# White stork population in southern England surges with record fledglings at Knepp Estate



Conservationists have hailed the white stork as a symbol of nature recovery in the UK, as efforts to reintroduce this iconic species, once commonplace but now largely vanished from British skies, gain momentum. The project, which has been under way since 2016, aims not just to repopulate these birds but also to restore ecosystems that support them. Historically, white storks were prevalent across Britain, often seen nesting on rooftops and in trees. However, centuries of hunting and habitat destruction led to their extinction in 1416.

Despite remaining migratory visitors from continental Europe, the absence of established breeding colonies has hampered their local reproduction. In a groundbreaking bid to reverse this trend, conservationists have turned to rehabilitated birds, primarily sourced from Warsaw Zoo in Poland. These non-flying storks are housed in predator-proof enclosures at Knepp Estate in West Sussex and Wadhurst Park in East Sussex, where they breed, providing a foundation for a new wild population.

The programme at Knepp has successfully birthed its first white stork chicks in 2020 and has since seen the colony flourish. In 2024, the initiative reported a record 53 fledglings materialising from the wild nests established primarily in ancient oak trees. Building on this success, expectations for the upcoming years are optimistic, with projections of around 40 fledglings anticipated in 2025. This resurgence is not merely a victory for the storks; conservationists assert it signifies a healthy ecosystem, as each chick requires about 35 kg of food, such as crickets and worms, to thrive.

The rewilding efforts at Knepp have transformed former agricultural lands into dynamically complex ecosystems, where various animal species—including longhorn cattle, red and fallow deer, and pigs—facilitate a rich habitat mosaic. This, in turn, benefits not only the storks but also a multitude of other wildlife, suggesting that species which may not traditionally be viewed as keystone figures can have unexpected ecological impacts. For instance, it has been observed that the nests—some weighing up to a tonne—attract an array of insects and even nest-building birds like wrens and blue tits.

Laura Vaughan-Hirsch, a project officer for the white stork initiative, spoke about the mutual benefits to the ecosystem, noting that the storks actively contribute to a thriving environment. “We see the white stork as a big charismatic species, but it’s much more than that; it’s an emblem for nature recovery,” she remarked. The positive developments at Knepp signal the potential for the storks to establish themselves not only at the estate but also in surrounding areas, with hopes that they will soon be a customary sight across rural southern Britain.

Isabella Tree, co-owner of Knepp with her husband Charlie Burrell, highlighted the broader implications of the project. “The joy and excitement is that they are now flying to Morocco on migration and coming back to nest and have chicks,” she enthused, reflecting on the resilience and adaptability of the species as citizens of nature. Moreover, the project has cultivated a communal connection to the land, tapping into a long history humans share with these birds that have been revered from ancient Egyptian times to the modern era.

Looking to the future, the conservation community is also eyeing further reintroduction efforts in Cornwall and Devon, aiming for a sustainable population of at least 50 breeding pairs by 2030. The narrative of the white stork is not merely about species recovery but embodies the essence of ecological restoration, capable of inspiring broader conservation activities across diverse landscapes.

As researchers and conservationists continue to study and support these efforts, the white stork stands as a promising exemplar of nature’s resilience, reminding us that with the right nurturing, cherished species can once again take their rightful places in our ecosystems.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/white-stork-return-uk-birds-b2765457.html), [[6]](https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/why-rewild/reintroductions-key-species/key-species/white-stork)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://knepp.co.uk/rewilding/reintroductions/white-stork/), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2jjzr1kpd1o), [[4]](https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/news/knepp-and-storrington-named-european-stork-village)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/17/storrington-in-west-sussex-named-uk-first-european-stork-village), [[7]](https://whitestorkproject.org/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/why-rewild/reintroductions-key-species/key-species/white-stork), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2jjzr1kpd1o)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/white-stork-return-uk-birds-b2765457.html), [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2jjzr1kpd1o)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/white-stork-return-uk-birds-b2765457.html), [[4]](https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/news/knepp-and-storrington-named-european-stork-village)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/white-stork-return-uk-birds-b2765457.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://knepp.co.uk/rewilding/reintroductions/white-stork/> - Knepp Estate in West Sussex is leading a reintroduction project to establish a breeding population of white storks in Britain. The project began in 2016, involving the release of rehabilitated non-flying storks from Warsaw Zoo into a predator-proof pen at Knepp. These birds have successfully bred, with the first chicks hatching in 2020. The initiative aims to create a sustainable population of white storks in the UK, with the long-term goal of establishing 50 breeding pairs by 2030.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2jjzr1kpd1o> - In 2024, Knepp Estate's white stork breeding programme achieved its most successful year to date, with approximately 40 fledglings expected to leave their nests. The colony, which began breeding in 2020, has seen significant growth, with 26 fledglings in 2023. The programme also observed its first members migrating between the UK and Morocco. Conservationists highlight the importance of establishing a large population to ensure the colony's long-term success, given the challenges of migration and survival.
4. <https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/news/knepp-and-storrington-named-european-stork-village> - Knepp Estate and the village of Storrington in West Sussex have been designated as a 'European Stork Village' by the EuroNatur foundation. This recognition acknowledges their role in the successful reintroduction of white storks to the UK. The Knepp colony, established through the White Stork Project, has seen significant growth, with over 50 wild chicks fledged in recent years. The initiative aims to establish a sustainable population of white storks in Britain, with a goal of 50 breeding pairs by 2030.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/17/storrington-in-west-sussex-named-uk-first-european-stork-village> - Storrington in West Sussex has been named the UK's first European Stork Village, joining Knepp Estate in this designation. The accolade, awarded by the EuroNatur foundation, recognises the successful reintroduction of white storks to the area. In 2024, a record-breaking 53 white storks fledged from wild nests at Knepp, primarily in ancient oak trees. The rewilded landscape of Knepp provides an ideal habitat for the storks, with its insect-rich meadows and wetlands offering abundant food sources.
6. <https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/why-rewild/reintroductions-key-species/key-species/white-stork> - White storks, once native to Britain, were driven to extinction in 1416. Reintroduction efforts, particularly at Knepp Estate, have been successful, with the first wild breeding pairs nesting in 2020. The White Stork Project aims to establish 50 wild breeding pairs in southern Britain by 2030. The project involves releasing captive-bred birds and restoring habitats to support the storks' needs, including grasslands, wetlands, and open habitats rich in insects and small mammals.
7. <https://whitestorkproject.org/> - The White Stork Project is dedicated to re-establishing a wild, breeding population of white storks in the UK. Launched in 2016, the project involves releasing rehabilitated non-flying storks from Poland into predator-proof pens at Knepp Estate and Wadhurst Park. These birds breed and their offspring are released into the wild, aiming to attract wild storks and establish a sustainable population. The project also focuses on habitat restoration and community engagement to support the storks' return to Britain.