



The Cactus Wren•dition



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Painted Lady

Photo by Marceline VandeWater

Inspired by Ibis

by Neil Rizos

It's a sun-splashed June morning. In the distance, the snow-capped peaks of the Austrian Alps shine brilliantly against the cerulean blue sky. As I set up my easel and arrange my paints, a profound peace arises within me, the self-conscious effort of striving and doing dissolves. The world and my spirit are cleansed through beauty, renewed in joy and wonder. This interior experience, though unexpected, is not unknown to me as an artist guided by my love of wild places and my fascination with birds. In front of me, and the focus of my attention, is a rather unusual looking bird – perhaps a cross between a turkey vulture and some wading bird species. In fact, it is one of the world's rarest birds – the Northern Bald Ibis, or Waldrapp.

At nearly eighteen inches tall and standing upon two stout, ruddy legs, my muse is both impressive and bizarre. The lush iridescence of her green and black feathers contrasts comically with her naked, boiled-red head, her long, curved bill, and war bonnet of ragged, erratic plumes. Undaunted by my presence, she boldly inspects my paint box, then cocks her head to fix a quizzical yellow eye upon her intruder. Her question is clear: "How did you get here?"

My journey to Austria began in October 2015, after a trip to the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge in southern California. Inspired by observing White-faced Ibises at the refuge, I searched the Internet for information about them and discovered videos of a different ibis species, unknown to me – the Northern Bald Ibis. Originally described in 1555, the Northern Bald Ibis is a migratory bird which was native to Central Europe until the 17th century, when it vanished due to human pressures from hunting and habitat loss. Apparently, Northern Bald Ibis was considered a delicacy and was appreciated for the tastiness of its flesh, especially that of chicks before fledging. A recipe for roasted ibis chicks can be found in a German cookbook compiled in the 16th century.

During my Internet search, I came across a documentary about the Northern Bald Ibis Reintroduction Program in Europe. Its founders, Johannes and Angelika Fritz, began their project in 2002 with a few dozen birds from captive collections. Its purpose is to re-establish migratory Northern Bald Ibis colonies in Germany and Austria which will then winter in Italy, on the Tuscan coast. The documentary traces



Northern Bald Ibis: Stepping out in full regalia!
Photo by Stephanie Peters

the many setbacks and successes during the team's efforts that have resulted in what we see today – wild Northern Bald Ibises flying in the skies of Austria, Germany and Italy.

Although Northern Bald Ibises were new to me, I was familiar with the project's approach of imprinting birds on humans, hand-raising them and then using ultralight aircraft to guide the birds on historical migratory routes to re-establish wild populations. From 1997-2000, I was the Artist-in-Residence at Airlie Center, Virginia, near Washington, DC. Airlie Center was also the home of The Swan Research Program, led by William Sladen. While there, I witnessed the early days of the ultralight aircraft method pioneered by Sladen, Bill Lishman and their crew, to reintroduce Trumpeter Swans in the eastern US. That project was the basis for the Hollywood film, *Fly Away Home*.

In November 2015, I emailed Johannes and Angelika with a proposal to visit them. They responded enthusiastically and were eager for me to experience their project from the perspective of an artist. We set the dates and on a beautiful, clear morning in June, 2016, Stephanie (my partner) and I arrived at the project's aviary near Seekirchen, about ten miles outside Salzburg. I will always remember that moment, for through it ran the golden thread of my life, weaving love and joy and birds and sunlight into a shimmering tapestry of form and feeling, knowing and mystery.

In one sense, it would be easier to keep this essay a standard birdwatching travelogue, sticking to facts and figures and great bird photos. But ease has never been my primary concern in life. A more compelling concern is to live the great mystery of life, to be authentic, open, and creative. Why did I travel more than 12,000 miles and commit significant time and money to see these birds in Austria – and by most measures, not strikingly beautiful birds? I cannot answer directly with words, ideas or images but perhaps I can point to forces that move me.

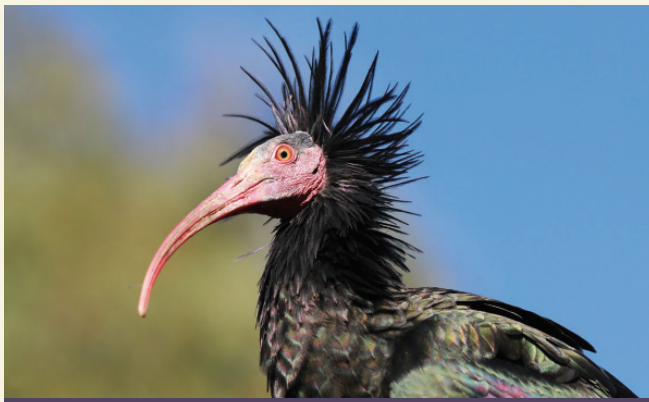
On May 29, 2017, my friend Bill Sladen died. He was 96 years old. He was also a patron and a great inspiration to me. He was friends with Roger Tory Peterson, Sir Edmund Hillary, Jane Goodall, Sir Peter Scott (a founder of World Wildlife Fund, exceptional bird artist, and the son of Antarctic explorer Robert F. Scott) and many other luminaries of conservation, science, and the arts of the late 20th Century. He was an elected member of The Explorers Club and had traveled every continent. In 1964, it was he who brought to light the global spread of DDT, finding it had entered the web of life in (then) remote Antarctica. Sladen had a tremendous curiosity about the natural world and an especially capable mind – with a PhD in zoology from Oxford and two medical



Preening Northern Bald Ibis, sketches by Neil Rizos



Various Poses – Northern Bald Ibis, sketches by Neil Rizos



Northern Bald Ibis: Exhibiting a personal sense of style!
Photo by Johannes Fritz, Waldrappteam

degrees. He served his humor dry and sharp. If one lives long enough and with such intensity, those qualities will surely win friends as well as detractors. Sladen won both, honestly.

This is from his obituary in *The New York Times*: “‘Some of my friends have puzzled over my giving up a medical career for studies in conservation and environmental health,’ Dr. Sladen wrote in *National Geographic* in 1975. But he never second-guessed himself. His response, he said, was, ‘Wouldn’t they perhaps trade whatever they are doing to witness the spectacle of 300,000 Adélie Penguins in Antarctica, to round up thousands of Pink-footed Geese in Iceland, to sit among harems of fur seals on the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, or to take inspiration from the Wandering Albatross as it soars majestically above the southern oceans?’”¹

Sladen lived his life guided by his love of nature. I live mine guided by my life-long fascination with birds, approaching them as an artist and naturalist for more than three decades. They afford me the opportunity to explore this beautiful planet and they introduce me to extraordinary people along the way. All birds, whether in the wilds of Alaska or clustered around the backyard feeder, can lead to adventures filled with beauty and inspiration.

I couldn’t offer a satisfactory answer to the question posed by the bird in front of me that morning – “How did I get here?” It’s simply part of a larger mystery embracing us all, including the Northern Bald Ibis. Eventually, having satisfied her curiosity about my painting gear, she spread her glistening wings and flew away toward the distant mountains – off on her own personal encounter with the unknown. 🐦

Neil Rizos is a professional painter, printmaker, and sculptor, specializing in birds. He is currently Artist-in-Residence for printmaking at Mesa Arts Center. To learn more about the artist and his work visit www.rizosart.com and www.birdjournaling.com.

¹Roberts, Sam. “William J.L. Sladen, Expert on Penguin Libidos, Is Dead at 96.” *The New York Times*. June 17, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/17/science/william-jl-sladen-expert-on-penguin-libidos-is-dead-at-96.html>



Soaring above the Austrian Alps - Northern Bald Ibises migrating to Italy. Photo by Pablo Prezesang, Waldrappteam



A Northern Bald Ibis explores my paint box. Photo by Stephanie Peters

inspired by ibis

Learn more...

At the beginning of the Northern Bald Ibis reintroduction efforts, scientists reared a group of the birds and let them roam free, only to discover that at the end of the summer, they flew off in different directions, to Holland, Germany, and even St. Petersburg. The birds showed a strong instinct to fly south in the fall, but they didn’t know which way was south. Learn how the scientists dealt with this challenge in the 50-minute film documentary, *The Flight of the Bald Ibis - The Secrets of Nature* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghUD4ABTM3o>

Follow the annual migration of the Northern Bald Ibis with the Animal Tracker app. Download it at http://www.orn.mpg.de/animal_tracker

For a report about the Northern Bald Ibis project, which includes details of the scientific methods used, read “Back into European ecosystems: The LIFE+ Northern Bald Ibis reintroduction project in Eastern Europe” by Johannes Fritz, Wiebke Hoffmann and Markus Unsöld at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312159311_Back_into_European_ecosystems_The_LIFE_Northern_Bald_Ibis_reintroduction_project_in_Central_Europe

The Northern Bald Ibis is listed by the IUCN as Critically Endangered. For additional information, go to <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22697488/0>