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Stork revival in Switzerland

Max Blösch, or: What a determined man can achieve

In Switzerland, where many wetlands had to be drained and agriculture intensified to ensure the survival of the densely populated landlocked country during World War II (1939-45), the last pair of the original wild population of storks nested at the village of Neuenkirch in 1949.

Fortunately, Max Blösch (1908-1997), then a young teacher in the city of Solothurn, after having encountered one of the last breeding pairs nesting and rearing its young on the roof of an old farmhouse, got hooked on the species, documented its decline and initiated a reintroduction programme. He established a reintroduction centre at Altreu, a small village on the Aare River close to Solothurn, which he populated, in 1948, with a few storks from Alsace. Recognising that he could not reach his goal with the few birds available from within Europe, he went, in 1955, on an expedition to Algeria and brought 36 fledglings back to Switzerland. 24 of these birds were released from nests at Altreu and two other sites. The remainder was kept in aviaries for breeding. Other expeditions followed in 1959, 1960 and 1961, and in total close to 300 storks were imported into Switzerland.

Fortunately, Max Blösch was not too impressed, and the birds themselves unaware, of all the conservation experts and other sceptics who claimed that a reintroduction programme based on non-migrating storks from North Africa would inevitably fail. While some storks stayed during winter in Swit-



zerland, many of them migrated along the western fly-way to Spain and further into Africa as far as Mali, and the first free-ranging pair bred at Altreu just outside the reintroduction centre in 1960. Successively the number of breeding pairs at Altreu in-

creased and stabilised at about 40. As from 1966, 23 additional breeding and reintroduction centres were established and the population grew continuously. In 1976, Max Blösch founded an NGO to ensure the long-term existence of the programme. In 1994, this "Swiss Society for the White Stork" (now called "Storch Schweiz - Cigogne Suisse"), decided to no longer breed storks in aviaries, and to phase out the supplementary feeding of the wild storks. As

from then, the breeding and reintroduction centres were successively converted into information centres and activities shifted to monitoring the storks on their migration and securing feeding grounds in Switzerland.

In 2004, altogether 198 breeding pairs were counted on Swiss territory, 116 of which successfully reared a total of 257 youngsters. 225 adults (57.6%) migrated to their traditional wintering grounds in the Iberian Peninsula, North and West Africa. Of course national boundaries are meaningless for storks, and Swiss storks mix with the reintroduced storks in Southern Germany where, in 2004, 35 birds originating from the Swiss programme reared 80 offspring, and more Swiss birds live in Alsace and Lorraine. *from "Storch Schweiz"*

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