

A project for the protection of avifauna in Sierra de San Pedro

Red Eléctrica and Junta de Extremadura collaborate in the conservation of threatened birds of prey in the region

- The project aims to guarantee feeding large protected birds of prey through the repopulation of wild rabbits in the Area of Regional Interest (ZIR, for its acronym in Spanish) of Sierra de San Pedro to avoid their dispersal to other territories.
- In order to achieve this, a space has been built for captive breeding of wild rabbits, a scarce species in the area which constitutes a staple food for the main raptors.

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Red Eléctrica de España and the Ministry for Ecological Transition and Sustainability of the Junta de Extremadura have collaborated to develop a project aimed at protecting the regional bird life, to improve the habitat of several threatened species such as the Iberian Imperial Eagle, the Bonelli's Eagle, the Black Vulture or the Red Kite.

"At Red Eléctrica we are committed to a sustainable development and, for that purpose, we have incorporated the conservation of biodiversity as a fundamental principle to carry out our activities", explains Luis Velasco, the Manager of Licences and Environmental Management Area.

The General Sustainability Management has been developing different programs in the region to improve the habitats of threatened species which have been implemented to specifically counteract certain threat factors. This context constitutes the framework of this project, which is considered by the Ministry to be of "great qualitative importance due to the fact that it improves these birds of prey's trophic availability through the repopulation of wild rabbits in the Area of Regional Interest (ZIR) of Sierra de San Pedro, a natural enclave of great environmental value in the region".

In order to achieve this, the La Ahumada farm, property of the Junta de Extremadura and located in San Vicente de Alcántara, has built five warrens or burrows as refuges and as a space for the captive breeding of wild rabbits, a species that is scarce in the area and which is a staple food for the threatened raptors of the ZIR. These new burrows have been built in a one hectare area which is fenced off in order to avoid dispersal and to prevent the access of common land predators.

The warrens have been built out of natural materials and have been designed to develop their own ecosystem, similar to the burrows. Likewise, they have been built with small feeders and waterers, as well as with cages to facilitate handling and capturing the rabbits intended to repopulate other neighbouring areas.

Alfredo Anega, Manager of Tagus International Nature Reserve, considers "it is an extremely beneficial initiative which contributes to create a wild rabbit population as a starting point to boost the recovery of the species in this protected area and to increase the food availability for protected species such as the Iberian Imperial Eagle and other fauna species of high ecological value which are found in the Sierra de San Pedro ZIR, for which the wild rabbit is considered a key prey".



This initiative, promoted by Red Eléctrica, is linked to the construction project of the 220 kilovolt Los Arenales-José María Oriol line, which will connect the municipalities of Alcántara and Cáceres and, specifically, to the measures incorporated in the project's Environmental Impact Declaration which includes actions aimed at strengthening wild rabbit populations to feed large protected raptors.

The wild rabbit in Extremadura

The wild rabbit which is found in this area of Extremadura is one of the most environmentally important Iberian mammals and constitutes the staple diet of many predators. Nonetheless, in Spain and Portugal it has suffered a drastic reduction due to the two endemic viral diseases of the species (myxomatosis and haemorrhagic-viral disease) and other factors such as the loss of optimal habitats or hunting pressure.

The decline in this species population has been so dramatic that the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has suggested considering it "vulnerable", at least in some regions of the Iberian Peninsula, and the Portuguese Institute for Nature Conservation has recently classified it as a "near threatened" species.

Sierra de San Pedro has been one of the many areas in which there has been a general decline in wild rabbit populations in recent years and the probability for recovery of this species in the area is currently very low, which jeopardizes the survival of raptors and carnivores in the area; therefore, its conservation would benefit both rabbit populations, as well as carnivore populations.