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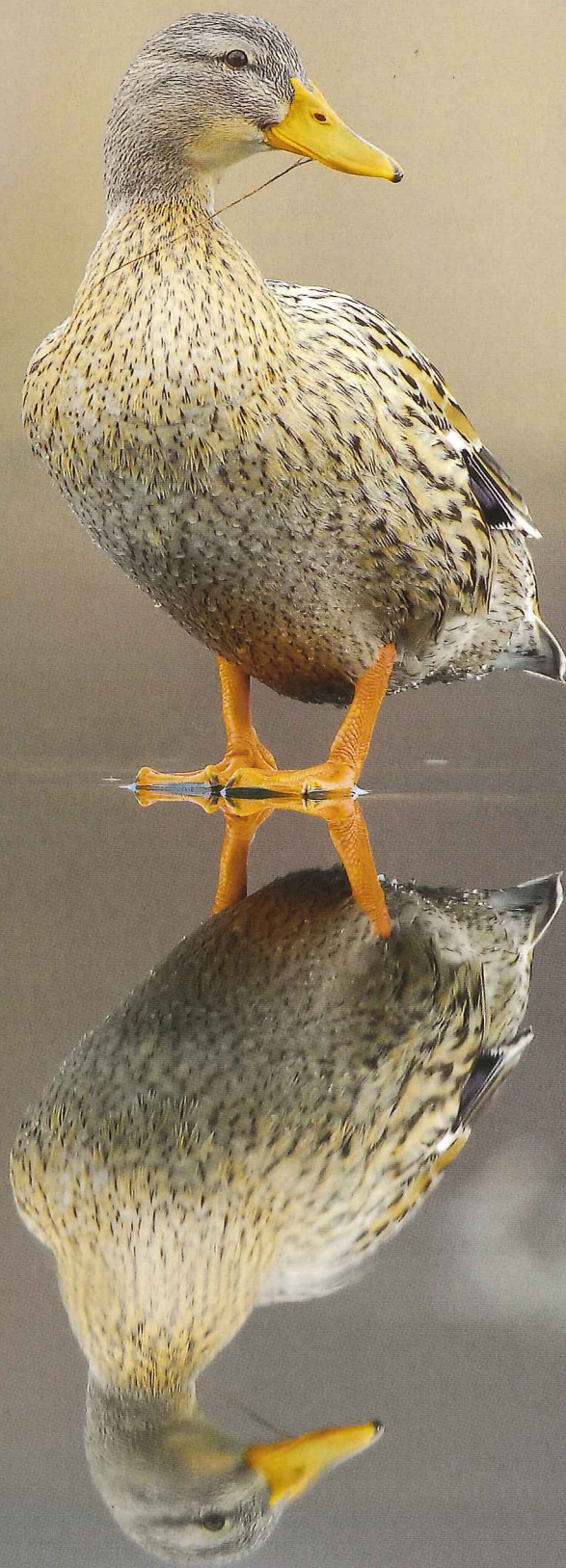




Photo: E. Enchev/Le Balkan



from Pavel Simeonov

Srebarna Dalmatian Pelican Colony – a successful example of international partnership for Nature Conservation

In June this year Dr Leon Bennun, BirdLife International's Director of Science and Policy, said that "In an ever more crowded world, species that need lots of space are losing out". He was speaking as the Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* was moved to the International Union of Nature Conservation's (IUCN) highest category of extinction threat, but he could equally have been referring to the magnificent **Dalmatian Pelican** *Pelecanus crispus* which is recognised by the IUCN as Vulnerable to extinction because of its globally declining population. With a wingspan of over three metres this is the largest of the world's eight pelicans, and also one of the most threatened. A migratory species typically breeding on small islands in freshwater lakes or in dense aquatic vegetation such as reedbeds of *Typha* and *Phragmites*, numbers of Dalmatian Pelicans dropped sharply in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with wetland reclamation,

disturbance, hunting, and over-exploitation of fish stocks all reducing breeding success and eliminating a number of isolated sub-populations across its once huge range.

With the eastern/Mongolian population all but extinct now, conservation measures are being increasingly focussed on the Dalmatian Pelicans that still breed in eastern Europe and east-central Asia. With just around 4,500 individuals in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean and about 6,000 individuals in SE Asia and S Asia (both estimates taken from information supplied by Wetlands International Specialist Groups in 2006) every pair is important, and an excellent example where conservation is having a positive impact is the Dalmatian Pelican Conservation Project in Srebarna, north-eastern Bulgaria, carried out by Foundation Le Balkan-Bulgaria with the financial support of Swarovski Optik and the technical assistance of Branta-Tours.

The colony of Dalmatian Pelicans at the Srebarna Biosphere Reserve is now the last remaining in the Lower Danube (where several pelican colonies had existed until the end of the 19th century) and the only one in Bulgaria. Swarovski Optik's support began in 1998 when the company, who also subsequently became BirdLife Species Champions for the critically endangered Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*, helped implement measures including the repair of a fence protecting the colony, mowing of part of a reedbed which was allowing predators to approach nests without being seen, and the construction of a two-metre high wooden pile breeding platform designed to attract new pairs and allow nests to be built above flood water levels.

A second Swarovski Optik pile platform was erected in 1999, and both platforms proved their conservation value when that same year unusually high water levels in the lake covered

and destroyed many of the nests that had been built on the ground. Seven nests built on the platforms were safely above the water and chicks were raised on both. In the same year a pair of **White Pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* also successfully used one of the pile platforms – the first breeding record for Bulgaria. By 2000, just two years after their construction, thirty Dalmatian Pelican nests had been built and 113 youngsters born on the two Swarovski Optik-financed platforms, meaning that 187 young pelicans had been reared on the wooden structures in just two years.

With populations elsewhere in the region continuing - in many cases - to decline the importance of the platforms to the Srebarna Dalmatian Pelican colony was noted in a report in 2004, which pointed out that between 2000-2004 an estimated average of forty-six pairs per year had raised over 62 fledged chicks annually on them, a total representing more than a quarter of the breeding population in Srebarna (and therefore a quarter of Bulgaria's breeding population).

However, as might be suspected given the typically fluctuating fortunes of this large and sensitive species, there have been both highs and lows over the years since. In 2006 many of the breeding structures built by Le Balkan Foundation and Swarovski Optik, which included floating 'rafts' as well as the platforms, were destroyed by a summer thunderstorm. Repairs were carried out in the autumn, and gratifyingly the following spring and summer the colony reached 150 breeding pairs with 180 young pelicans being successfully reared – the highest numbers recorded since monitoring began in 1955. In 2008 the colony was compromised by a sounder (a group of females and their offspring) of Wild Boar which entered the colony in search of food, destroying nests and somewhere in the region of 55-60 eggs: as a result some members of the colony, perhaps 40 pairs, shifted 850 m south where they recommenced breeding and laid on this sub-optimal location, with the rest of the colony most likely dispersing to unprotected lakes across the rest of the Danube basin.

While the damage caused by this (entirely natural) disturbance appeared to be only a temporary setback – the 2009 breeding season saw 120 breeding pairs successfully rearing 109 young pelicans – Le Balkan-Bulgaria Founda-

tion decided to introduce several important measures and management techniques to the colony, again with the financial assistance of Swarovski Optik. Another pile platform was built, wood was used to enforce the front of purpose-built breeding platforms on the ground, and about 2000 m² of reed surrounding the lake were mowed to protect the colony from terrestrial predators and fire. Interestingly the cut reeds were then bundled into 'sandwiches' and placed on the ground to encourage Dalmatian Pelicans to nest on them, thereby raising any eggs laid above future rises in water levels while also increasing

the area available to the birds for nesting by about 600 m².

A decision was also taken to step up observation of the colony, and between February and August 2010 the pelicans were monitored twice weekly by one of the foundation members. The amount of data gathered, all of which will be important for guiding future conservation strategies of course, was impressive with, for example, pairing and copulation noted to begin in mid-February and the first eggs seen hatching towards the end of March. Notably the number of White Pelicans recorded visiting



Photo: E. Enchev/Le Balkan

the Lake Srebarna Reserve also rose steeply during the same period. Many were young, non-breeding individuals, and the largest number was observed on the 28th of June when 138 immatures landed amongst the colony causing considerable disturbance.

In March 2011 between 80 and 95 breeding pairs of Dalmatian Pelican were regularly observed in the Srebarna Pelican colony, including twenty-one pairs on the Swarovski pile platforms, but in April a Golden Jackal *Canis aureus* (a widespread and relatively common canid) entered the western part of the colony and destroyed around 25 eggs laid on a ground platform.

Such temporary swings in fortune would have, at a global level, virtually no impact on the Dalmatian Pelican. Of course that's not the case now, and with every pair and every chick vital to the continuing existence of this wonderful species the work being financed by Swarovski Optik in Bulgaria is obviously very important. With an increase from just 50-60 pairs when the project began in 1998 to around 120 in 2009 and 2010, the success of the Dalmatian Pelican Conservation Project in Srebarna also shows that with the right management and targeted financial support there is still room for this large and beautiful waterbird to not only survive but prosper on this planet we all share.

Die bulgarische NGO Le Balkan-Bulgaria ist im Naturschutz aktiv und hat u.a. durch die langjährige Unterstützung der LNVL-Sektion Bettembourg-Monnerich durch Kauf viele bedrohte Lebensräume erhalten. Am Durankulak-See, an dem ein Großteil der bedrohten Rothalsgans-Population überwintert, wurde u.a. ein Besucherzentrum sowie eine Pflegestation für Vögel errichtet.

2012 wird der 15. Geburtstag der Zusammenarbeit zwischen Le Balkan und Swarovski Optik www.swarovskioptik.com gefeiert.

Weitere Informationen



Pavel Simeonov – President
Le Balkan-Bulgaria Foundation

lebalkan@lebalkan.org
www.lebalkan.org



Photos: Branta-Tours