

1st SE European pelican census

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Introduction

It is well documented that Dalmatian pelicans in Europe: 1) form distinct meta-populations 2) their home ranges within and outside the breeding season are huge, extending to dozens of wetlands lying even in neighbouring countries and 3) there is a year-round movement of individuals between different sites. Thus, in order to have a reliable picture of the status of their populations and their life history traits simultaneous censuses are needed. The first SE European simultaneous pelican census was carried out on 7 May 2016. It was an initiative of the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP), an environmental NGO based in Prespa, Greece and took place in six countries in the Balkans and Turkey. The census targeted the Dalmatian pelican (DP) *Pelecanus crispus*, a globally endangered species, and the great white pelican (GWP) *Pelecanus onocrotalus*.



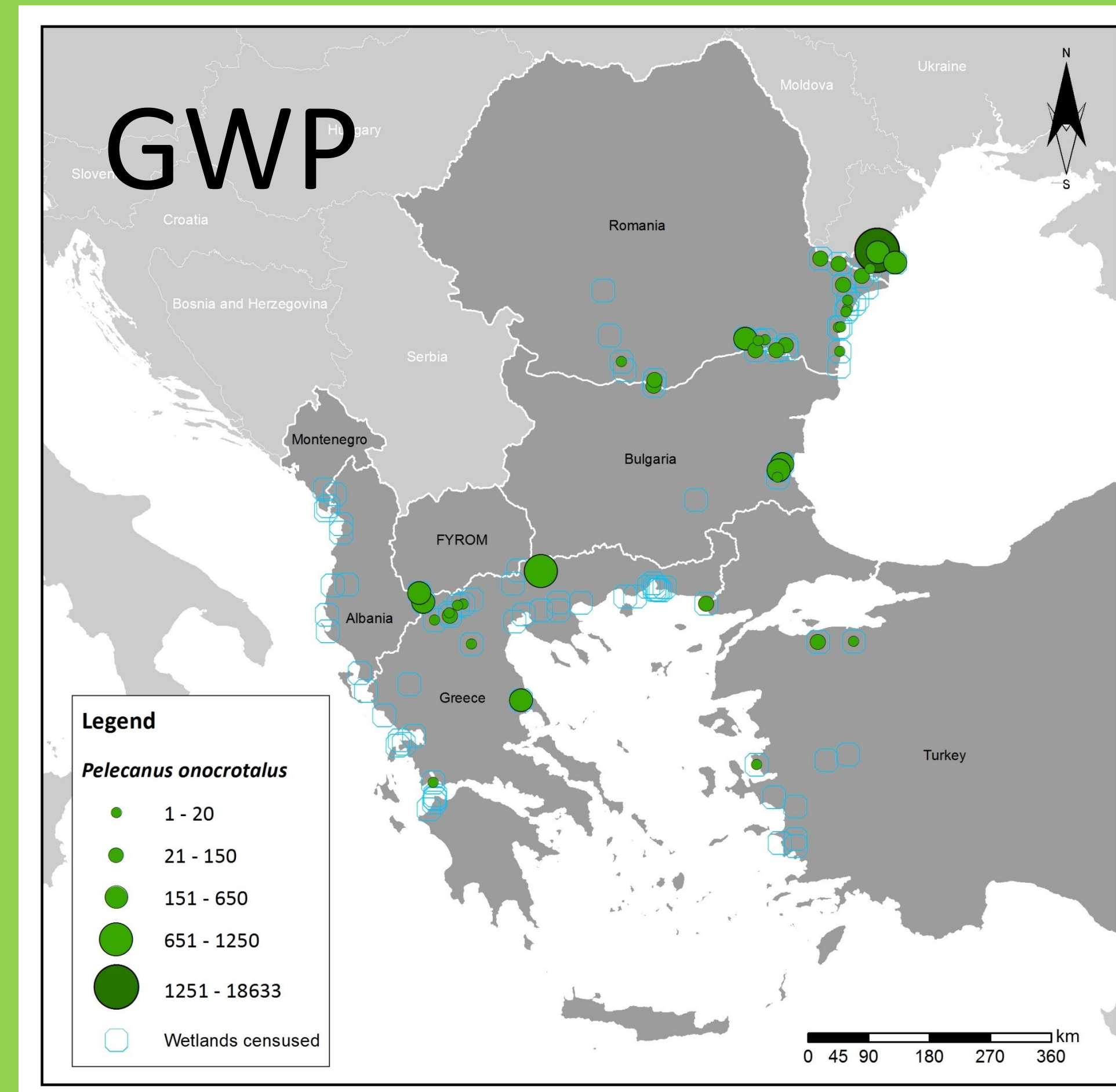
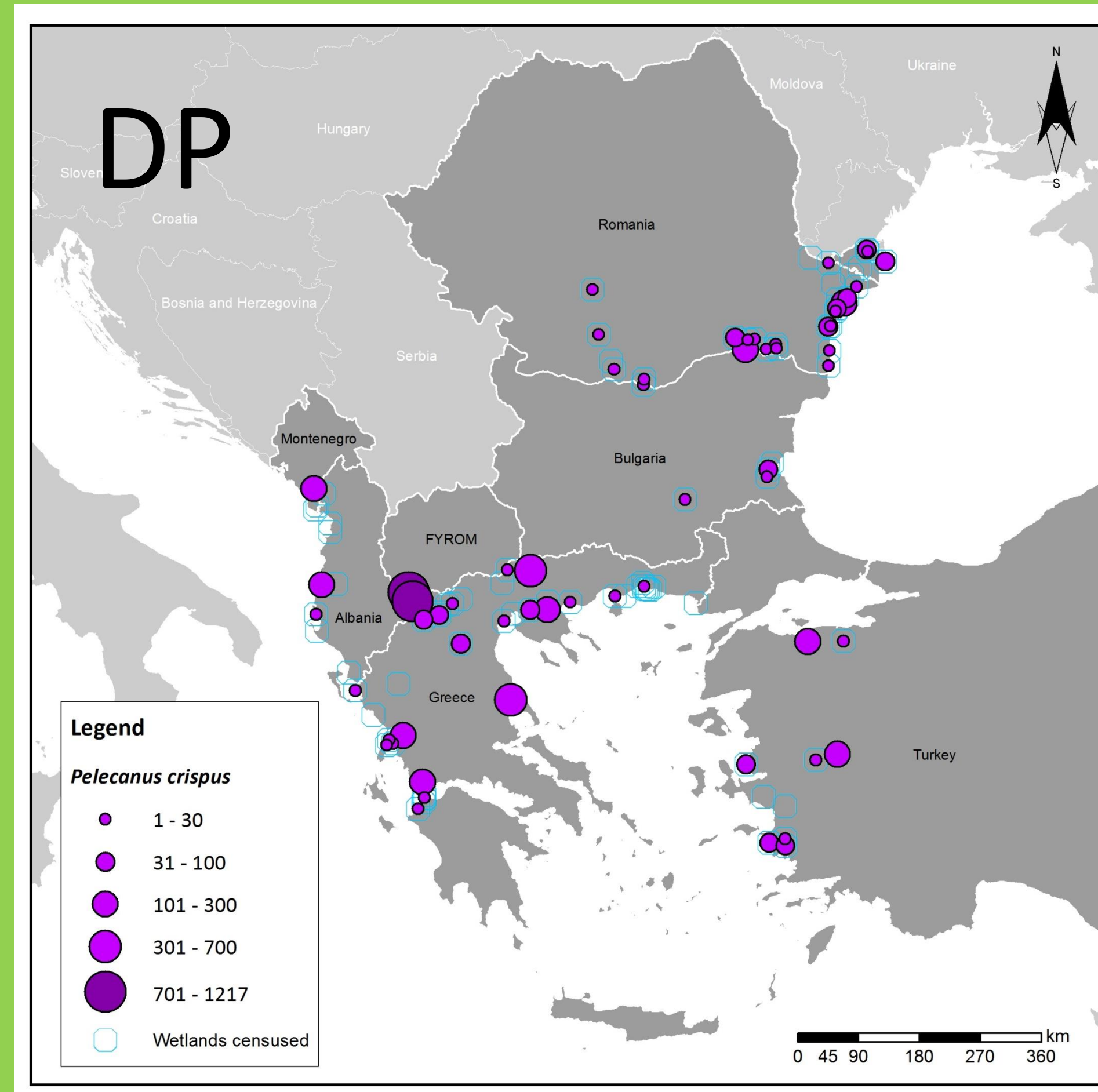
Aim: To estimate the number of pelicans present in this region during the breeding season in order to assess the overall numbers of immatures and adult non-breeders. This information will contribute to improved management decisions for pelican populations and their habitats. This is especially crucial in the case of the DP, as SE Europe is home to about 50% of the world population of the species.

Materials and Methods

The census was conducted in Albania, Bulgaria, FYR of Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, Romania and western Turkey with the contribution of 138 participants. It was implemented on a simultaneous, single-afternoon survey in 98 wetlands across the region in collaboration with 15 Management Agencies of protected areas, 3 research institutions and 9 environmental NGOs of which 4 are BirdLife partners. All individuals present in each wetland were recorded, distinguishing between adult and immature birds. Counts were performed mainly from vantage points, already used by the International Waterbird Census programme (IWC). Boats were also used in order to survey the more distant parts of large wetlands and even a light aircraft had to be employed for the survey of the Danube Delta colonies, which lie within vast inaccessible reedbeds.

Results

- DPs were recorded at 63 wetlands, GWPs at 40 wetlands, both species together at 31 wetlands.
- The total number of **DPs** recorded was **6,265** and the total number of **GWPs** was **22,944**.
- The majority of DPs and GWPs occurred in Greece and Romania respectively. DPs were more widespread with small concentrations in many wetlands, whereas GWPs were more numerous but were mainly concentrated in the Danube delta.
- The bulk of DPs (81%) and GWPs (90%) occurred in wetlands hosting breeding colonies, yet significant numbers were recorded at other wetlands, especially the ones close to breeding sites.
- The western (Adriatic–Ionian) DP populations which form a distinct meta-population accounted for 13% of the total number.
- 1,330 immature DPs were recorded in the region and they accounted for a 11%, 15%, 16%, 26% and 32% of the total number of DPs counted in Turkey, Greece, Romania, Albania and Montenegro respectively. In Bulgaria they accounted for an exceptional 52%.



Discussion and conclusions

- Such invaluable simultaneous data can be gathered only through extensive international collaborations.
- The wetlands of the Balkans act as important refuges for waterbirds and for pelicans in particular. At the same time the value of each of them is magnified by their proximity to other wetlands.
- New evidence is provided on the extensive home range of both species during the breeding season.
- The DP population in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea is larger than it was thought until now (4,350-4,850 individuals, BirdLife International 2016). On the one hand this is a very positive point; however, it is not an indication of the trend of the world population, since data on the populations of Central and West Asia are not at all encouraging.
- Wetlands in close proximity to breeding sites are of great importance for both species. They are partially used to cover the increased foraging needs of breeders and non-breeders during the breeding period.
- The western DP meta-population is in need for special conservation measures because of its small size and isolation.
- DP immatures: The numbers of DP immatures recorded are impressively low compared to the observed breeding success of the over 2,500 pairs breeding in the region every year.
- The number of non-breeders / floaters / prospectors cannot yet be estimated as the numbers of breeding pairs from all countries in the region are not yet available.