

BirdLife Partners are LIFE masters!

Title

Each year, the European Commission evaluates all completed projects funded through the LIFE programme and this year, 4 out of the 11 Best LIFE Nature projects receiving the award have been implemented by BirdLife partners. Tomorrow, an award ceremony will be held in Brussels where the leading BirdLife Partners, OTOP (Poland), the RSPB (UK), BirdLife Finland, HOS (Greece) and SPEA (Portugal) will receive an award.

Iván Ramírez, Head of Conservation at BirdLife Europe stresses ?It is an extremely important recognition for our partnership, 2013 was a difficult year for conservation, but even more for our BirdLife Partners that fought the financial crisis without weakening their conservation objectives. These four awards are just another example of their incredible work.?

OTOP (BirdLife in Poland) and the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) joined forces in the ?Aquatic Warbler? project aiming to improve the conservation status of the Aquatic Warbler, at the edge of global extinction.

Europe hosts 99% of the global population of the Vulnerable **Aquatic Warbler** and Poland is a critical habitat for their survival, being its second-largest population stronghold. During the past century, this species experienced a steep decline due to the drainage of its territories for agriculture. The Aquatic Warbler LIFE project, spanning from 2005 to 2011, sought to stabilise populations at key sites (totally 4,200 ha) in Poland and Germany through the enlargement of suitable habitats and improvements to their condition. The project resulted in increasing populations of the bird species and the re-occupation of restored habitats. New management and enforcement plans are now in place and the future of the species is secured thanks to the project ?Facilitating Aquatic Warbler habitat management through sustainable systems of biomass use.?

?Kokemäenjoki - From Ancient to the Present Estuary, Kokemäenjoki Wetland Chain? , a BirdLife Finland project aiming to restore natural sites on the River Kokemäenjoki.

The purpose of the Kokemäenjoki project, started in 2006 by BirdLife Finland, was to restore five valuable natural sites on the **River Kokemäenjoki**, including eight Natura 2000 areas. Mowing and excavation were used to prevent overgrowth and preserve the wetlands that were at risk of becoming marshy and overgrown, causing the loss of valuable species. The area was also managed by cultivating and furrowing the reed roots, imitating the effects of being trampled by cattle, which has proven to be very effective at other similar sites. Birdwatching towers and information boards were put up and a number of nature trails were

laid to increase awareness of the incredible natural value of the area. Finally, management and land use plans were developed to ensure future sustainable use of the site for both conservation and recreational activities.

BirdLife Greek and Portuguese Partners complete the project ?Concrete Conservation Actions for the Mediterranean Shag and Audouin?s gull in Greece?.

This project, run by HOS (BirdLife in Greece) and SPEA (BirdLife in Portugal), focused on improving the conservation status and breeding performance of **Audouin?s Gull** and **Mediterranean Shag**, which inhabit the Aegean Sea and Ionian Sea areas of Greece. The project actions addressed the most relevant threats for the conservation of these two species, namely, rat predation, gull competition and commercial fishing activities that cause accidental birdcatch. Specific actions at project sites included the complete removal of all rats from five Natura 2000 sites, the modification of fishing gear and/or fishing regulations to reduce seabird bycatch and the pilot implementation of control measures to reduce Yellow-legged gull populations, a competitor for food and nesting sites. As a parallel result, 41 marine Important Bird Areas (IBAs) were identified and will be included in the Greek Natura 2000 network, securing their protection as a necessary step to avoid habitat loss and degradation. The project was of utmost importance for seabird and marine conservation in the Eastern Mediterranean; it improved critical habitats, allowed for better seabird breeding sites and created a model that could be easily repeated by neighboring countries.

SPEA and RSPB receive a second award for the project ?Safe Islands for Seabirds?.

The **Azores islands** used to be the home of millions of breeding seabirds, but today most of these colonies have decreased drastically as a result of introduced predators and invasive exotic plant species. Started in 2009 and focusing on Corvo (the smallest of all Azorean islands) and Vila Franca islet, this project worked towards the conservation of seabird colonies in the Azores, through habitat restoration and control and eradication of invasive alien species. It also built the first ?pest-proof fence? in Europe, following successful experiences carried out in other remote areas such as the Hawaiian islands and New Zealand. As part of a wider restoration plan, several tests evaluating the chances of making Corvo an alien-free island were also implemented. The future of the pest-free fenced zone will be secured thanks to a management protocol signed into place by SPEA and the local authorities.

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