

White Storks, murder in the community

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It is a stressful life having White Storks upon your home! From the season's outset to its sudden premature end, 2007 was a one event after another, beginning with the late arrivals of both the male and female and then, a little over six weeks later, culminating in a dramatic and totally unexpected attack by another stork, a frenzied affair that left me with an empty nest, four bloodied chicks in my hands and a season at a failure. Two chicks died from their wounds, the remaining two struggle on ...despite head and serious neck injuries, they made it through the first critical 48 hours. After much care, they began to feed well and ultimately made it back to the wild in time for autumn migration. A small silver lining in an otherwise rather dark affair.

PROLOGUE

Late arrivalsHe arrived on the 9th April, a little late, but a very fine sight - sitting there, bill clapping and looking just the perfect garden adornment, but where was she? All the neighbouring storks were paired up and settled, married bliss atop their poles! But mine sat alone! A week and more passed and still he sat there ...yes, only one half of my White Stork pair had returned! And a sad sight it was, it would certainly be a dent to my spring, and no doubt to the male stork's too, if she failed to show up. As the days ticked by, things were not looking good - the nest looked like failing before the season had even started, very bad news. By the 15th, there were about a dozen active nests in the neighbourhood and from my kitchen window alone, I could see four nests - pairs on two, one still empty, plus my solitary bird. But on that day, another pair of White Storks arrived - at about 10 a.m., they drifted in from the south, enough to persuade my male to begin his bill clapping, perhaps to entice the female. However, that pair had other ideas - they descended and tried to steal his nest! A good bit of squabble, but he stood his ground, they circled round a couple of times, then drifted off and spotted the other empty nest, immediately taking it and not leaving for the rest of the day! Hmmph, now I could now see three pairs, but still my male continued his solo duty! The next few days would be critical. On the 18th, almost resigned to the inevitable, I arrived at the garden to see the nest empty ...probably he was off feeding, but it did suggest that still the female had not returned, a full nine days after the male had arrived. Gloom, no nest this year I thought.

Indoors I went and almost immediately heard him bill-clapping, looked out the window and there he was, snapping away with his beak, fluffing up his feather and arching his neck, a nice bit of classic display ...but there was something more, all his actions were for one thing only, for the attention of the female standing on the opposite side of the nest!!! She had arrived, super! And throughout the day, there they stayed, touching up the nest, showing off to each other and generally doing what they should.

Family life

So passed the next month and a half, she settled down and incubation started. The weather went topsy-turvy, snow some days, hot sun others, but there she sat through thick and thin, all too soon the big day was soon approaching. By the 27th May, the first chicks were appearing in the neighbourhood and, on the 30th, I could announce the big news to the world - the first of my stork chicks had hatched, at least three of them peeping over the nest. Right little corks, little did I know they had less than a week before they would find the world a very brutal place!

STORK WARS

Nothing prepared me for the events of the 4th of June, a warm sunny day that would end like no others. In hindsight, things were not as usual from midday - just thirty metres or so from the stork nest, another White Stork landed on my chimney, an event unusual enough to get me out to photograph it, but think little more. He flew off. Half an hour he was back, again on the chimney. Again he flew off. Then, at about 2.30 p.m., suddenly the peace of the garden was shattered, stork battles had broken out between the parent storks and an intruder, presumably the bird from the chimney. Trying to attack the nest, the intruder repeatedly tried to fly in, each time to a ferocious defence by the parents. The top of the nest was a flurry of action, bills stabbing and wings and legs everywhere, on several occasions the birds toppling off and

tumbling down through an apple tree below to continue the fight on the ground. Each time the parents repelled the intruder, he returned and the fight continued. A neighbouring pair of storks on their nest began to get agitated, bill clapping and observing, but what came next was the real shock. The intruder managed to get on the open nest and immediately he turned and speared the first chick, slicing its neck before throwing it out of the nest. At this stage I just ran at the nest, but nothing would deter the bird. As I picked up the first chick, a second rained down, bleeding from the head and appearing to also suffer internal injuries, the week-old bleeding from the beak. The parents knocked the intruder from the nest, but it was not to last, soon a third chick was stabbed through the back and again expelled from the nest. And not too long after, the last chick followed a similar fate, the youngest and smallest of the chicks, it was shaken violently before being slung sideways. The nest was empty, all chicks lay injured beneath the nest and the intruder departed. In a state of somewhat shock, I gathered up the youngsters and tried to guess what could have caused such a deed, I failed to find an answer. I was left with four chicks, all alive, but unlikely to remain so. In a normal state of affairs, the best thing to do with a downed chick is to return it to the nest, but this was not really an option - not only due to their injuries received, but moreover to the lingering presence of the intruder. I tended the chicks in the open, the parents could still hear their calls, leaving open the possibility to return the chicks if the injuries did not appear so serious, but this small possibility was dashed - even an hour later, if the two parents returned to the nest, the intruder returned. By 6.00 p.m., I had managed to get one chick to feed, incidentally the one with neck injuries. Soon he would eat every earthworm I could offer, but for a realistic chance of survival the bird needed stitches to close the wound. The other three chicks would not take food and looked very weak, I did not hold out much hope. I took the decision to take all in captivity, try to get them through the next couple of days, then raise them with the idea to release by autumn.

FROM THE ASHES Arriving in Vilnius, I did a tour of vets, none would even look at them, wild birds they said, not their responsibility. Shame on them, had they been a parrot, they would have treated them, but not the national bird of the country. Back home, I did my best. The neck-injured bird just ate everything offered, I held hope for him, despite the cut. For him, I bandaged the wound and fed every few minutes. For the others, I cleaned them up, dabbing the caked blood from the eyes of the bird with head injuries, he opened his eyes for the first time, but would not accept food. The bird stabbed through the back seemed alert, perhaps he would survive. The smallest was weak and becoming colder. Sliced carp, minced pork and earthworms, a stock of food was built up, there was no more I could do that day. The smallest died that first evening, the one stabbed through the back died overnight, but at 4.45 a.m., a new sound resounded through my living room - storks bill clapping! The neck-injured bird wanted food, maybe he was going to be okay! But, news better than I had dared to hope, was the head injured bird was alert and even bill clapping too! Perhaps two might survive, but still I needed veterinary help to close the neck injury. I began force-feeding and he started to accept, the corner was turned ...perhaps. The worse was over, the remaining news of this sorry tale was one of improving fortunes. For the chicks, and for me, there came news of an excellent organisation in Lithuania, complete with veterinary services, to tend to injured wild animals with the ultimate aim of returning them to the wild. It was a surprise to me, I didn't know such existed in this country, so I and the two storks, by now both feeding fairly well, took a drive the 100 km to Kaunas where the centre is located. The name of this place was Laukiniu Gyvunu Reabilitacijos Skyrius (LGGD), a unique centre in the country. After a chat, it soon became clear that this was the best place for the stork chicks - the previous year, they had ended up with about 25 orphan storks through various mishaps, but all were returned to the wild. The storks are reared together on a plot of land and, as migration time approaches, the amount of food provided is gradually reduced, encouraging the birds to learn to fend for themselves. All the birds are ringed and, a mark of their success, all migrated as usual last year. This I could not better, only hope to equal, so I entrusted my storks to them. The bird with a neck injury had an operation and they got through the first critical 48 hours with no problem. By the 11th June, both birds were still doing well, putting on weight and awaiting their rings. The prognosis is good. All being well, they will see Africa after all!

STORK FINALE, the orphans take to the wing!

Just ten weeks earlier, I had stood with four chicks in my hands, badly injured and near death. Though two hadn't made it, the other two struggled through. Under the expert care of LGGD (see links), the two survivors battled on, putting on weight and generally doing very well. As the days and weeks passed, and storms lashed the country, further orphans joined them and by early August my two had 42 buddies! Forty-four young White Storks all waiting a return to the wild! The finale of a season of care, the birds were transferred to release pens and, after some days of acclimatisation, the pens opened to allow the birds to wander. Day by day, the quantities of food were slowly reduced and the storks slowly began to forage for themselves. Then came the good news - by mid-month, over 30 had already departed to migrate, success! I took the opportunity to pay a visit, to see my birds off and feed them one time more. Totally fantastic event - I lay on my stomach for an hour as White Storks wandered around, cautiously venturing in to take the meat provided. One bold individual decided to get a little closer, then another ...as I lay there, I had to look up to see the storks looking down! A few minutes later I happened to look over my shoulder ...and what did I see? The cheeky blighters had noticed where I

had left some of the meat! On the table adjacent, stork heads were appearing over the rim! Most comical, first the eyes would appear, then a little stretch and the whole head would arch over and swipe a morsal. With a kilogram of food gone, off they wandered, some flying up to a nearby roof, some just plodding the lawns. I sat there for a while, remembering back to the early days of June. Back then it had seemed near hopeless, now they were just days from the beginning of a flight to Africa. Happy storks, happy me.