



CONVENTION ON MIGRATORY SPECIES

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SECOND MEETING OF THE SIGNATORIES TO
THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING
CONCERNING CONSERVATION MEASURES FOR
THE AQUATIC WARBLER (*Acrocephalus paludicola*)
Biebrza National Park, Poland, 13-15 May 2010
Agenda Item 8.0

OVERVIEW REPORT

(Prepared by Birdlife International on behalf of the CMS Secretariat)

1.0 Introduction

1. Pursuant to paragraph 6 of the Memorandum of Understanding concerning Conservation Measures for the Aquatic Warbler (MoU), the Secretariat shall prepare an Overview Report compiled on the basis of information at its disposal pertaining to the Aquatic Warbler. It shall communicate this report to each of the Range States and the Co-operating Organisations. Signatories are to compile a report on implementation of this MoU in each of the respective countries and to provide the Secretariat with this report.

2. Reports by the Signatories are a primary source of information for the overview report. In conjunction with the invitation for the present meeting, the Secretariat provided to all MoU Signatories and non-Signatory Range States the reporting template for Parts I and II of the Aquatic Warbler Action Plan approved by the First Meeting of the Signatories in 2006. As of 7 May 2010, the following Signatory States had submitted their national reports to the Secretariat: Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany and Ukraine. National progress reports from the following signatories: Belarus, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Senegal, Spain and the United Kingdom and non-signatories: France, Netherlands, Portugal and the Russian Federation have been prepared by national experts in 2008 during the preparation of the updated International Species Action Plan. The Secretariat considers it acceptable that these reports are used as national reports to the CMS Secretariat on the implementation of the MoU, although they differ in format from the template approved in 2006. Information available to BirdLife International in the form of data and project reports, conference proceedings and published materials was also used.

3. The structure of this report follows the national report format. This report does not repeat the information provided in the national reports. It summarizes the main issues, covering all 15 Range States recognised in the original MoU and Action Plan of 2003, and one additional country (Portugal) proposed to be considered as range state by experts. For all of these States, national reports from 2008 or 2010 were available when preparing this report (8 with breeding occurrence, 7 with stopover sites and 1 with a wintering population). Additionally, the implementation of non-country-specific actions has been evaluated.



4. Six other countries (Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Slovakia, Luxembourg and Switzerland) are now proposed by experts to be recognised as official Range States. However, they have not been included in this review, as no national reports were available for these countries.

2.0 Status of the Aquatic Warbler in the Agreement Area

5. The species is classified as “vulnerable” on the IUCN red list of globally threatened species due to large population losses in the past and the current very small area of occupancy (less than 1,000 km²). Aquatic Warbler is listed as vulnerable together with such well known problematic species like African elephant and Venus flytrap.

6. In 2009, the breeding population of the aquatic warbler was estimated at 10,500-14,000 singing males (unit used instead of breeding pairs, as the species does not form pairs). Within the official range states, an estimated total of 300-1,000 migratory records of the species are made annually.

7. The only confirmed wintering population of 2,000-10,000 individuals is confined to Senegal. The current breeding population estimate is within the lower part of the brackets given in the CMS Action Plan of 2003. The main reason for this change in numbers is the availability of more accurate population estimates. The dramatic population decline has been stopped since the late 1990ies, with the overall population now fluctuating with a possible underlying slow decline. Populations in the three main breeding countries are relatively stable (fluctuating with a possible slow decline in Belarus and Poland, increasing with a recent local decline in the Ukraine). National populations in all other countries show confirmed declines at various rates.

Country	Population in EU SAP, (singing males), 1993	Population in CMS SAP (singing males), 1998-2002	Current population estimate, (singing males),		Reason for change of estimate/trend since 2002
			2003-2009 (2000 for Russia)	2009	
Belarus	1,500-5,000	6.600-12,500	5,500-6,000	3,960-7,610	Unknown sites discovered, later adjustment of estimate, fluctuating or slow decline
Germany	40-50	9-25	0-10	0	Real decline
Hungary	400-425	386-700	60-492	190-200	Real decline
Latvia	10-50	1-10	0-3	0	Irregular breeding occurrence
Lithuania	50-200	225-280	110-309	150	Real decline since 2004
Poland	3,500-4,500	2,800-3,000	2,700-3,460	3,200	New counts, underlying slow decline
Russia	100-500	50-500	50-500	0-500	Adjusted estimate, presumed decline, no records since 2000
Ukraine	1-10	2,100-3,540	2,550-4,400	3,975-4,740	Additional sites discovered, and real increase, recent decline at Upper Pripyat since 2006
TOTAL	5,600-10,700	12,171-20,555	12,100-13,800	11,500-16,400	New sites discovered, adjusted estimate, overall trend: fluctuating, possible underlying slow decline

3.0 Implementation of the Action Plan

Target of the Action Plan

8. In the short term, to maintain the current population of the Aquatic Warbler throughout its range. In the medium to long term, to promote the expansion of the breeding population to other suitable areas.

Evaluation against target

9. The dramatic decline of the world population could be stopped since the late 1990ies due to effective conservation work at the species' most important breeding sites. However, there still is a possible overall slow decline. Countries with small national populations show clear declines with extinction of the species immanent in Germany, Latvia and Russia. Hence, it can be concluded that important progress has been made towards achieving the short-term aim, while the medium to long-term aims have not yet been achieved.

Protection Status

10. The species is fully legally protected in all states subject of this review, save for Ukraine, Russia and Senegal, where the species is partly protected. In Senegal, efforts are underway to arrange full protection for the species.

National and regional species action plans

11. The UK and Belgium (Flanders) have a fully approved National Species Action Plan. There are draft action plans in Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine, covering 95% of the world population, and in France, which have not been formally adopted. There are plans to develop Action Plans in the German Land of Brandenburg and in Senegal. All other countries are unlikely to develop National Action Plans, either because the species is rare or irregular or because targeted conservation work is being undertaken without the need for a National Action Plan. No separate National Wetland Conservation Strategies have been developed in any country, and they are not considered necessary with other tools being available.

Site protection

12. Across the global breeding population, c. 86% is located within either a national protected area or a Special Protection Area (SPA).

13. About 80% of the known stopover sites are nationally protected areas and SPAs, but two out of the four key sites in Belgium remain unprotected. Less than 50% of the known wintering population in Senegal occurs within a nationally protected area (national park), the remainder just outside in the buffer zone of this park.

14. The network of protected areas covering the breeding sites can be assessed as coherent, with room for improvement in the Ukraine. It has to be noted that many countries report that the formal protection of sites alone is not sufficient to maintain the populations due to implementation deficits or the lack of active protection measures.

15. Projects likely to damage Aquatic Warbler sites are subject to environmental impact assessments in all countries but Russia. However, there are doubts about the efficiency of the system in the Ukraine, Bulgaria and Latvia, and to a lesser extent in Lithuania, Portugal and Poland.

Management plans

16. Site management plans with specific focus on the Aquatic Warbler have been developed for 8 sites of the Desna-Dniepro population group (Kyiv and Chernigiv regions) of the species in the Ukraine, all key sites in Belarus and are being developed for eight key sites in Poland (covering c. 80% of the national population) and one potential site in Germany. The management plan for the key site in Hungary is suitable for the protection of the species, although long-lasting spring floods or fires can still negatively influence the local population. In Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria general site management plans exist or are being developed for most SPAs with Aquatic Warbler occurrence during breeding or migration. These plans are deemed insufficient for the only German breeding site and for the Lithuanian sites. For the only German breeding site a new site management plan (National Park Management Plan), considering the Aquatic Warbler in particular, is in progress and will be finished by 2011.

Habitat conservation

17. As there are virtually no 100% pristine and self-sustaining habitats left, maintaining the species' breeding habitat requires the conservation or development of appropriate hydrological conditions and active management of the vegetation by conservation managers or farmers in order to prevent overgrowth with reeds, bushes or trees. To a lesser extent, this equally applies to stopover sites. For wintering sites, these aspects are again crucial.

18. While changes of the hydrological regime (drainage) have been the reason for most of the rapid historical decline of the species, further drainage of major Aquatic Warbler sites has been stopped since the late 1990ies. Restoration of water conditions has been implemented in Belarus and Hungary, and to a smaller extent in the Ukraine and Poland. Today, drainage continues to be a problem, but only locally. Ongoing river deepening work at the upper Pripyat in the Ukraine potentially threatens the habitat of 1,000 singing male Aquatic Warblers, while river deepening works in the Ner Valley in Poland might cause the extinction of the small local population. Proper water management is needed to maintain the declining Lithuanian population.

19. Incentives for the maintenance of extensive land use on wet meadows within the breeding range of the species have been created through agri-environmental schemes in Poland, Germany, Hungary and Lithuania. They aim to prevent both abandonment and intensification of land use. However, only the new scheme in Poland is specifically targeted at the Aquatic Warbler and is likely to be the only one creating a measurable positive impact, while in Lithuania non-specific schemes for extensive use of meadows are even likely to be damaging to the local population of Aquatic Warblers. No such incentives exist outside the EU, but in those countries the decline of traditional extensive land use is slower.

20. Only Hungary, the Netherlands, France and Senegal report more than half of their Aquatic Warbler sites to be covered by suitable vegetation management (grazing or mowing). In Poland, Germany, Lithuania and Belarus, suitable active vegetation management is being implemented,

but currently on much less than half the area of the sites, in Poland and Germany mainly as part of a recent EU LIFE Project. A low level of active management is reported for the Ukraine.

21. Fire is now being used as a targeted active management tool in Belarus and Senegal. In other countries, this tool is not used, mainly due to legal obstacles. In Germany, a burning experiment is planned to restore vegetation suitable for the Aquatic Warbler. Uncontrolled fires are not a major problem any more in any of the range states.

22. Today, the lack of suitable vegetation management is the main reason for population declines across the breeding range. In most cases, the problem is abandonment leading to overgrowth, but locally it is too intensive land use with too early mowing, especially in the Nemunas Delta, the main breeding site in Lithuania.

23. Habitat restoration is currently mainly confined to the re-introduction of extensive land use on recently abandoned land near existing Aquatic Warbler breeding sites. This type of activity is implemented in those countries that conduct active vegetation management for the species (see above). The restoration of former breeding sites, which had been completely destroyed through historical drainage, is being attempted only in Belarus. Here, ongoing projects have already restored more than 25,000 ha of degraded fen mires, with a target to restore another 2,500 ha before the end of 2010. However, it is too early yet to expect the re-colonisation of these sites by the Aquatic Warbler.

Research and Monitoring

24. In 1998, BirdLife International has set up the Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team (AWCT), a working group of national Aquatic Warbler experts. This group is coordinating research and monitoring on this species, and has developed standard methods. Reliable estimates for the whole breeding population are assembled annually, with full counts conducted regularly in most countries (in some countries even annually). In Belarus and Ukraine only smaller populations and selected monitoring plots are completely surveyed, thus national population estimates are extrapolations. The extent of the breeding range has now been fully clarified, and the first major wintering site in Africa has been found, with further research being undertaken to identify other key wintering sites. Thanks to EU LIFE Projects in Spain and France, more key stopover sites have been identified.

25. Thanks to the AWCT and its members, there is now a very good understanding of the species' habitat requirements at the breeding and stopover sites. Current research is focusing on the habitat requirements at the wintering sites, and the effect of different habitat management techniques (mainly within the Polish-German EU LIFE Project, but also in Belarus).

Networking and awareness rising

26. Since the preparation of the EU action plan, a strong network committed to the conservation of the species has developed. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB, BirdLife in the UK) financially supports the work of the AWCT and of national BirdLife organisations in the range states. The Memorandum of Understanding concerning Conservation Measures for the Aquatic Warbler concluded under CMS has been signed by all CMS-recognised

range states apart from France (signature upcoming), the Netherlands and Russia and a coordinating hub has been set up at APB-BirdLife Belarus in Minsk. A number of donor organisations are supporting Aquatic Warbler research and conservation across its range.

27. Awareness for the conservation of Aquatic Warblers and its habitat has been raised successfully amongst land users, stakeholders and the public in France, Spain, Germany and especially Poland, largely thanks to EU LIFE Projects. Outside the EU, educational activities have been particularly successful in Belarus, where the bird is now a well-known symbol for nature conservation as a whole and a flagship species for fen mire protection in particular. In other countries, publicity has been less, largely because of the scarcity of the species, which does not make it a suitable candidate to be a flagship for conservation. However, local publicity has been provided in all countries but Portugal, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Belgium and Russia.

4.0 Evaluation

28. Based on the synthesis of the national reports and other available information, actions relating to formal protection, monitoring and research were implemented to a high extent, while actions relating to active targeted habitat management to a much lower extent. This can probably explain why large-scale habitat destruction could be stopped since the publication of the first International Species Action Plan in 1996 and since the signing of the CMS MoU, but not yet the existing or possible slow decline of most populations due to land use and habitat changes.

29. More progress should be achieved in the following fields:

- develop National Species Action Plans;
- improve formal species protection especially in the Ukraine and Senegal;
- undertake further identification of migration and wintering sites of the Aquatic Warbler, and especially those in Africa. It is assumed that potential wintering sites of AW in Sahelian W-Africa are under serious threat – and that, therefore, the population bottleneck may switch from the breeding to the wintering sites in the near future;
- create financial incentives to maintain suitable extensive management of wet meadows;
- implement regular targeted vegetation management (mowing, grazing, fire);
- widely undertake management planning and conservation actions at small Aquatic Warbler breeding sites;
- restore degraded or destroyed sites through the restoration of natural hydrological conditions and subsequent vegetation management; and
- further promotion of the Aquatic Warbler in some countries of the range.

30. There are also issues that raise concern:

- In Germany, there are risks due to the Lower Oder Valley National Park Act (core zone concept). The new National Park Act postpones the establishment of the core zone at Aquatic Warbler breeding sites so that land uses crucial to Aquatic Warbler habitat management may continue until substitute areas are developed. However, the second risk (construction of the new road crossing the National Park) will remain.
- There is still no management plan for the Djoudj National Park, Senegal, the only known wintering site. Habitat water management is needed. Undesirable overgrazing of habitats takes place.
- Implementation of projects and programmes that could harm the breeding, stopover and wintering sites of the species, e.g. potential continuation of the deepening of the Upper Pripyat River in the Ukraine or programmes supporting early mowing in Lithuania's Nemunas Delta must be prevented.
- It is difficult to protect dispersed migratory stopover sites. Aquatic Warbler is recorded at 60% of SPA in France, but there are no more concrete data on species distribution. At the moment no active habitat management is being implemented in France, but the recent adoption of a new 5-year national action plan should improve the situation.