

A brighter future for Europe's rarest migratory songbird

Title

Aquatic Warbler, the rarest and the only globally threatened passerine bird in mainland Europe, is facing a brighter future thanks to six years of intensive work within a LIFE project (part financed by the European Commission), coordinated by OTOP (BirdLife in Poland). Swarovski Optik, Cemex Poland and the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) kindly agreed to co-finance the other part of the € 5 million project. Aquatic Warbler belongs to a very special habitat characterised by peatlands fed by groundwater, called 'fen mires'. Protecting this bird by restoring its habitat means at the same time to improve the conservation for other rare species that also live in fen mires, explains Lars Lachmann, the project coordinator working at the same time for OTOP and for the RSPB, also partner in the project. In the last century, all but a very few fen mires have been drained for agriculture or peat extraction, causing a catastrophic decline in Aquatic Warbler populations, and led to classify them as globally threatened. A quarter of the global population has survived in Eastern Poland, and a small and isolated group of Aquatic Warbler has found refuge along the Polish-German border. But today, the vegetation on the few remaining fen mires is changing, and the elements composing the bird habitats are disappearing, and with them, Aquatic Warbler and several breeding waders like Black-tailed Godwit, Common Redshank and Northern Lapwing. Even the establishment of National Parks, has not been able to invert this tendency. The objective of the project led by OTOP has been to develop a landscape-scale solution for the restoration and the sustainable management of peatlands (fen mires). On the pilotsites, OTOP introduced a prototype mowing machine that does not destroy the delicate peat soil and vegetation. More than 30 of these machines now maintain 15,000 ha of Aquatic Warbler habitat in Poland and this successful technique has already been exported to Germany and Belarus. OTOP has also implemented suitable agri-environment schemes, paying farmers for Aquatic Warbler friendly management, rehabilitating three national reserves, and supporting the idea that National Parks should lease out their lands needing active management to farmers using the new machines. Currently, OTOP and its partners are setting up a system to convert the large amounts of low-quality hay harvested on those lands into carbon-neutral biomass briquettes and pellets, permitting to protect the climate, to finance habitat restoration and management for Aquatic Warbler, and at the same time to create local green activities and employments. We are very pleased to see the return of large numbers of waders, including Jack Snipe and Wood Sandpiper not seen in Poland for over 10 years, but the key success of this LIFE Project is of course that Aquatic Warbler is readily returning to the areas we have restored for

it. welcomed Lars Lachmann. The € 5 million project has been implemented with funds from the EU LIFE Nature Programme. Additional co-financing was provided by the RSPB, Swarovski Optik and Cemex Poland.
