

Black Stork – *Ciconia nigra*

Characteristics

With its dark black, metallic feathers and their iridescent shimmer, the black stork is a striking sight. Beak and legs are bright red, the belly is covered in white feathers.

Lifestyle

The stork is a real messenger of spring: mid-March, but more often beginning of April, black storks return to the Thayatal from their African winter quarters. With a daily flight route of approx. 150 to 300 km it takes them 8 to 15 weeks from Eastern Africa to Europe. Unlike its white cousin, it is a very shy forest creature, which requires a territory of almost 15 km² in large marshy wetlands interspersed with woodlands and natural forests. During the mating season they mark their territory by drawing noticeable circles, similar to birds of prey. In favourable places, the birds circle up on warm up winds and glide away elegantly above the town of Hardegg or the Überstieg. The approx. 1 m tall bird, weighing up to 4 kg, can also often be observed fishing in the Thaya between Hardegg and the Überstieg. It is particularly in the early hours of the morning, between May and July that hikers might be lucky. Storks have strong ties to their old aerie and therefore “couples” from the previous year often find each other again. This “together until death us part” – as legends go – is only a consequence of their pronounced attachment to the nest! Two to four young storks hatch after an incubation of just five weeks. One adult bird stays close to the nest for protection, as long as the young ones are still small. In the meantime, the partner must find enough food to fill the hungry bills as young storks need at least 1200 grams of meaty food daily. The food and water that the parents carry in their throat pouch is then brought up and picked up from the bottom of the nest by the chicks. After 7 weeks already the young storks are almost as big as their parents, but still differentiate themselves from them by their brownish feathers and dark orange bills and legs. This is when the chicks make their first attempts at flying, until they leave the nest at 9 weeks. After 3 months, they can finally look after themselves before they start the long, dangerous journey to their African winter quarters around the middle of August, without the guidance of their parents, who usually only follow one week later. They will only return after 3 to 5 years after reaching maturity.

Dissemination

The black stork is disseminated between Western China and Central Europe. In Austria there is no historical breeding evidence, the colonization only came from the east in the first half of the 20th century. The species therefore colonized here real virgin territories and is constantly spreading out towards the west.

Threat and protection status

The black stork is a breeding bird regionally disseminated in Lower Austria. It is registered as potentially threatened in the Lower Austrian Red List, as its nesting places in old trees are threatened by forestry measures or constant disturbances.