

Appendix IX. East European Newsletter Release, 2005

Darwin Initiative and RSPB helps aquatic warblers in Belarus

As a result of the work by APB (BirdLife Partner in Belarus) and the RSPB, supported by the Darwin Initiative, the hydrological regime of the three unique fen mires in Belarus has been significantly improved for breeding aquatic warblers, the only globally threatened songbird species in mainland Europe.

The decline of the species has now been stopped at the key breeding sites of Sporovo, Zvanets and Dikoe fen mires, which together hold around 60% of the species' world population and 90% of the Belarusian population. Recently obtained monitoring data show that at the three mires number of Aquatic warblers is kept at a stable high level of 10500-11300 males.

This all became possible as a result of *Implementing Urgent Conservation Actions in Mesotrophic Fen Mires in Belarus*, a joint project between APB, the RSPB, the Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species, the Michael Otto Foundation for Environmental Protection, UNDP and the Belarusian Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection. The scheme started in October 2002, and it was during the early stages of the group's long-term strategy that their most urgent recommendations for the three sites were implemented.

The project activities were primarily concerned with restoring the hydrological regime, influenced by a large-scale improvement campaign in the 1960s. In addition, priority was also given to creating optimal breeding conditions for the globally endangered species, and conserving the unique biological diversity at each site. Throughout the duration of the project, fourteen water-regulating facilities – such as overflow weirs, dams and sluices – have been built, aimed at maintaining water level at its optimum every year. To ensure that the facilities built on the sites operate smoothly, operational guidelines have been given an overhaul and subsequently approved by the relevant authorities.

Stabilization and increase in the number of aquatic warblers has been achieved since 2003, at all plots monitored by the project. In recent years, project activities concerned with water level regulation have resulted in the avoidance of prolonged floods and decreases in water level, and have prevented negative conditions that occurred earlier, in 1999 and 2001. In Belarus, during years with average rainfall and no floods and draughts, the total population size varies from 10,000 to 11,300. In years with extremely high rainfall, 1999 for example, or in dry years, such as 2001, the population size has decreased sharply to 7,000 birds. Over the last four years, it has been at a stable, high level, in spite of relatively dry conditions. During 2005, extreme nesting conditions for aquatic warblers were observed, when all the mires flooded, and this was assumed to be the cause of a sharp fall in population numbers. However, owing to the project's actions and joint efforts with the regional water users, it became possible to lower the water level to its optimal level, to ensure favorable conditions for nesting.

To ensure the long-term success of the project, management teams have been established at the Zvanets and Sporovo reserves, and the scheme has recently prompted the development of a large-scale campaign by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection to create similar structures on another 37 Belarusian reserves. The positive results of the project have also become a basis for amending national environmental legislation, which means that management plans for areas of international importance are becoming obligatory in the country.

Successful delivery of the Darwin Initiative project has enabled conservationists in Belarus to continue implementing management plans. We hope that further implementation and application in other reserves will extend aquatic warblers' breeding areas, and that the species will also inhabit other territories.