Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*

(2008)

Coverage

This report evaluates the implementation of the EU Species Action Plan from 1996 in the EU range states of the species, as well as the implementation of the CMS Species Action Plan from 2003 across all of the species' EU and non-EU range states.

The evaluation covers all 16 range states of the species (8 with breeding occurrence, 7 with stopover sites and 1 with a wintering population), 12 EU countries and 4 non-EU countries. Additionally, the implementation of non-country-specific actions has been evaluated.

Three countries have not been included in this review, as they are not yet officially recognized as range states by the CMS Memorandum of Understanding for the conservation of this species: Mauritania and Mali, which presumably hold parts of the population in winter, and Morocco, which presumably is important during migration.

Replies have been received from national experts from all countries.

Status

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.

In 2007, the breeding population was 11,342-13,939 singing males (unit used instead of breeding pairs, as the species does not form pairs), of these 2,966-3,024 in the EU (22-26%).

Within the official range states, an estimated 300-1,000 migratory records of the species are made annually, all of them within the EU.

The only confirmed wintering population of 5-15,000 individuals is confined to Senegal, i.e. outside the EU.

The current breeding population estimate is higher than at the time of writing the EU action plan but within the lower part of the brackets given in the CMS action plan . The main reason of the change in numbers is an adjustment of the population estimates. The dramatic population decline has been stopped since the late 1990ies, with the overall population now being 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, increasing with a recent local decline in the Ukraine and a slow decline in Poland). National populations in all other countries show confirmed declines at various rates.

Table 53 Aquatic warbler population size and trends

Country	Population in EU SAP, (singing males), 1993	Population in CMS SAP (singing males), 1998-2002	Current population estimate, (singing males), 2003-2007 (2000 for Russia)	Reason for change of estimate/trend since 2002
Poland	3,500–4,500	2,800-3,000	2,700-3,460	New counts, underlying slow decline
Germany	40–50	9-25	10	Real decline
Hungary	400–425	386-700	132	Real decline
Latvia	10–50	1-10	0-3	Irregular breeding occurrence
Lithuania	50–200	225-280	150-309	Real decline since 2004
Ukraine	1-10	2,100-3,540	3,500-4,000	additional sites discovered, and real increase, recent decline at Upper Pripyat since 2006
Belarus	1,500-5,000	6.600-12,500	5,840	Unknown sites discovered, later adjustment of estimate, fluctuating or slow decline
Russia	100-500	50-500	0-500	Adjusted estimate, presumed decline, no records since 2000
TOTAL	**5,600-10,700**	**12,171-20,555**	**12,182-14,254**	**New sites discovered, adjusted estimate, overall trend: fluctuating, possible underlying slow decline**

Targets (for EU and CMS plan)

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

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

The species is fully legally protected in all EU member states save for Belgium, where the species has only been given general protection. Outside the EU, the species is fully protected in

Belarus, but not in the Ukraine, Russia and Senegal. In Senegal, efforts are underway to arrange full protection for the species by the end of 2008.

National and regional species action plans

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, which have not been formally adopted. There are plans to develop Action Plans in France, 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

Within the EU, c. 90% of the breeding population is covered by national protected areas, even 98% are covered by Special Protection Areas (SPAs). Across the whole breeding population, c. 86% is located within either a national protected area or an SPA.

About 80% of the known stopover sites are nationally protected areas and SPAs (all within the EU), but two out of the three 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.

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.

Projects likely to damage Aquatic Warbler sites are subject to environmental impact assessments in all EU countries and all non-EU 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

Site management plans with specific focus on the Aquatic Warbler have been developed for half of the key breeding site of the species in the Ukraine, all key sites in Belarus and are being developed for nine key sites in Poland (covering c. 80% of the national population). 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 all other EU countries 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.

Habitat conservation

As there are virtually no 100% pristine and self-sustaining habitats left, maintaining the species' breeding habitat requires the conservation 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.

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 bring the extinction of the small local population. Proper water management is needed to maintain the declining Lithuanian population.

Within the EU, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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, an ongoing GEF Project is restoring about 20,000 ha of degraded fen mires, with another project being developed to target another 150,000 ha in the medium-term future. It is too early yet to expect the re-colonisation of these sites by the Aquatic Warbler.

Research and Monitoring

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 all countries (in some countries even annually). 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.

Thanks to the AWCT and their 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 raising

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. A Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation of the Aquatic Warbler under the Bonn Convention (CMS) has been signed by all CMS-recognised range states apart from France (signature upcoming), the Netherlands and Russia and a secretariat has been set up at APB-BirdLife Belarus in Minsk. A number of donor organisations is supporting Aquatic Warbler conservation across its range.

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.

Community financial support

The EU LIFE Programme has to date supported five projects targeting the species' conservation. The overall EU contribution to these projects is 6.9m €, but only three of these projects (EU contribution: 5.7m €) focus mainly on Aquatic Warblers: one in Spain (LIFE02 NAT/E/008616, Conservation of the aquatic warbler in the ZEPA 'La Nava-Campos'), one in France (LIFE04 NAT/FR/000086, Conservation of the Aquatic Warbler in Brittany) and one in Poland and Germany (LIFE05 NAT/PL/000101, Conserving *Acrocephalus paludicola* in Poland and Germany).

Other community funding contributing to the conservation of the species are Rural Development Funds used to finance agri-environmental schemes. A specifically targeted scheme is due to commence in Poland in 2009.

Conclusions

There has been significant progress in the implementation of the action plan. The average National Implementation Score (NIS) for the EU member states increased from 2.4 in the 2004 review to 2.7. The NIS for all range states including the four non-EU member states is 2.6. If weighting the NIS according to the percentage of the species population occurring in each country during breeding, migration and wintering, the scores increase further, being 3.1 for the EU, and 2.9 for all range states. This shows, that both within the EU and outside, far better implementation of the action plan could be achieved in those countries that are especially important for the species. This is different to the findings of the 2004 implementation report, when a particularly low score was reported from Poland, the country that holds 82% of the EU population.

The highest NIS were achieved for France (3.3), UK (3.2), Hungary (3.1), Poland (3.0) and Spain (2.9), and outside the EU for Belarus (3.0).

Actions relating to formal protection, monitoring and research reached very high implementation scores between 3.0 and 4.0, while action relating to active targeted habitat management scored much lower between 1.0 and 2.9. This can probably explain why large-scale habitat destruction could be stopped since the publication of the EU action plan, but not yet the existing or possible slow decline of most populations due to land use and habitat changes. The target has not yet been fully reached, and further efforts have to be made, especially on the following priority actions:

- develop National Species Action Plans
- improve formal species protection outside the EU, especially in the Ukraine and Senegal
- prevent the implementation of projects and programmes that could harm the breeding, stopover and wintering sites of the species, e.g. the deepening of the Upper Pripyat River in the Ukraine or programmes supporting early mowing in Lithuania's Nemunas Delta.
- create financial incentives to maintain suitable extensive management of wet meadows
- implement regular targeted vegetation management (mowing, grazing, fire)
- restore degraded or destroyed sites through the restoration of natural hydrological conditions and subsequent vegetation management

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Appendix: Table 54 Aquatic warbler SAP Implementation scores (2008)

		COUNTRY WEIGHTING RE. POPULATION IMPACT																				
		EU only			100%	82%	2%	13%	1%	2%	2%	2%	5%	6%	6%	40%	40%					
		all range countries			100%	25%	1%	4%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%	25%	25%					
EU SAP Action No.	CMS SAP Action No.	Target	Priority EU SAP	Priority CMS SAP	non country-specific actions (AWCT)	Poland	Germany	Hungary	Bulgaria	UK	Portugal	Latvia	Lithuania	Netherlands	Belgium	France	Spain	AIS for EU countries only	weighted AIS for EU countries only	API for EU countries only (EU plan)		
1.1.1	1.1.2	Incentives are available to maintain the traditional farming practices at breeding sites.	3	3	0	3	3	4	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	2.8	3.1	1.2		
1.1.2a	1.1.1 a	The species is fully protected.	3	4	0	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	3.8	3.8	0.2		
1.1.2b	1.1.1 b	National action plan developed.	3	4	0	3	2	1	1	4	1	1	3	1	4	2	1	2.0	2.2	2.0		
1.1.2c & 2.1.2	1.1.1 c & 2.1.2	All activities likely to damage the species' habitat are subject to environmental impact assessment.	3	4	0	3	4	4	2	4	3	2	3	4	4	4	3	3.3	3.3	0.7		
1.1.2d	1.1.1 d	Insecticide use in water catchments is regulated and limited.	3	4	0	0	4	4	1	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	3.3	3.8	0.8		
1.1.2e	1.1.1 e	National wetland strategy, taking into consideration the species' needs developed.	3	4	0	0	0	3	1	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	1	1.5	1.5	2.5		
2.1.1 & 2.1.2	2.1.1 & 2.1.2	All sites regularly holding breeding Aquatic Warblers are protected and has management plan	3	3	0	3	3	3	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	0	3.0	3.0	1.0		
2.2.1	2.2.2	Traditional agriculture practices preventing habitat succession are maintained.	3	4	0	3	3	4	1	0	1	1	2	0	1	0	2	2.0	2.6	2.0		
2.2.2	2.2.3	Properly applied hand scything and mowing covers all habitats on rotational basis	2.5	3	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	1	2	2	0	3	0	2.2	2.3	1.5		
2.2.3	2.2.5	Appropriate level grazing is maintained.	2.5	2	0	2	0	4	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2.0	2.2	1.7		
2.2.4	2.2.4	Fire applied as part of management where appropriate, but uncontrolled fires are prevented	2.5	3	0	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1.2	1.0	2.4		
2.2.5	2.2.1	Natural water conditions are restored, where this is not possible water level controlled.	1.5	4	0	3	3	4	2	0	0	1	1	2	0	3	3	2.4	3.0	0.8		
2.2.6	2.2.6	Land managers informed about best habitat management techniques	3	1	0	2	2	4	1	2	1	3	3	0	1	3	4	2.4	2.7	1.6		
2.3.1	2.3.1	All sites in Europe used by the birds on passage are effectively protected.	3	3	0	0	3	0	3	4	4	3	0	4	2	3	3	3.2	3.0	0.8		
2.4.1	2.4.1	In areas no longer used for agriculture habitat restoration carried out.	3	2	0	1	2	3	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	2	1.9	1.5	2.1		
3.1.1	3.1.1	Census methodology developed and regularly applied throughout the species range.	3	3	3	4	4	4	1	4	1	4	4	1	3	4	3	3.1	3.4	0.9		
3.1.2	3.1.2	All potential breeding sites located and surveyed	3.5	3.5	0	4	3	3	0	0	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	3.4	3.8	0.7		
3.1.3 a	3.1.3	Regular data collected at major passage sites and further passage sites identified.	2	2	0	0	0	2	1	4	3	3	0	2	2	4	3	2.7	3.1	0.9		
3.1.3.b	3.1.4	Major wintering sites identified.	2	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3.0	3.0	0.7		
3.1.4	3.1.5	Habitat requirements at passage and wintering sites understood.	2	2	3	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	2	2	3	4	2.1	3.1	1.3		
3.2.1	3.2.1	Variation in breeding density and success understood through comparative studies.	2	3	3	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2.0	2.9	1.3		
3.2.2	3.2.2	Effect of different habitat management techniques and water conditions on breeding populations assessed.	3	3	3	3	3	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	4	2.8	3.1	1.2		
3.2.3	3.2.3	Collaborative research and monitoring developed.	3	3	4	4	2	3	1	4	3	4	3	1	2	4	3	2.9	3.7	1.1		
4.1	4.1	A strong network of committed organisations and individuals developed.	3.5	3	4	4	2	3	2	3	3	4	4	0	2	3	4	3.2	3.7	1.0		
4.2	4.2	The species is used as a flagship for the conservation of lowland marshes and wet meadows.	3	3	0	4	1	3	0	2	0	0	4	0	0	2	4	2.9	3.4	1.1		
4.3	4.3	Educational material on the species produced and distributed.	3	3	0	3	2	2	0	2	0	3	2	0	0	4	4	2.8	3.3	1.3		
Additional measures taken at national level, but not related to any of the targets defined in the action plan:																						
N.A.	N.A.	Investigate and implement sustainable use of biomass produced during AW habitat management				2																