

PARCO NAZIONALE DEL GARGANO

PARCO NAZIONALE DEL GARGANO

Region: **Apulia**

Area: **118,144 hectares**

Established in: **1995**

Headquarters: **via Sant'Antonio Abate 121
71037 Monte Sant'Angelo (FG)**

Tel. **0884 568911**

Fax **0884 561348**

www.parks.it

www.parcogargano.it

The Reintroduction of the White-headed Duck

The White-headed Duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*) is a small diving duck, which can be easily recognized for its tail cocked vertically, its "hunchback" aspect from which the Italian name derives (*gobbo rugginoso*, "gobbo" meaning "hunchback") and, in males, the unusual blue color of the bill. This rare duck is strictly linked to the marshes of the Eurasian dry areas. In particular, it needs small freshwater or brackish stretches of water surrounded by thick canebreaks where it builds its nest. In winter, it also moves to open and larger stretches of water. Its diet is based on vegetation and aquatic invertebrates it catches while diving. It spends its whole life in the water, never departing from it, and refrains from flying, except for long journeys or in case of impending danger. It lives in a large but extremely fragmentary distribution area around the Mediterranean and in Central Asia.

The decline of the White-headed Duck has been caused, as in many other cases, by the combination of an unrestrained hunting pressure and the drainage of the wetlands. This species suffered from a real drop in number in its whole distribution area, and in particular in the Mediterranean region. In the 20th century the White-headed Duck died out in the whole Eastern Europe, in Italy, Corsica and was also on the brink of extinction in Spain, where in the 1970s only twenty-two specimens could be found.

In recent years, this species has also had to face a new threat. The Ruddy Duck is an American relative of the White-headed Duck. The Ruddy Duck has been introduced in Britain several decades ago: here it has proliferated and now consists of thousands of individuals.

Spreading out from Britain towards the continent, the Ruddy Duck has begun to appear in the distribution area of the White-headed Duck. The two species can easily hybridize, giving origin to fertile hybrids. Therefore, the risk is that the small Spanish population can be genetically "polluted" and gradually disappear through a genetic replacement process. In order to minimize this risk, it has been necessary to start a project for the eradication of the Ruddy Duck on a European scale. This is a classic example of the damages that can be caused by the introduction of exotic species.

The last Italian regions housing the White-headed Duck have been Sicily, Apulia, and Sardinia. Gargano National Park, together with Lipu – which since the 80s has been committed to bring back this duck to Italy – has carried out a reintroduction project in a particularly adequate Park area: Daunia Risi. The Park consists of important protected wetlands, relatively safe from the risk of the Ruddy Duck.

The project, financed by the protected area and Regione Puglia, started in the year 2000 with the transfer of the first individuals from Racconigi, in Piedmont (where there is a Lipu reproduction center) to the acclimatization aviaries situated in Daunia Risi, within the national park. The first individuals were freed at the closure of the hunting season in winter 2001, a test enabling to study the acclimatization of the animals in their new environment. At the same time, the program of reproduction in captivity has been developed and further releases have been carried out.