



Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals



FIRST MEETING OF THE SIGNATORY STATES TO THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING CONCERNING CONSERVATION MEASURES FOR THE AQUATIC WARBLER (*Acrocephalus paludicola*)

*Lower Oder Valley National Park, Criewen, Germany
25-27 June 2006*

CMS/AW-1/Report
Annex 5

REVISED 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. By letter dated 20 February 2006 the Secretariat provided to all MoU signatories, non-signatory Range States and signing organisations a reporting template for Parts I and II of the Aquatic Warbler Action Plan. As of 31 May 2006 the Signatories from the following Range States had submitted their national reports to the Secretariat: Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Senegal, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. A report from the Russian Federation, a non-signatory, was also received. Information available to BirdLife International in the form of data and project reports, conference proceedings and published materials was also used.

3. This revised report also takes account of a report submitted after 31 May by France, a non-signatory. Additional information provided by participants at the First Meeting of the Signatory States, as well as that available from the Aquatic Warbler Scientific Symposium which preceded the MoU meeting (24 June 2006) was also incorporated into the revised report.

4. The structure of this report follows the draft national report format. Corresponding action points from the Action Plan are indicated in square brackets. This report does not repeat the information provided in the national reports. It only summarizes the main issues.

2.0 Status of the Aquatic Warbler in the Agreement Area

5. The status of the species is assessed here on the basis of the information available to BirdLife International, the national reports submitted and from the Birds in Europe 2 database, monitoring and project reports of BirdLife International partners and members of the BirdLife

International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team.

6.

7. Over the last 10 years the world population of the Aquatic Warbler has been fluctuating. The overall decline has been stopped thanks to active conservation efforts at large breeding sites. Several new breeding sites have been found since the Memorandum's entry into effect, which has contributed to the increase of the population. At the same time, many smaller Aquatic Warbler breeding sites have been lost or breeding conditions deteriorated due to overgrowth.

8. The only known genetically distinct Pomeranian population (Germany and West Poland) has continued to decline, falling from 242 in 1996 to only 78 vocalizing males at just 7 small breeding sites in 2005.

Table 1. Breeding population of the Aquatic Warbler based on the information collected by BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team (Source: Flade, 2005)

State	Years	Population size (vocalizing males)		Geometric mean	Trend
		min	max		
Belarus	1996-2005	7,009	11,354	10,152	Fluctuating
Germany	1996-2005	7	33		Declining
Hungary	1996-2005	386	700	578	Increasing
Latvia	1996-2005	0	3		Fluctuating
Lithuania	2000-2005	160	320	209	Fluctuating
Poland	1997-2005	2,634	3,448	3,026	Fluctuating
Russia	1996-2005	50	500	158	Unknown
Ukraine	1996-2005	1,260	4,235	2,656	Slightly increasing
Global Population Estimate		13,330	18,925	16,960	

9. The status of the Aquatic Warbler in Russia is not clear. The small Siberian breeding population is unstable and is in need of research and protection. Stable breeding sites in European Russia still need to be identified.

10. On migration, the Aquatic Warbler is regularly registered in Europe in Belgium, France, Latvia, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom. In Africa, the Aquatic Warbler has so far been recorded in 11 countries – Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Canary Islands (Spain), Western Sahara, Mauritania, Mali, Senegal, Guinea Bissau and Ghana, with Senegal, Mauritania and Mali considered as the most likely wintering localities.

3.0 Implementation of the Action Plan

11. **Legal protection [AP 1.1.]:** The Action Plan calls for the promotion of national and international broad policies and legislation which favour the conservation of the Aquatic Warbler and its habitat.

12. The Aquatic Warbler is strictly protected in most countries of its European range: **Belarus,**

Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, the UK, and Ukraine reported that the species protection level is sufficient to ensure protection of the species and its breeding sites as well as exclude potential detrimental developments at Aquatic Warbler breeding sites. In **Senegal** the Aquatic Warbler is not protected specifically, although the species is under general wildlife protection, which is considered as not sufficient. Increase of the knowledge on the status of the species at its migration and wintering sites will favour strengthening of protection of the species there. Inclusion of the Aquatic Warbler into Annex I of the EU Birds Directive and habitat types occupied by the Aquatic Warbler into Annex I of the Habitat Directive facilitates conservation of the species and protection of its breeding sites in the EU.

13. As an instrument to encourage suitable farming practices at breeding sites impacted by drainage or threatened by succession, the Action Plan calls for development of policy incentives that favour conservation of the Aquatic Warbler. Addressing the issue, **Germany** reported that several agri-environmental schemes are used in Brandenburg to support implementation of habitat management at Aquatic Warbler breeding sites. In **Latvia** agri-environmental schemes could potentially be used for conservation of Aquatic Warbler breeding sites after restoration of meadows and recognition of them as agricultural land. In **Poland**, new agro-environmental schemes are being developed now for 2007-2013 to specifically support suitable farming practices on Aquatic Warbler habitats. No incentives for Aquatic Warbler friendly agriculture are currently available outside the EU, for example, in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.

14. *Species and habitat protection [AP 2.1.1.]:* The Action Plan calls for adequate protection of the breeding sites and removal of key factors adversely affecting the breeding habitat. It calls for designation as protected areas of all sites regularly holding breeding Aquatic Warblers and prevention of habitat alteration, habitat fragmentation, pollution and other factors that could be detrimental to the Aquatic Warbler in its breeding sites.

15. **Germany, Hungary** and **Latvia** reported that the only known breeding sites are strictly protected. In **Lithuania**, 6 of 7 known Aquatic Warbler breeding sites are fully protected with the remaining small site (Sierpiejai, 4 vocalizing males) currently being evaluated for protection. **Ukraine** reports that at the moment 60% of Aquatic Warbler breeding sites are protected with an increase to 90% protection envisaged by the end of 2006 with establishment of Pripjat National Park and two Nature Reserves of national importance. In **Belarus**, over 80% of breeding sites are protected which corresponds to upwards of 90% of the national population of the Aquatic Warbler. In **Poland** Aquatic Warbler breeding sites are almost entirely located within protected areas, although legal protection does not necessarily reject all possible detrimental developments.

16. Management plans are being implemented at key Aquatic Warbler breeding sites in **Belarus** (Zvanets, Sprava and Dzikaje mires) and in Hortobágy National Park in **Hungary**. In **Lithuania** management plans have been developed for 4 out of 7 Aquatic Warbler breeding sites (Zuvintas, Svencele, Kliosiai and Sausgalviai), and implementation will start upon their approval. Management recommendations are being elaborated for the only currently occupied Aquatic Warbler breeding site in **Germany** in Lower Oder Valley National Park. The recommendations are planned to be included into the National Park's Management Plan. A Management Plan for the potentially restored former breeding site, Peene Valle, is planned for development. In **Poland** management plans will be developed shortly for most breeding sites. In **Latvia** management planning has not been started.

17. *Preventing detrimental developments at breeding sites [AP 2.1.2]:* The Action Plan calls on Range States to prevent habitat alteration, habitat fragmentation, pollution and other

factors that could be detrimental to the Aquatic Warbler in its breeding sites. While **all countries** reported that no detrimental projects have been implemented since signing of the Memorandum, several potentially detrimental developments raise concern. Unlike many other species which would benefit from strict protection of breeding habitats, the Aquatic Warbler is highly dependent on regular habitat management. In **Germany**, implementation of the existing Lower Oder Valley National Park Act will put up to 50% of the Aquatic Warbler territories into the core strict protection zone, where no management will be allowed. This would have a very negative effect on the breeding population. There is hope that the new National Park Act will mitigate the negative effect of this paradoxical situation by postponing enforcement of the core zone so that land uses favourable to the Aquatic Warbler in its breeding sites could continue and more time could be used to develop substitute sites. The Lower Oder Valley National Park Act also envisages establishment of a new border crossing with traffic lines across the National Park which will affect part of the breeding population not threatened by core zone enforcement. In Poland, a planned road development project near Chelm mires can be a very high potential threat if implemented.

18. *Management of the breeding habitat [AP 2.2.]*: The Action Plan calls for the implementation of habitat management favourable to the Aquatic Warbler: hydrological management, preventing natural succession of the vegetation, implementing hand-scything and mowing, conducting controlled burning and grazing.

19. Water management is implemented at Aquatic Warbler breeding sites in **Belarus, Hungary, Poland and Ukraine**. Following completion of hydrological works at 3 key Aquatic Warbler breeding sites in **Belarus**, habitat management (hand- and tractor mowing) will be established at Zvanets and Sporava mires in 2006-2007, where bush removal and mowing will be implemented on 1200 hectares. In **Poland**, 2500 hectares have been mown in previous years in Biebrza National Park, and a management plan for the park envisages mowing of 32,562 hectares with 8000 hectares of bush removal. In **Ukraine** hydrological works were implemented at one key Aquatic Warbler breeding site in Pripjat floodplain which would favour the Aquatic Warbler and improve hay yields thus stimulating hand-mowing still implemented by local community. In **Poland**, land at some of the breeding sites is privately owned, which hampers water management. In **Germany**, water management in the Lower Oder Valley National Park is conducted but without focus on the requirements of the Aquatic Warbler.

20. Extensive grazing is implemented to conserve Aquatic Warbler sites in **Hungary and Poland**. Pilot application of grazing and controlled burning is planned at Zvanets (**Belarus**) although it still depends on funding and legalization of controlled burning. Mowing and grazing are also applied in **Germany**, but any management will have to be stopped in part of the current Aquatic Warbler range located within the planned core area of the Lower Oder Valley National Park after the National Park Act comes into force. A research project is now being conducted to identify potential replacement areas and appropriate management techniques. Implementation of management at breeding sites is hampered by the absence of a Site Management Plan in **Latvia** and approval of already developed plans in **Lithuania**, where pilot small scale mowing was implemented at 4 sites and grazing at 2 sites.

21. Legalization of controlled burning as a habitat management tool in **Belarus and Poland** is now in being reviewed. In **Germany** controlled burning is planned to be used as a habitat management tool for restoration of the former breeding site in Peene Valley. Controlled burning is currently legal in **Hungary** but its application for Aquatic Warbler conservation is not considered necessary.

22. Dissemination of habitat management recommendations has been initiated in **Belarus**. In **Germany**, close contacts with landowners have proven to be very successful.

23. *Protection the Aquatic Warbler and its habitat in the winter quarters and along the migration route [AP 2.3.]*: The Action Plan requests Range States to protect and appropriately manage all sites used regularly by the Aquatic Warbler on passage and during winter.

24. Aquatic Warbler passage sites in the breeding range have not been identified to a large extent. In **Belarus** and **Latvia** migrating birds are thought to use breeding sites as pre-migration congregation areas and migration stopovers, so birds might benefit from protection and management of breeding sites. In **Latvia**, the only known migration site (Lake Pape) is protected.

25. In **Belgium** one of the most important known passage sites (Harbour area of Zeebrugge) was lost in the late 1990's. The current most important site (decantation pits of Veurne) is threatened by the stopping of land use. In **France**, most Aquatic Warbler breeding sites are protected (the Aquatic Warbler is mentioned on migration in 30 SPAs), but this protection is not specifically targeted at the Aquatic Warbler. A LIFE-Nature project is run by Bretagne Vivante - SEPNEB is aimed at management and restoration at 3 Aquatic Warbler migration sites. A large-scale conservation and restoration project involving mowing, removal of accumulated biomass, controlled grazing and burning is now implemented at La Nava (**Spain**) by the Foundation for Global Nature. In the **UK**, all sites regularly holding migrating Aquatic Warblers are protected and regularly monitored.

26. Little is known on migration routes and wintering sites of Aquatic Warbler in Africa. In **Senegal**, the two known sites where the Aquatic Warbler is registered in winter are protected but protection level is not sufficient. **BirdLife International** has been summarizing existing information on registrations of the Aquatic Warbler in Africa, which helped further identify several potentially important sites for migrating and wintering Aquatic Warblers. On-the-ground verification of the results of desk-studies is needed to ensure appropriate protection and management of these sites in the future.

27. *Restoration of habitats for the Aquatic Warbler [AP 2.4.]*: The Action Plan calls on countries within the breeding range of the Aquatic Warbler to undertake ecological restoration of potential breeding sites. Potential breeding sites have been to a different extent surveyed and identified in **Belarus, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland**. Restoration and ecological rehabilitation of several currently abandoned Aquatic Warbler breeding sites will be approached in **Belarus** in 2006-2010. In **Germany** and **Poland** about 1,500 ha of new potential habitat in Pomerania and Biebrza will be restored within the framework of the LIFE project "Conserving *Acrocephalus paludicola* in Poland and Germany". Restoration of abandoned Aquatic Warbler breeding sites in Pomerania is targeted by this LIFE project and will be especially significant to conserve the sharply declining Pomeranian population of the Aquatic Warbler.

28. *Development and implementation of Aquatic Warbler monitoring programme [AP 3.1.]*: The Action Plan calls for development and distribution of a unified methodology for counting Aquatic Warblers, implementation of nation-wide surveys and research at breeding/migration/wintering sites.

29. The methodology for monitoring the Aquatic Warbler is regularly discussed at **BirdLife International** Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team annual meetings, as part of an

international Aquatic Warbler monitoring programme coordinated in respective Aquatic Warbler Range States largely by BirdLife International national partners and BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team members. A new scheme for monitoring of Aquatic Warbler breeding population and habitats is being developed within the framework of the EU-LIFE-Nature project “Conserving *Acrocephalus paludicola* in Poland and Germany”. If successful, the scheme will be later applied to monitoring Aquatic Warbler breeding sites throughout breeding range.

30. Annual surveys of Aquatic Warbler breeding sites are implemented in **Germany, Hungary, Lithuania and Latvia**. In **Belarus, Poland and Ukraine**, because of the large number and size of breeding sites, annual monitoring is conducted on the most important Aquatic Warbler breeding sites with all-country surveys covering all known and potential territories every 3-5 years. The methodology used for Aquatic Warbler counts is everywhere similar to that advised by the Species Action Plan. All countries within the breeding range of the species reported to have either high or full coverage of the territory by Aquatic Warbler surveys. Research on movement during the breeding season/exchange of subpopulations was implemented in Poland (Biebrza and Pomerania) and piloted in Belarus.

31. Intensive research has been implemented at major Aquatic Warbler passage sites in **France and Spain**, where the migrating strategy and requirements of the Aquatic Warbler are studied in order to implement conservation actions at migration sites. **In France, migration monitoring methodologies are being standardized.** Species-specific research has also been conducted in **Belgium** where several aspects have been studied with the results yet to be analysed. Ringing of migrating Aquatic Warblers is conducted in **Latvia** (in the framework of the ACROPROJECT) and **Belarus**. DNA sampling of all key Aquatic Warbler sub-populations, as well as on migration, conducted by the **BirdLife International** Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team has allowed the origin of migrating birds to be identified by DNA analysis. On the whole, the extent of coverage of known Aquatic Warbler migration sites by monitoring and the extent of identification of migration sites has been low.

32. The wintering range of the Aquatic Warbler is yet to be identified. **BirdLife International** through its National Partners and the BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team members in all countries of the Aquatic Warbler breeding range has run several desk-studies aimed at narrowing down a potential wintering range of the species, including a project funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the UK to study migratory connectivity of Aquatic Warblers using stable isotopes, which have resulted in identification of the very likely wintering sites in Senegal, Mauritania and Mali. On-the-ground confirmation is now required and planned for the beginning of 2007 in line with the strategy for further work of the BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team for the search for the wintering grounds of Aquatic Warbler, presented during the Aquatic Warbler Conference in Palencia/Spain 17-20 August 2005. A number of expeditions to find Aquatic Warbler wintering grounds have been initiated independently by ornithologists from **Spain** but without success.

33. **Promotion of research for the conservation of the Aquatic Warbler [AP 3.2.]:** The Action Plans calls for research into different aspects of the ecology of the Aquatic Warbler in different habitats which can help improve conservation of the species and its habitats.

34. Several studies have been implemented in **Poland, Belarus, Germany and Hungary** to study different aspects of breeding ecology of the Aquatic Warblers and identify conservation implications. Habitat structure and water level have been found to play a major role. Thus,

appropriate habitat management (mowing grazing burning, etc.) and water level regulation seem to be crucial to the welfare of the breeding populations of the species. Only **Hungary** has Aquatic Warbler breeding habitats represented by climax communities and which, therefore, do not require any kind of habitat management. Everywhere else cessation of traditional low intensity management (mowing, grazing) together with disturbance of the natural hydrological regime stimulated vegetation successions. Research on habitat requirements of the Aquatic Warbler at migration sites with the aim of subsequent implementation conservation actions is conducted in **France** and **Spain**.

35. Development of Aquatic Warbler conservation network [AP 4.1.]: The Action Plan strives to broaden involvement of organizations and individuals in the conservation of the Aquatic Warbler and its habitats.

36. Nationwide networks of organizations and individuals involved in the conservation of the Aquatic Warbler have been established in **Poland** and **Belarus** where they are coordinated by **BirdLife International** national partners. In **Germany** such a network was established under the leadership of the Brandenburg State Office of the Environment. On the international level such a network was established in 1996 in the form of the BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team, which unites key Aquatic Warbler experts from across the Aquatic Warbler breeding range. All key Aquatic Warbler experts meet at annual BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team field meetings. Regular Aquatic Warbler Conferences are envisaged in the framework of Aquatic Warbler LIFE projects in **Spain** (held in 2005), **France** (2007) and in **Poland** (2009).

37. Use of the Aquatic Warbler as a flagship species [AP 4.1.]: The Action Plan suggests using the Aquatic Warbler as a key species for the inventory and protection of lowland marshes and wet meadows. **The Aquatic Warbler is the most threatened migratory passerine breeding in Europe.**

38. In **Belarus**, thanks to the active promotion of the species and conservation of mires, the recognition of the species is extremely high. In **Poland** the Aquatic Warbler has been used as a flagship species for the inventory and protection of the Biebrza Marshes and the Chelm Marshes on Lublin Polesie. In **Germany** it is a highly prioritised species in Brandenburg. Other countries reported that the Aquatic Warbler is not yet used as a flagship species mostly due to very small size of population.

39. Promotion of the Aquatic Warbler [AP 4.3.]: The Action Plan calls for increased awareness about the Aquatic Warbler and the preparation of information and educational materials.

40. Materials specifically devoted to the conservation of the Aquatic Warbler have been published and disseminated in **Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, Spain and France**. In **Germany, Latvia and Poland** information about the Aquatic Warbler was included into materials with a broader conservation context.

4.0 Evaluation

41. Based on the synthesis of the national reports and other available information the following achievements can be recognized:

- The Aquatic Warbler is subject to a very high level of protection throughout its breeding range.
- Breeding habitats of the species are now largely protected, although sometimes the protection level is not sufficient.
- Management planning for key Aquatic Warbler breeding sites is making good progress.
- No potentially detrimental projects have been implemented at Aquatic Warbler breeding/migration/wintering sites since the Memorandum's entry into effect.
- Identification of migration and wintering sites of the Aquatic Warbler has been progressing.
- Key Aquatic Warbler breeding sites are appropriately managed (Zvanets, Dzikaje, Sporava mires in Belarus, Biebrza mire in Poland and Pripiat floodplain in Ukraine). Management planning and Aquatic Warbler targeted management will start for the sharply declining Pomeranian population of the species (Germany, Poland).
- Restoration of habitats for the Aquatic Warbler will be initiated in Belarus, Poland and Germany.
- Monitoring and research on the Aquatic Warbler in the breeding range of the species is actively implemented. There is good cooperation and networking among researchers and conservationists on the national and international level largely due to the work of BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team.
- The coverage of known and potential breeding sites by surveys is very high.
- Awareness raising and promotional campaigns have been launched. The Aquatic Warbler has been broadly publicised.
- Good progress on implementation of country-specific recommended actions has been achieved by countries within breeding range of the Aquatic Warbler.

42. Less progress has been achieved in the following fields:

- The progress to identify migration and wintering sites of the Aquatic Warbler is not yet sufficient to initiate species protection measures at these sites, or the management of its habitats at breeding and wintering grounds.
- Management planning and conservation actions at small Aquatic Warbler breeding sites has yet to be widely undertaken.
- Promotion of the Aquatic Warbler in some countries of the range has been insufficient.

43. There are also issues that raise concern:

- In Germany, there are risks due to the Lower Oder Valley National Park Act (core zone concept). There is hope that the new National Park Act will postpone establishment of the core zone at Aquatic Warbler breeding sites so that land uses critical to Aquatic Warbler habitat management may continue until substitute areas can be developed. However, the second risk (construction of the new road crossing the National Park) will remain.
- Planned implementation of water management activities – deepening of the riverbed and construction of dykes – in Pripiat floodplain poses a potential threat to the most important Aquatic Warbler breeding sites in Ukraine.
- Belgium's most important stopover site, the decantation pits of Veurne, is threatened by the stopping of the land use.