

FOREIGN NEWS

Compiled by Cynthia Best

WHITE STORK IN SWEDEN: FROM EXTINCTION TO RE-INTRODUCTION

The Swedish Re-introduction Project for White Stork (see Announcement on page 24 of this issue) was launched in 1989. The following background to this important initiative was derived from a paper by Berith Cavallin, presented at the International Symposium on the White Stork, Hamburg, September 1996, and mentions subsequent developments.

The White Stork appears to have arrived in Sweden during the 15th century and probably reached its highest numbers around 1800. The oldest-known sighting of White Stork, in 1589, is recorded in the meteorological diary of the astronomer Tycho Brahe. Apart from a few accidentally nesting pairs, the White Stork has never settled outside Scania, the southernmost province of Sweden. As a student at Lund University in 1731, Carl von Linné noted that: "*in Scania copiose, alias rarissime*", meaning that White Stork was common in Scania but was rare elsewhere in Sweden. It is thought likely that Scania held about 5 000 pairs during the 18th century, compared with 10 000 pairs in Denmark.

In 1856, however, the Swedish White Stork population met with a severe weather catastrophe during migration, and of 80 pairs belonging to the most numerous colony only five returned that year. The Danish population was also drastically affected, but in Sweden the White Stork population never recovered and it started on its road to extinction.

The first Swedish White Stork census was performed in 1917, when 35 pairs bred in Scania and reared 82 chicks. The number of

breeding birds declined until 1954, when the only two fledglings subsequently died in cold, wet weather. Since then the only breeding attempt involved a single bird which built a nest, although White Storks have visited Scania almost every year in numbers ranging up to 37 individuals and averaging 16.

The main reason why the White Stork abandoned Sweden as a breeding area was, as in other countries, the vast drainage of the wetlands. In the area favoured by the White Storks in Scania, nearly 90% of the wetlands which existed in 1820 were drained before 1950. Without considerable expansion of the wetlands, the White Stork will not recolonise Sweden, even if the population on the European continent recovers. Although the White Stork has been extinct in Sweden since 1954, it is still the most beloved symbol of Scania and all the people of that province would welcome its comeback.

Aware of the value of the White Stork as the greatest ambassador of the wetlands, three organisations, the Society for Nature Conservation in Scania, the Ornithological Society in Scania and the Institute for Water and Air Research in Aneboda, initiated the Swedish White Stork Project in 1989 with the aim of re-establishing the White Stork as a breeding bird. To be successful the Project must achieve environmental improvements, particularly the protection and expansion of wetlands in the river valleys of Scania. The current wetland areas need to be increased five-fold to support a White Stork population of about 150 free-flying pairs.

The geographical position of Sweden, at the northern boundary of the White Stork breed-

ing area, creates special problems for the Swedish Project. To reach Scania the storks have to cross the Baltic – a considerable obstacle. Thus a large scale immigration of White Storks from the rest of Europe cannot be expected, even if those populations increased dramatically.

The aim, therefore, is not only to re-establish wetlands in Scania, but also to breed White Storks for release as soon as they have formed pairs, as has already been done in Switzerland and the Netherlands. The Project was started with 15 Swiss birds; it now boasts 158 birds. There are 14 nesting pairs amongst the free-flying birds. Outside of the stations White Storks are not fed during the breeding season, but only in wintertime when they should have migrated to Africa. To date 23 young have migrated: one of them was seen in Romania later the same autumn, another returned to Scania two years later.

In 1997, a White Stork born in the Project returned to nest on the roof of one of the substations for the first time. The bird may well have over-wintered in Africa, as it was sighted in southern Germany two weeks after leaving Sweden in September 1996 and only returned on 4 April the following year.

The Project storks have already attracted some of the vagrant wild White Storks which habitually visit Scania. Two of them have each nested with a wild Stork. In 1996, a wild pair nested close to one of the substations – the first time since 1954 that a wild pair of White Storks nested in Sweden and quite an occasion for the mass-media, the public and for the Project.

The free-flying Project storks have been of great help in wetland re-establishment projects in southern and western Scania. For instance,

the river valley most abundant in White Stork during the 17th century, has been ear-marked for significant field improvements. Although these improvements focus largely on nitrogen-surplus problems, they will also favour the re-introduction of White Storks. Meadows will be allowed to flood in spring and stretches of river will meander again.

So, with the Project storks as ambassadors, both the wetlands and a natural breeding White Stork population will return to Scania and thus to Sweden – with frogs, marsh marigolds and forget-me-nots as a bonus!

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