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European Stork Villages

Where storks are honorary citizens

EuroNatur award

June 2016 review

The white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) cannot be confused with any of Europe's other large birds, and none of the others is so closely connected with human life. They follow civilisation, building their nests on roofs, electricity poles and chimneys. Legend has it that they bring new babies, and in many countries these elegant birds are considered lucky. Yet all the affection they inspire has not been enough to stop mankind destroying their habitat.

Why does the white stork need our help?

White storks prefer open terrain with large meadows, floodplains, marshes and other wetlands. Flying to their winter quarters in the south, they cover huge distances. When rearing their young, the adult birds stray only a few kilometres from the nest, so during this period they are dependent on the availability of suitable feeding grounds close to their breeding sites. Every day, they must hunt down about a pound of frogs, grasshoppers and other small animals for each young bird! This is why storks are good indicators of the ecological quality of cultural landscapes. Larger colonies are established where agricultural land use is so compatible with nature that it can support a variety of flora and fauna. However, construction along and across rivers, drainage work and the intensification of agriculture have led to valuable wetlands – so indispensable for storks – being amongst Europe's most severely endangered habitats. This is turning the white stork into one of the most endangered bird species despite its popularity! It is already extinct or a rarity in many parts of Europe, and there are only a few villages left where the white stork breeds in colonies.

Stork villages – international ambassadors

So the European Stork Village award is taking a new approach. Every village recognised represents its country - it may have the highest number of breeding pairs or a rapidly increasing population. To be recognised as a stork village, the local authorities and population must take active stork protection measures. Where possible, there should be at least one major protected area already in existence or planned, accompanied by measures to enhance the living conditions of the white stork, such as preserving or rewilding large open wet meadows or erecting artificial stork nests. It is equally important to raise the awareness of the local population and to awaken the local authorities' interest in their feathered neighbours. This can be achieved by a variety of public relations events, such as, for example, annual stork festivals, photography and painting competitions etc. The aim of the European Stork Village award is for these places to become internationally known for their special cultural and natural heritage and to hold up their commitment as an example to others. It is designed to stimulate discussion and an exchange of ideas about this large endangered bird species and to strengthen positive approaches to stork protection. At the same time, the award encourages both the population and the authorities of the whole region to respect intact landscapes.

European Stork Villages: an overview

Čigoč, Croatia (1994)

- Pairs of storks: 32 pairs and 98 young (dry year 2013), 32 pairs and 55 young (2012), 29 pairs and 77 young (2011), 39 pairs and 54 young (dry year 2003), 45 (2000), 41 (1999), 44 pairs and 188 young (wet year 1988), 31 (1968)
- Nests on: wooden houses
- Stork festival: 19 March (St. Joseph's Day) for the arrival of the storks and in late June.
- Support measures: preservation of old breeds of farm animals, information centre
- Further details: most successful breeding in Europe in 1988 with an average of 4.3 young per pair, Turistička družba Čigoč (www.cigoc.hr), the tourist information association, supports stork protection.
- Partners: Lonjsko Polje Nature Park, Nature Conservation Agency

Čigoč on the river Sava was the first village in Europe to be awarded the title of European Stork Village. With around 124 inhabitants, the village belongs to the parish of Sisak and is situated in the 50,600 hectare Lonjsko Polje Nature Park. These large areas of pasture grazed by old breeds of farm animals adapted to the landscape, such as the Posavina horse, Turopolje pig and Slavonian-syrmian grey-cattle, are a unique piece of natural and cultural heritage.

Nagybajom, Hungary (1996)

- Pairs of storks: 9 pairs and 15 young (2013), 4 pairs (2012). 33 (1998), 4 (1958)
- Nests on: houses, electricity and telegraph poles
- Stork festival: early June
- Support measures: construction of bases for nests, environmental education in schools, conservation of wet meadows
- Further details: ecological town twinning with Schortens (Lower Saxony)
- Partners: Somogy Natural Heritage Foundation

The village of Nagybajom with 3,600 inhabitants is situated in the Somogy district, and in the south it borders on the 7,933 hectares of the Boronka reserve, whose designation as a protected area received considerable support from EuroNatur. The local association Lake Balaton / River Drava Green Bridge is campaigning for the preservation of grazing pastures, woodlands and ponds for a wildlife corridor between Lake Balaton and the Drava National Park. It is not only white storks that find their ideal living conditions here. Fifteen pairs of white-tailed eagles breed here as well and otters can often be seen. Habitat protection measures in particular are urgently required, as Hungary's stork population has declined from

15,000 pairs in 1941 to 4,800 pairs in 2003. There were still 380 pairs recorded across the Somogy municipal district in 2003.

Rühstätt, Germany (1996)

Pairs of storks:	23 pairs and 72 young (2013), 2002: 37 pairs with 72 young, (in 1958 there were only 4 pairs)
Nests on:	stone houses
Stork festival:	late July
Support measures:	artificial nests, rewilding
Further details:	head office of the biosphere reserve, parish stork club, nest information panels, information centre
Partners:	Elbe River Landscape Biosphere Reserve (Brandenburg)

Rühstätt with its 600 inhabitants is situated in the Elbe River Landscape Biosphere Reserve of Brandenburg, which was established in 1998. The reserve's 375,000 hectares extend across five of Germany's states and along 400 km of rivers. The head offices of the protected area are in Rühstätt. The protected area of the river Elbe's floodplain offers a wide range of feeding opportunities and is the region with the strongest population of storks in Germany. In 1996 147 pairs of storks with 306 young were counted in the former district of Perleberg (now Prignitz).

Malpartida de Cáceres, Spain (1997)

Pairs of storks:	80 (1997), 24 (1988); Barruecos natural heritage site: 40 (1997), 20 (1991)
Nests on:	houses/church, rock formations with 'woolbag' erosion (Barruecos natural heritage site)
Stork festival:	stork week, early June
Support measures:	nest protection
Further details:	youth work, Silver Stork prize
Partners:	Torrejón el Rubio Nature Conservation Centre

The 4,300 strong settlement of Malpartida de Cáceres is situated in the Spanish region of Extremadura amidst the steppes, which stretch westwards from Cáceres to the Portuguese border. This land is mostly farmed as extensive pasture grazed by traditional breeds of farm animals such as Avileña cattle and merino sheep. Ponds were created as watering holes for cattle and for fishing, and small reservoirs for irrigation and drinking water. This created not only important feeding grounds for the white stork, but also breeding grounds for many other species of birds associated with water, such as the little grebe, great crested grebe, various species of duck, the little egret and grey heron.

Andrid, Romania (1997)

Pairs of storks:	37 (1997), 17 (1984)
Nests on:	electricity poles
Stork festival:	early July
Support measures:	construction of nest bases, rewilding
Further details:	active youth group
Partners:	Romanian Ornithological Society (SOR)

The village of Andrid with its approx. 2.700 inhabitants lies in the Pannonian plain in the north west of Romania. Covering a few hundred hectares, these largest remaining areas of former wetland meadows are on land belonging to this village, making the region home to one of the largest stork populations in Romania. The local authorities are working to improve the habitats of the storks step by step. Former wetlands have been restored to their natural state and new nature reserves have been designated.

Effective information programmes are to contribute to gaining the interest of the public and winning people for the protection of storks. For instance ever since 1997 Andrid has been celebrating an annual stork festival in cooperation with the Ornithological Society of Romania. The community has set up an educational nature trail. It has been running a nature conservation information centre in the village since April 2013 and organizes various activities in environmental education.

Mala and Velika Polana, Slovenia (1999)

Pairs of storks:	4 pairs and 12 young (2013), 3 pairs and 7 young (2012), 8 pairs, 18 young (2002); 9 pairs, 14 young (2001); approx. 35 pairs in the area
Nests on:	houses, electricity poles
Stork festival:	every year since 1999
Support measures:	development plan for tourism compatible with nature
Further details:	highest breeding density in Slovenia
Partners:	DOPPS (Slovenian Ornithological Society)

The two villages (approximately 1,420 inhabitants) are situated in the Pomurje region of the Drava and Mura rivers. The 3,500 hectares of the wetland complex surrounding these villages provide the ideal feeding grounds for the white stork, the symbol of this region, and make this the centre of Slovenia's breeding population. The orchid-rich meadows and floodplains, in which 23 endangered species of birds have been recorded, are the last remaining large grassland ecosystems in Slovenia. They are situated between the Important Bird Areas of Mura and Crni log, one of the largest continuous wet alder forests. Together with this and the areas subject to flooding, the meadows form a single ecological unit. EuroNatur and DOPPS-Bird Life Slovenia are campaigning for the designation of an

international Danube-Drava-Mura Biosphere Reserve to stretch across five countries from the Steiermark region of Austria to the Danube basin along the Serbian-Croatian border. 2,300 km² already have protected status.

Tykocin, Poland (2001)

Pairs of storks:	27 pairs and 86 young (2013), 17 pairs and 39 young (2003), 22 pairs and 29 young (2002), 21 pairs and 27 young (2001) and 23 pairs and 51 young (2000)
Nests on:	houses, trees, electricity poles
Stork festival:	stork week, early June
Support measures:	construction of nest supports, rewilding of wet meadows, extensive agriculture
Further details:	information centre and observation tower in Pentowo
Partners:	PTOP (Polish Society for the Protection of Birds)

The village of Tykocin has 6,860 inhabitants and is situated on the edge of the Narew floodplain in north-east Poland. In Pentowo, a district of Tykocin, a single farm is home to the largest colony of white storks in Poland. Thanks to the actions of the farm owner collaborating with the PTOB (Polish Society for the Protection of Birds), the construction of nesting aids has succeeded in increasing the number of nests from two in the late 1980s to 27 in 2001. There is also a visitor information centre on the farm. The land use on feeding habitats in the area is compatible with nature. Wet grassland, which has been partially re-irrigated after having been previously drained, is grazed extensively by old breeds of farm animals, such as Polish red cattle, or mowed at intervals.

Marchegg, Austria (2002)

Pairs of storks:	52 (2001), 20 (1970)
Nests on:	pedunculate oaks
Stork festival:	transboundary stork festival around the 20 June
Support measures:	extensive grazing projects, nest protection, management of wet meadows
Further details:	as many as 8 pairs on one tree, regional development programme for floodplains
Partners:	WWF Austria

The town of Marchegg with around 3,000 inhabitants lies approx. 45 km to the north-east of Vienna on the border with Slovakia. It is situated within the 38,500 hectare Donau-March-Thayaauen Ramsar site. The stork colony is in the 1,150 hectare Marchegg Reserve, where black stork, grey heron, night heron, white-tailed eagle, eagle owl, black and red kite also

breed. The designation of the wet meadows as a nature conservation area and the support for a comprehensive grazing project using Scottish highland cattle have safeguarded this area as a feeding ground for white storks. This small town is situated directly on the European Green Belt.

Belozem, Bulgaria (2005)

Pairs of storks:	35 pairs and 107 young (2013), 23 pairs and 59 young (2005), 25 pairs (2004)
Nests on:	houses, electricity poles
Stork festival:	planned
Support measures:	working to gain protected status for 5 potential Natura 2000 sites
Further details:	fourteen pairs on the school
Partners:	Green Balkans

Belozem is a parish of 5,000 inhabitants on the Maritsa plain near to Plovdiv in southern Bulgaria. Large tracts of its land are in areas flooded by the Maritsa, Bulgaria's largest inland river. Here conditions for white storks and many other species are still ideal. The 2005 European Stork Village is situated in the midst of extensively farmed wet meadows, pasture and rice fields. Within the district of Belozem, there are 700 hectares of rice fields used as feeding grounds by white stork. Over half of these have potential as Natura 2000 sites. In 2005, 23 pairs of white stork bred successfully in Belozem, rearing 59 young. Every year 14 pairs of storks set up home on the school building alone.

Altreu, Switzerland (2008)

Pairs of storks:	32 pairs
Nests on:	houses and trees (artificial nests)
Stork festival:	2008, regular programme in the information centre
Support measures:	rewilding, 1,500 hectare protected area established (Witi)
Partners:	Parish of Selzach, Storch Schweiz foundation, Für üsi Witi association

Further details: the colony began 50 years ago as a project to re-introduce storks from the Alsace into Altreu. Later most storks were imported from Algeria. Since 1999, the problematic basis of the introductions programme has been systematically transformed.

Today by far the largest breeding population in the country can be found in this small hamlet in the parish of Selzach in the canton of Solothurn. Approximately 20% of all the white storks breeding in Switzerland live in this colony. Altreu is now a model for such projects: the feeding of storks ceased in 2004, and the enclosures have meanwhile been abolished. In their place, the focus is now on habitat conservation as the basis for the survival of storks in the cultural landscape. The 1,500 hectare 'Witi' reserve was created, in which the large and

now stable stork population can hunt for food. As a result of this, marshland along the river Aare has been preserved in the midst of the otherwise intensively farmed arable land of the Swiss central plateau. Furthermore, the 'Witi' is an internationally important resting place for waders. The funding of the motorway tunnel under the 'Witi' – the only one in the Swiss lowlands – shows that the conservation of this valuable habitat is being taken very seriously indeed.

Eskikaraağaç, Turkey (2011)

Pairs of storks: 5 pairs and 16 young (2013), 10 breeding pairs (2010)
 Nests on: houses, mosque, breeding platforms
 Stork festival: held regularly every year since 2005
 Support measures: promotion of extensive grazing, measures to reduce death by electrocution, the construction of artificial nests
 Partners: Doga Derbegi conservation association, parish of Eskikaraağaç, borough of Nilüfer, district of Karacabey, province of Bursa

The small village of Eskikaraağaç is situated on the picturesque banks of Lake Uluabat in north-west Turkey. The varied landscapes and the large number of bird species make this area around Lake Uluabat an insider tip for nature-lovers and bird-lovers alike. For several years now, this parish has been encouraging extensive grazing in the species-rich meadows and pastures on Lake Uluabat, to preserve and enhance stork feeding grounds. The measures taken to prevent the death of these large birds from electrocution are exemplary. Following pressure from stork conservationists, energy suppliers have replaced the most dangerous sections of overhead cables with underground cables, have made electricity poles endangering birds harmless by adding protective covers and used flags on overhead cables on stork flight paths to make them more visible. Furthermore, artificial nests have been erected, to make the storks' task easier.

Češinovo-Obleševo, Macedonia (2013)

Pairs of storks: 68 pairs (2013), 70 breeding pairs (2012)
 Nests on: houses, electricity poles
 Stork festival: planned
 Partners: Macedonian Ecological Society (MES)
 parish of Češinovo-Obleševo

The Macedonian European Stork Village of Češinovo-Obleševo is a 'stork parish' comprising 11 small villages in all. Situated in the Bregalnica river basin, this parish provides the white stork with rich feeding grounds. The large rice fields, in particular, are home to a wide variety of amphibians. The Kočani-Štip valley (a large part of which lies within the parish of

Cešinovo-Obleševo) is home to the second largest population of white storks in Macedonia, with 180 pairs. Unlike the region of Pelagonia in the south, where the the largest populations of white storks are found, the number of storks in the Bregalnica river basin is currently stable, even experiencing slight growth. The rice fields of the parish of Češinovo-Obleševo provide a valuable habitat not only for the white stork but also for a number of species of heron, such as the night heron, grey heron, little egret and the great white egret. Until now there were insufficient funds and know-how in the parish to carry out far-reaching conservation measures. As a member of the European Stork Village network they have been given an opportunity to develop strategies for sustainable stork protection.

Buzica, Slovakia (2014)

Pairs of storks: 11 breeding pairs (2013)

Nests on: breeding platforms, electricity poles

Stork festival: annual festival to greet the arrival of the storks in spring.

Support measures: environmental education, artificial nest bases as an alternative to nests on electricity poles.

The parish of Buzica on the Slovakian-Hungarian border is one of the three most important nesting areas for the white stork in Slovakia: the Košice basin, a designated bird reserve. The stork is held in great esteem in the parish of Buzica. Both the local citizens and the parish authorities support measures to protect these large black and white birds. Buzica is one of the first Slovakian parishes to install artificial nest bases as an alternative to nesting on electricity poles. These have been well received by the storks and are in frequent use. Since 1976 the parish has carried out a systematic stork census. Great emphasis is placed on raising the local population's awareness of the need for stork protection measures. There is an environmental education programme 'Stork', designed to develop understanding of the issues in even very young children. A kindergarten and a primary school in Buzica are involved in this. Other activities include regular issues of the school magazine *Goya* (Stork), and each June pupils work alongside young adults to help with the ringing of young storks. Each spring, there are traditional celebrations in the village of Buzica, to mark the arrival of the storks.

Taraš, Serbia (2015)

Pairs of storks: 40 pairs and 78 young (2014), 32 pairs and 65 young (2013)

Nests on: breeding platforms, electricity poles

Stork festival: In June, Taraš Stork Days; in August a village festival to mark the storks' departure. Both every year since 2014

Support measures: environmental education, nest bases as an alternative to nests on electricity poles.

Taraš lies in the Serbian region of Banat in the heart of the province of Vojvodina. The meadows and pastures in areas subject to flooding along the river Tisa provide the white storks with a rich supply of food. It is not without reason that the number of white storks breeding in Taraš is the highest in the whole country. The village is taking action to ensure that the storks will be provided with optimal living conditions in the future too. In 2004 they were already installing 11 nesting platforms as an alternative to nests on electricity poles under the aegis of the "Safe Nests for White Storks" project. In 2014 the association Local Ecological and Pedagogical Challenge worked together with the regional electricity company to install 40 more nest bases across the borough. Great emphasis is placed on raising the local population's awareness of the need to protect the storks and the wet meadows and pastures. So in 2014 the village association of Taraš organised the Taraš Stork Day for the first time together with the local association of ecologists and anglers. From 2015 the event is being extended to two days and organised by the newly founded association Taraš Storks. They have taken on the task of protecting the white storks and their environment, raising environmental awareness and promoting environmental education in society (particularly for children and young people too), and are campaigning for sustainable ecotourism in the countryside.

Poros, Greece (2016)

Stork pairs:	11 pairs and 30 young (2016), 9 pairs and 35 young (2015), 11 pairs and 34 young (2013), 11 pairs and 32 young (2004)
Nests on:	Breeding platforms, electricity pylons
Stork festival:	introduced in 2016, planned to take place every year in future at the end of May
Measures:	Nesting platforms as an alternative to nesting places on electricity pylons, measures to reduce the incidents of electric shocks suffered by birds, encouragement of extensive grazing, environmental education.
Partners:	Evros-Delta National park management, Ciconia local initiative for the protection of storks, Feres municipality, Poros village council.

Poros is a village in the municipality of Feres on the edge of the Evros Delta on the border to Turkey. Roughly 200 square kilometres of the delta are protected as a national park. Numerous wetlands and meadows along the delta have been turning into scrubland over the past years as farmers have given up extensive grazing the land. The management of the national park plans to reopen these areas through strategic grazing projects. The nesting conditions are also to be improved. So far the storks have been nesting solely on electric pylons. The municipality wants to install artificial nesting platforms with the support of the electricity company HEDNO as an alternative.

The village authorities in Poros and its partners are placing great emphasis on raising awareness in the local population. An environmental consciousness project on the storks has been carried out in the three primary schools in the municipality. This is to be further extended, and in addition an annual stork festival is to be held. The village is planning to reach people beyond the confines of the region and to gain their interest and support for the protection of storks and their habitat.

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