

Nature Conservation in Europe: Approaches and Lessons

Annex LT.1. Population Recovery Project for the Globally Threatened Migratory Aquatic Warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*) in Lithuania

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An example of a particularly successful population recovery project¹ is the ‘Stepping stones towards ensuring long-term favourable conservation status of Aquatic Warbler in Lithuania’ project (LIFE MagniDucatusAcrola)². This focussed on the globally threatened long-distance migrant Aquatic Warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*) in Žuvintas Biosphere Reserve and in Nemunas Delta Regional Park. The project was initiated by NGO BEF (Baltic Environment Forum) and also involved leading species conservation scientists from an international working group on species conservation as well as Cambridge University, Greifswald University, the Institute of Avian Ecology and the UK Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

As conservation translocations of the Aquatic Warbler have never been carried out before, the primary aim of the project was to test the methodology and assess its effectiveness and applicability as a species conservation tool. The initiative benefited the Žuvintas Biosphere Reserve, where the population was incapable of recovering naturally because only a few males were present. Pilot translocations took place in 2018, and again in 2019, with 50 young birds brought each year from Zvaniec fen mire (Belarus) and raised in Žuvintas. This increased the population such that 33 singing male birds were found in Žuvintas Biosphere Reserve in 2020, compared to 1–8 before the translocation. Scientists also recorded the highest ever number of Aquatic Warblers in Lithuania, which indicates the success of the conservation efforts and good prospects for a national population recovery, beyond the Žuvintas Biosphere Reserve. National monitoring in 2020 revealed 316 individual birds, which amounts to an 84% increase since 2017.

The translocation method³ may also be appropriate in other areas where bird populations are incapable of naturally recovering, and can help avoid the complete disappearance of species.

Farmers who participate in agri-environment schemes targeted for the protection of the Aquatic Warbler, have to delay grass mowing (as late as 15 August). This results in poor quality grass that cannot be used for feeding livestock. This was addressed in the ‘Stepping stones’ project by setting up a biomass processing plant that can use the late-grown grass to produce useful products, such as animal bedding. As the primary objective of the biomass processing plant is to protect the environment, it only takes biomass for processing from farming areas where this is compatible with nature conservation requirements.

The Aquatic Warbler conservation project was among the finalists of Natura 2000 awards announced by the European Commission (2020)⁴ (one of the best projects in the category related to socio-economic benefits for society).

¹ <https://meldine.lt/en/> or

https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/life/publicWebsite/index.cfm?fuseaction=search.dspPage&n_proj_id=5853

² LIFE NAT/LT/001024 (duration 07/07/2016 – 31/01/2023)

³ https://meldine.lt/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/07/Meldine_factsheet_A4_ENG_preview.compressed.pdf

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/awards/previous-editions/2020-edition/finalists/html/index.html>

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