



Press release

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Battle to save Black Sea wetlands honoured with Whitley Award for conservation

May 2019

A conservationist committed to protecting critical wintering grounds for migratory birds in Bulgaria has been honoured with a prestigious Whitley Award by HRH the Princess Royal tonight (1 May).

Nikolai Petkov, Coordinator of the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB)'s programme for the conservation of the red-breasted Goose is working to preserve these enigmatic rust-coloured geese as a flagship for the Black Sea wetlands.

For centuries, the coastal wetlands of the Black Sea have been a safe haven for migrating water-birds coming from Northern Europe who take shelter during the winter months. In colder winters, the coastal lakes of Shabla and Durankulak harbour almost 100% of the global population of red-breasted geese, numbering some 50,000 birds, as well as providing a critical habitat for 260 other bird species.

For the last 15 years, Nikolai and his team have worked to champion and protect this habitat from the ever-growing demands of economic development. Currently the biggest threat is the imminent adoption of the Shabla municipality Master Plan, which would see infrastructure and windfarm development in the area, displacing wintering flocks. Coupled with increased hunting and disturbance by illegal fishing activity, red-breasted geese are at risk.

Although BSPB has faced some resistance from local people who contest conservation activities, Nikolai and his team are making progress. Working alongside

institutions they have improved understanding and enforcement of environmental legislation and are ensuring that conservation values and sustainable alternatives are considered in the municipality development plan.

Nikolai has successfully engaged farmers to develop an agro-environment payment scheme to reduce conflict with geese due to crop damage. Using his Whitley Award, Nikolai will ensure nature conservation is mainstreamed into development planning and is viewed by communities as an opportunity for sustainable economic development, including bird-watching ecotourism. This project will act as a model that could be applied in other areas, where wetland habitat and human expansion are in conflict.

Edward Whitley, Founder of the Whitley Fund for Nature, said: “Nikolai’s work in Bulgaria is benefitting some of the most important stop-over sites for this strikingly coloured goose along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. He shows how collaborative working can have successful outcomes against the odds, and demonstrates the need to integrate wildlife conservation into future development planning.”

Whitley Award winners each receive £40,000 in funding to support their work to conserve some of the planet’s most endangered species and spectacular natural habitats. The prize is accompanied by a boost in profile, helping winners to leverage new connections and further funding.

Nikolai plans to build upon his team’s success and expand their initiative, saying: “Now, we want to replicate this work and find similar solutions to this in other countries along the flyway.”

This year’s Whitley Gold Award honours Prof Jon Paul Rodríguez of Venezuela who co-founded his NGO, Provita, 30 years ago to conserve the country’s threatened wildlife, including the nationally Endangered yellow-shouldered parrot. After receiving his Whitley Award in 2003, today the parrot is on the road to recovery in Jon Paul’s project site – with record numbers of parrots flying the nest in 2018. Elsewhere however, populations continue to fall due to heavy poaching of this pretty polly for the pet trade. With his Whitley Gold Award, Jon Paul will scale up his work by developing a multi-country strategy to protect the yellow-shouldered parrot across its entire range, working in collaboration with other Whitley Award winners. Jon Paul is Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission, an internationally influential role in conservation which makes him uniquely positioned to deliver this project.

The 2019 Whitley Award winners are:

- **Caleb Ofori-Boateng** – Critical refuge for the Togo slippery frog, Ghana
- **Nikolai Petkov** – Wetlands on the brink: conserving the red-breasted goose, Bulgaria
- **Vatsoa Rakotondrazafy** – MIHARI: a civil society movement to safeguard marine resources, Madagascar
- **José Sarasola** – The Chaco eagle: a flagship for semiarid wildlife conservation, Argentina
- **Wendi Tamariska** – Protecting orangutans and rainforests through sustainable livelihoods, Indonesia (Borneo)
- **Ilena Zanella** – Strengthened sanctuary for the scalloped hammerhead shark, Costa Rica

The 2019 Whitley Gold Award winner is:

- **Jon Paul Rodríguez** – A range-wide plan for the yellow-shouldered parrot

Visit www.whitleyaward.org to find out more.

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Press materials available:

- Copyright-cleared photographs of this project are available here: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/ojNAX7Wi5c3eJvqj6>
- Video footage of the Awards Ceremony and individual films featuring the award winner narrated by WFN trustee, **Sir David Attenborough** will be available upon arrangement with Liquid: contact Madeline Arnold, t:+44 (0) 121 285 3760, e: madeline@weareliquid.com or Chloe Baker, t:+44 (0) 121 285 3760, e: chloe@weareliquid.com

Notes to Editors:

- The Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN) is a UK-registered charity that champions outstanding grassroots leaders in nature conservation across the Global South.
- The Whitley Awards – also known as Green Oscars - are prestigious international prizes presented to individuals in recognition of their achievements in nature conservation. Each Award Winner receives a prize worth £40,000 in project funding over one year. The charity's Patron, HRH The Princess Royal, presents the Awards annually at a special ceremony in London.
- The Whitley Gold Award is the charity's top prize. Worth £60,000 it recognises a past Whitley Award Winner who has gone on to make an outstanding contribution to conservation. Joining the Judging Panel to assist in selection, the Gold winner also acts as a mentor to Whitley Award winners receiving their Awards in the same year.

- Since its founding in 1993, the Whitley Fund for Nature has given nearly £16 million to support the work of over 200 conservation leaders benefiting wildlife and communities in over 80 countries.
- WFN operates a rigorous application process involving expert panel representation from international NGOs including WWF-UK and Fauna and Flora International (FFI). This year, WFN received 110 applications which passed through four stages of assessment, reviewed at every step by expert screeners and panellists who kindly offer their expertise voluntarily.
- The Whitley Awards are open to individuals working on wildlife conservation issues in biodiversity-rich, resource-poor countries. Further eligibility criteria are available from Liquid.
- During their trip to London for the Awards week, finalists have the opportunity to meet the judges, WFN's Trustees, including Sir David Attenborough, and Patron HRH The Princess Royal. They participate in professional media and speech training, attend networking receptions with leading conservation organisations, meet WFN donors and are interviewed by the media. The associated publicity of winning a Whitley Award puts a spotlight on their important work, boosting profile both in the UK and winners' home countries.
- Whitley Award winners join an international network of Whitley alumni eligible to apply for Continuation Funding grants. These follow-on grants are awarded competitively to winners seeking to scale up their effective conservation results on the ground over multiple years.
- WFN is generously supported by: Arcus Foundation; The Badenoch Fund, The Balcombe Trust; The Frank Brake Charitable Trust; The William Brake Charitable Trust in memory of William Brake;; The Constance Travis Charitable Trust; The Corcoran Foundation; Earlymarket; Fondation Segré; The Foundation for the Promotion of Wellbeing; The G. D. Charitable Trust; Garfield Weston Foundation; The Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation; The LJC Fund; The Britta & Jeremy Lloyd Family Charitable Trust; Lund Trust – A charitable fund of Peter Baldwin & Lisbet Rausing; Charles and Ruth Plowden; The Rabelais Trust; The Reece Foundation; The Rufford Foundation; The Savitri Waney Charitable Trust; The Schroder Foundation; The Shears Foundation in memory of Trevor Shears; The Whitley Animal Protection Trust; WWF-UK; The Friends of the Whitley Fund for Nature; and all our partners and supporters and those donors who have chosen to give anonymously.