over the straight of Gibraltar on their way to West Africa. 'Our' breeding female, for example, is wearing a colour ring too, which allowed us to trace her back to Karlsruhe, Germany, where she was ringed as a nestling in 2010. We now know that she was ringed in 2010.

A reward for consistent conservation efforts

The fact that this couple of white storks decided to make this stretch of restored river their home and raise their young here, is probably the greatest reward the participants of the Life project (natur&environment, municipalities of Schiffflange and Mondercange, Administration de la nature et des forêts and the Ministry of the Interior) could possibly have hoped for: hopes now are for a successful return and many more breeding successes in the years to come.



Roby Biver, president of natur&environment, Marco Schank, Minister for Sustainable Development, Gilles Biver and Patric Lorgé ringing the young white storks.

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