

This special issue of "Die Vogelwelt – Beiträge zur Vogelkunde" is dedicated to our colleague and friend Prof. Dr. Andrzej Dyrzcz, initiator and forerunner of the Aquatic Warbler research in the Polish Biebrza marshes, with cordial wishes for his 65th birthday.

Preface

The Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*, which up to the mid-1990s was known as a breeding bird only from very few localities in the world, is the most threatened passerine bird species of continental Europe. It is classified as "vulnerable" at the global and as "endangered" at the European level. Despite these facts, and although the breeding biology and the extraordinary mating system of the species have been intensively studied by a Polish-German research team for more than 15 years (see SCHULZE-HAGEN *et al.*, this issue), our knowledge about the world population size, distribution, population trend and current threats was surprisingly poor up to the early 1990s. But times are changing rapidly: We can now state that the Aquatic Warbler has developed from a fairly poorly known species to one of the best studied breeding birds in Europe. Knowledge especially about distribution, European range, habitat selection, diet, population size, trend and threats has increased drastically during the 1990s. These exciting developments are documented in this issue. A large part of the data presented has not been published before and represents the very recent situation of the species (data of the 1998 breeding season are included), which has to be judged as absolutely critical from a conservation point of view.

Comprehensive survey, monitoring and conservation activities, which already existed in Poland and Hungary, were initiated in 1995/96 in Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Lithuania, leading to the foundation of the "Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team" (AWCT) in 1998. The AWCT is a free expert group, which was established to elaborate a proposal for an update of the EU Aquatic Warbler Species Action Plan (see paper of AWCT in this issue). In the group, experts from all seven countries within the breeding range of the species are co-operating to exchange data, information and experiences (for details see "News" at the end of this issue). The AWCT is funded and supported by the *Royal Society for the Protection of Birds* and works under the auspices of *BirdLife International*.

But studying and protecting the Aquatic Warbler is more than caring about a small, poorly known bird: it is connected with its unique habitat, the European fen mires, their beautiful landscape and fa-

scinating wildlife, and the whole problem of mire destruction, drainage, peat excavation, abandoning of traditional pastoral farming in huge areas, increasing economical and social problems in the rural regions of Central and Eastern Europe and finally with the emission of huge amounts of CO₂ into the atmosphere, contributing to the global problem of climate change.

Moreover, the fast development and intensive work of the past four years has changed the views of many of us. We learned, for instance, how poor our knowledge is about a key nature conservation issue right in the geographical center of Europe, how important and effective a small bird can be in helping to change non-sustainable land-use policies, and what the nearly hopeless problems are to find an un conspicuous warbler under field conditions in the endless expanses of Russia. But at the end, hopes are rising that this endangered species and its unique habitat can be saved for the future.

All of this was only possible thanks to the help of some very special colleagues: first, our "malinki drug" (little friend), the Aquatic Warbler, who brought us together and was the reason and flagship for all activities documented here; second, our "bolshoj drug", the German business man Michael Otto and his foundation for environmental protection, who funded all initial surveys as well as conservation and monitoring work, and was the forerunner for the growing group of sponsors and supporters, which include: The British Darwin Initiative, BirdLife/Vogelbescherming Nederland, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), EURONATUR, the Ministry for Natural Resources and Environment Protection of the Republic of Belarus, the Danish government etc.; finally, not to be forgotten, our "zholty drug" (yellow friend), who helped us in our desperate defence against the innumerable army of mosquitos. We hope that this special issue of VOGELWELT will find the interest of a broad international readership.

Martin Flade, Co-editor of "DIE VOGELWELT – Beiträge zur Vogelkunde" and chairman of the Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team.