

**Foundation prize
„The Living Danube“
Application documents 2026
(Application period 01. April 2025 until 31. August 2025)**

Proposer (if not identical with applicants)

Name	
Adress	
Fon/Fax	
E-Mail	

Applicant

Institution/ responsible	Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds
name of project	Code Name Pelican: Restoring the Lower Danube ecosystems for the birds and people
contact person	Vanya Ratarova-Georgieva
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Summary of institution/of project/of applicant

(Please underline where applicable)

The Applicant: The applicant is the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds ([BSPB](#)). Established in 1988, the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB BirdLife Bulgaria) is the largest and leading charity in Bulgaria. For over thirty years, the BSPB has worked to preserve wild birds and their habitats by sustaining vital functions of priority landscapes through direct conservation work, upgrading the single-species effort to a larger ecosystem and watershed-based approach; this resulted in the designation of 33% of Bulgaria's territory as Natura 2000 Protected Areas. For over 20 years now we have been implementing a long-term strategy to preserve the fragile ecosystems in the target region – the Lower Danube epitomised by the majestic **Dalmatian Pelican**. Through series of targeted and scientifically grounded conservation interventions we can proudly say that our effort yielded remarkable success – creating **third** safe heaven to the Dalmatian pelicans on the Balkans near the town of Tutrakan, where the **newly** established colony of **86 pairs successfully hatched 106 chicks** in 2024. In addition, the three wooden platforms built by BSPB together with colleagues from the Persina Nature Park Directorate and WWF-Bulgaria on the **Persin Island** (part of the Persina Marshes Managed Reserve) ten years ago were occupied by pelicans for the first time after more than 60 years. This year **35 pairs** successfully raised **43 chicks fledged** by mid-July. About 200 Great White Pelicans also used the platforms as resting site, though they did not breed.

For the last **15 years** the Dalmatian pelican recovery strategy has been led by **Svilen Cheshmedzhiev**, who is deeply connected to the Lower Danube region, having been born and raised in Svishtov, Bulgaria, near the Persina Nature Park. From childhood, he has been passionate about the Danube's rich biodiversity, particularly its islands, riparian forests, wetlands, and sandbars. Starting at age 13, he joined BSPB, and over the years, has been involved in numerous conservation initiatives at both local and national levels. For the past 15 years, his main focus has been the conservation of the Dalmatian pelican in Bulgaria – Europe's rarest pelican species. This bird is an umbrella species, meaning its protection benefits many other species in the same habitat, and serves as a key indicator of the Lower Danube ecosystem's health.



Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*), photo credit: Svetoslav Spasov

Detailed description

- o background, max. 1500 character
- o target (concept, project design, methods), max. 2500 character
- o implementation (extent of implementation, next steps) max. 2500 character
- o attachments: up to three files with max. 3MB per file, in German or English
....language. Use this option to provide us with additional information and media to your project (e.g. specialized publications, reports, sources / references).

Background



The Lower Danube near to town of Nikopol, photo credit: Svilen Cheshmedzhiev

The ecological integrity of the Lower Danube wetlands is vital, playing a key role in maintaining hydrological balance, nutrient cycling, and carbon sequestration. These ecosystem functions support wildlife and provide critical services for humans, such as water purification and flood protection. However, this environment faces threats from agricultural expansion, industrial development, habitat loss, and climate change, contributing to the loss of about 72% of original floodplains. This degradation threatens breeding habitats and food availability essential for species like the Dalmatian pelican.

In response, BSPB adopted conservation strategies combining habitat restoration, sustainable resource management, and scientific monitoring. Innovations like artificial breeding platforms and decoy pelicans have encouraged pelican colonies to return to areas they vanished from decades ago. These efforts doubled Bulgaria's pelican population and created stable breeding sites, including the largest Ramsar site in Bulgaria - the Belene Islands Complex and the Kalimok-Brushlen Protected Area. The Dalmatian pelican, symbolizing the Lower Danube's ecological richness, has some 20% of Europe's 2,831–3,094 pairs breeding in Southeastern Europe.

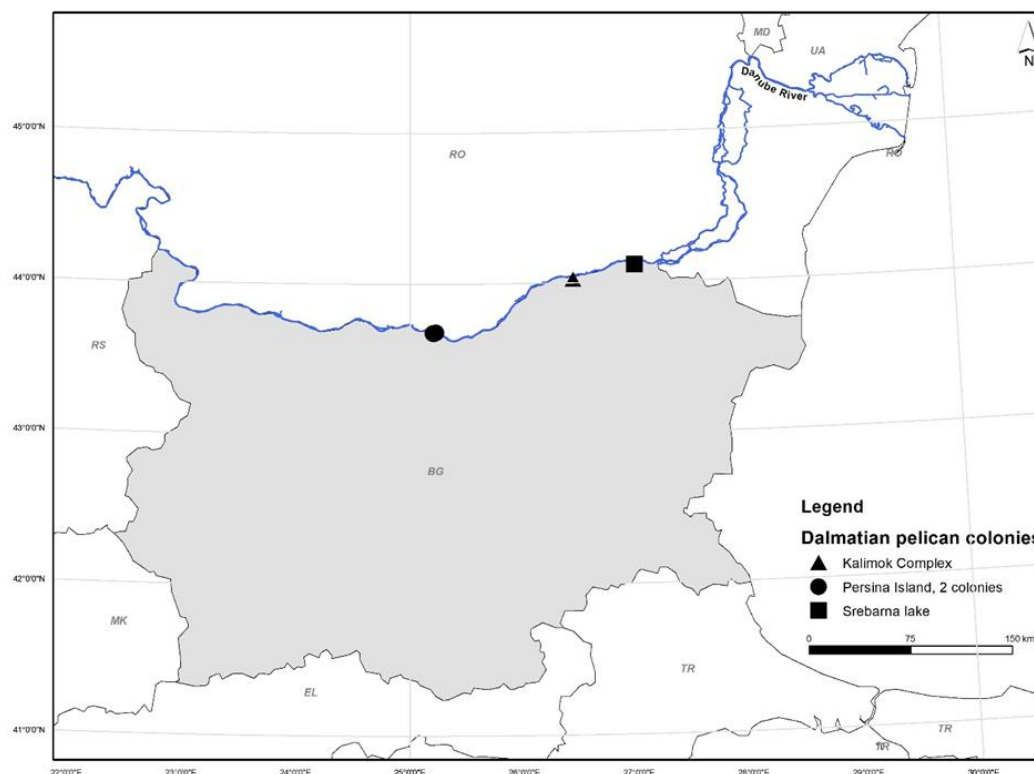
In Bulgaria, where the species is Critically Endangered, breeding once occurred at five sites but habitat loss reduced this to one colony at Srebarna Lake, where the population declined from 40–80 pairs (2007–2012) to 15–50 pairs (2020–2024).

Target (concept, project design, methods),

The project titled "**Code name Pelican – Saving the Lower Danube Ecosystem for the Birds and People**" focuses on the conservation of the Lower Danube region, widely recognized as one of Europe's most significant biodiversity hotspots. The area support over **300 species of birds** – most notably the **Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*)**, a flagship species and symbol of the Danube's rich biodiversity- as well as numerous freshwater fish, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles. Given the Lower Danube's **transboundary nature, cross-border cooperation and scientific research** are essential components of the initiative. Partnerships between NGOs, governmental agencies, and European Union programs have bolstered conservation outcomes and raised awareness among local communities about the importance of protecting both the pelicans and their habitats. By linking **ecological health with human well-being**, the project embodies its mission to benefit "**the Birds and People**," safeguarding an ecosystem that supports biodiversity, sustains livelihoods, and enhances resilience against environmental change.

First of all BSPB tackled an issue associated with the Pelican biology – its ground (reed beds) nesting nature; the birds nesting on the ground are much more prone to disturbance and land predators' attack. Our project leader – Svilen, suggested construction of **innovative breeding platforms** built of wood, covered with reed and mounted on high wooden pylons and 'created' **four** of these. Further on, a **unique scientific method** was developed by Svilen and his team to attract Dalmatian pelicans to breed at the Kalimok-Brushlen Protected Area in 2020. They installed three life-size fiberglass pelican decoys, custom manufactured and painted to resemble adult pelicans, on a wooden platform. This **innovative** approach **successfully** encouraged pelicans to start nesting just three months after the platform was built, establishing Bulgaria's **third** breeding colony. **This is the only known breeding colony in the world created through the use of decoys.** The method has generated significant interest **internationally**, with similar platforms now being **replicated** in Greece, Turkey, Ukraine, and Romania to support the species' survival. This scientific approach is praised in the journal [Conservation Evidence](#).

The restoration of Dalmatian pelican breeding colonies in Bulgaria also **results** from the **successful** cooperation between local municipalities, park directorates, state institutions and BSPB. The return of pelicans to Persina Nature Park and Kalimok-Brushlen Protected Area boosted local economy by **securing** stable basis for ecotourism, **attracting** birdwatchers, photographers, and nature lovers. The municipalities of Belene and Tutrakan embraced the pelican as a regional symbol, promoting ecotourism to support these economically disadvantaged areas.



Location of the activities aimed at stabilising the breeding colonies of the Dalmatian pelican in the Lower Danube

Implementation (extent of implementation, next steps)

We **believe** effective conservation is about building alliances and joining efforts with the **hope** to preserve the last free-running tracts of the Danube and that even **resurrection** of healthy populations of a highly threatened species is possible.

Code name Pelican will pursue further stabilisation of the newly established colonies in **Persina Nature Park, Kalimok-Brushlen Protected Area** and enhancing breeding conditions in **Srebarna Managed Reserve and Word Heritage Property**.

Our planned intervention follows the conservation strategy mentioned above – **providing safe breeding and foraging habitats** is the **key** to securing the survival of the **Dalmatian**, while also advancing broader conservation goals that integrate **habitat restoration, innovative technologies, and international collaboration**.

We intend to **obtain satellite transmitters** to continue **monitoring of young pelicans** **provides critical data on their movements, habitat use, migration routes, and survival challenges**. Using lightweight GPS-GSM transmitters that do not interfere with their natural behaviour, we will gather real-time information about where pelicans feed, rest, and travel. **This information is essential for identifying key habitats, understanding threats they face, such as human disturbances or environmental changes, and improving conservation strategies**. Such tracking enables targeted protection efforts for vulnerable pelican populations, by informing adaptive management and safeguarding important wetlands and breeding sites. **This method has been successfully used in multiple regions and significantly enhances knowledge of pelican ecology and conservation needs**.

We will also continue with our work for securing breeding and foraging platforms. Due to constant exposure to water, the wooden platforms have a **lifespan of 7 to 8 years and are replaced accordingly**. Besides regular monitoring, the **continuous upkeep of these platforms is vital for providing a safe and secure environment for pelicans to raise their chicks**. We will **build two platforms in Srebarna and continue maintaining the platforms in Kalimok-Brushlen**. These platforms are **raised 2.5 meters above the ground to prevent flooding and designed to be inaccessible to predators** (wild boar, raccoon dog, golden jackal, and red fox).

Ranging in size from 12 to 32 m², the platforms need to be **supported by sturdy wooden poles embedded at least one meter deep into the ground, topped with wooden planks and covered with nesting material mainly composed of cut common reed stems transported from other locations.** The whole works will be **organised by BSPB and carried out by volunteers.** Further on a **technical inspection and necessary repairs are carried out on the platforms, which are then covered again with fresh reeds to maintain their appeal to pelicans.** Volunteers actively participate in **annual reed mowing campaigns to supply the nesting material.**



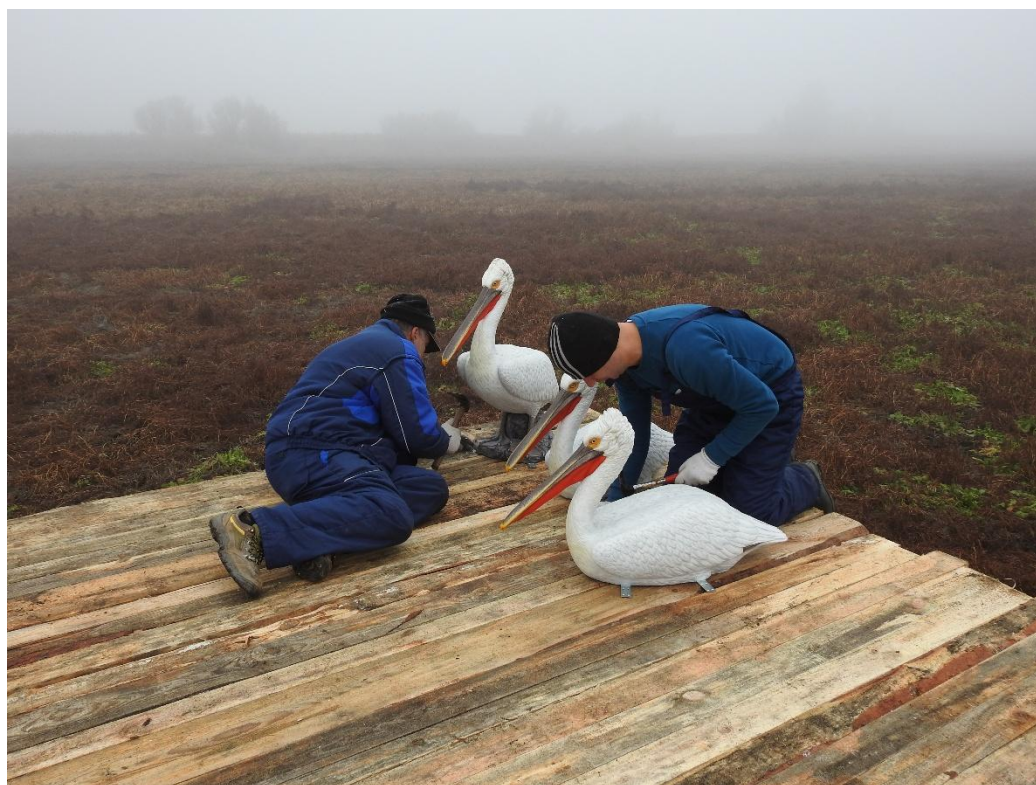
Construction the wooden platform at Peschina marsh (Persina Nature Park), photo credit: Svilen Cheshmedzhiev



Reed cutting by the volunteers, photo credit: Emil Todorov



Svilen and part of his team are transporting the reed to the platforms, Date 19.12.2019, photo credit: Angel Angelov



Installation of real-sized pelican decoys, Date: 10.12.2020, photo credit: Georgi Georgiev



The breeding colony in the Kalimok-Brushlen Protected Area (the decoy is visible on the far right), photo credit: Svilen Cheshmedzhiev



Maintenance and repair activities on the platforms during the winter months, photo credit: Damyan Petkov



The breeding colony of the Dalmatian pelican in Kalimok-Brushlen Protected Area, Date: 19.04.2023,
photo credit: Damyan Petkov



Peschina Marsh, photo credit: Svilen Cheshmedzhiev

Sofia, 29.8.2025

Place and date

Signature, stamp if necessary