

## A6.100 Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*

### 1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status	Conservation status
Breeding		Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 <b>General Protection</b>	Species of European Conservation Concern <b>SPEC 1</b> Global conservation concern ( <b>endangered</b> )
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 <b>General Protection</b>	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance <b>Table 1</b>
Wintering		EC Birds Directive 1979 <b>Annex I</b> <b>Migratory</b>	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book

### 2. Population data

	Population sizes (individuals)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
<b>GB</b>	67	1	47 (70% of GB total)
<b>Ireland</b>			
<b>Biogeographic population</b>	11,220	112	47 (0.4% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: English Nature unpublished

Biogeographic population source: Tucker & Heath 1994

### 3. Distribution

Aquatic Warblers have a highly restricted global distribution that is confined to eastern Europe. They breed in extensive reed-swamps between 50° E and 60° E, from eastern Germany to the River Ob in western Siberia (Cramp 1992; Hagemeyer & Blair 1997). The population winters in west Sahelian wetlands, from Senegal and Mali, to Ghana (Hagemeyer & Blair 1997), although the exact location of the wintering area(s) remains unknown. The species is monotypic.

The extent of suitable breeding habitat, *i.e.* large, undisturbed reed-swamps, has been greatly diminished by large-scale drainage.

Despite their eastern European breeding distribution, many Aquatic Warblers migrate west or south-west in autumn en route to wintering areas in western Africa. This brings them into north-west Europe before they turn south through France and Iberia. Observations in Great Britain show that they are virtually restricted to reedbed habitats during their migration through Europe. Accordingly, small numbers of birds occur in southern England every autumn, mostly as drift migrants. Consequently, the UK passage population is very small and at the edge of the species' range, although several sites have a long history of occurrence. All regular passage sites are in England, concentrated on the south coast. On autumn passage, Aquatic Warblers occupy damp habitats with rushes (*Scirpus* and *Juncus* spp.).

#### **4. Population structure and trends**

The Aquatic Warbler is classified as Globally Threatened (Collar *et al.* 1994) due to its small world population and anticipated further declines due to habitat loss. In fact the species is one of only three globally threatened birds that regularly occur in Great Britain.

The period 1970 to 1990 has seen declining numbers in most of the remaining central European populations and the current population in Europe is possibly as few as 3,740 singing males, although the upper limit of estimations is 18,000 singing males (Tucker & Heath 1994). No quantitative data are available to determine the magnitude of the decline which is thought to be largely the result of habitat loss due to land drainage for agriculture and industrial development, as well as the abandonment of traditional farming practices (Tucker & Heath 1994).

In Europe, the Aquatic Warbler has become extinct as a breeding species in the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Slovakia, Austria, France and The Netherlands since 1930 (Tucker & Heath 1994).

Historically, very few quantitative data exist for Aquatic Warblers passing through the UK in autumn. However, the number of records has greatly increased since 1950 and the species ceased to be considered as an official rarity by the British Birds Rarities Committee in 1982 (Grant & the BBRC 1982). The increase in records is likely to be a result of greater observer coverage and, particularly, of ringing effort. The autumn passage population of Aquatic Warblers in Great Britain is estimated to be 67 birds, based on 1997 figures, although this number is based on casual observations supplemented by ringing records at a limited proportion of sites, so is likely to be an underestimate.

Numbers passing through the UK in any given year are primarily determined by the prevailing weather conditions in August and September. South-easterly winds are liable to push birds that would otherwise migrate over the European continent across the English Channel. Like other migrant passerines, Aquatic Warblers are more likely to pause suitable habitat if they encounter inclement weather during migration. Thus, the species is more likely to be recorded in adverse conditions than during fine weather.

On return migration to breeding areas in spring, Aquatic Warblers are thought to take a more easterly route across Europe, using inland wetlands as staging areas. Consequently, there are very few spring records for those sites along the southern English coast where the species occurs regularly in autumn. There is, however, a general paucity of data concerning both autumn and spring migration routes and habitat requirements (Heredia 1996).

#### **5. Protection measures for population in UK**

##### **SPA suite**

In the autumn passage period, the UK's SPA suite for Aquatic Warbler supports, on average about 47 individuals. This is thought to amount to about 70% of the British population at this season<sup>1</sup>. There are no records of Aquatic Warblers migrating through Northern Ireland. In the autumn passage period, the SPA suite is thought to support about 0.4% of the international population. The suite comprises three sites on the south coast of England (Table 6.100.1).

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<sup>1</sup> Calculation of site totals and population coverage for migrating Aquatic Warblers is problematic. Assessment of total numbers using any site is difficult owing to turnover as birds move through. Additionally, the national total (although based on the best available data) is probably imprecise for the same reasons. The site totals and proportions presented here should thus be regarded as indicative rather than exact.

Aquatic Warblers depend on the availability of large areas of reedbed habitat for feeding prior to autumn migration and at staging points along the course of the route to their wintering areas. They use these staging points to feed and rest in order to replenish their fat reserves, before commencing the long flight over the sea to France or Spain.

#### **Other measures**

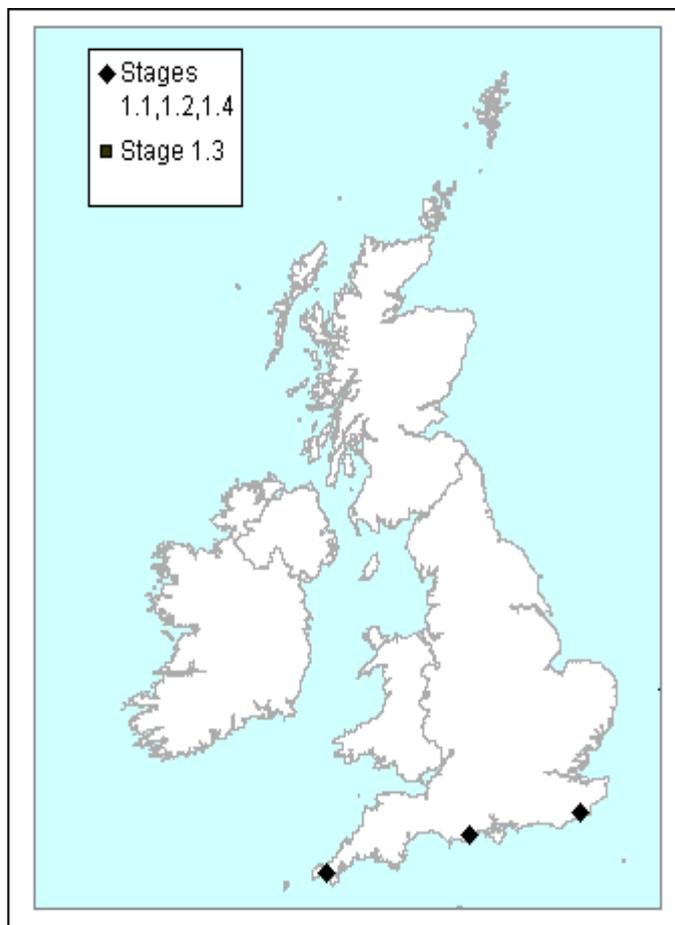
A Biodiversity Action Plan has been drafted for this species (Biodiversity Steering Group 1995) and is being implemented as part of the UK's national response to the Biodiversity Convention.

#### **6. Classification criteria**

All sites in the UK known to support more than 1% of the national total of Aquatic Warblers during autumn migration were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements. All three SPAs (Dungeness to Pett Level; Poole Harbour; and Marazion Marsh) are multi-species sites lying respectively on the eastern, central and western parts of the English south coast.

Monitoring of Aquatic Warblers has improved in recent years – they are known to have occurred at Dungeness to Pett Levels every autumn since at least 1989 (James 1996), and at Poole Harbour every autumn since 1991 (Taylor 1992).

#### **Distribution map for passage Aquatic Warbler SPA suite**



**Table 6.100.1 – SPA suite**

<b>Site name</b>	<b>Site total</b>	<b>% of biogeographical population</b>	<b>% of national population</b>	<b>Selection stage</b>
Dungeness to Pett Level	30	0.3	45	1.1
Marazion Marsh	6	<0.1	9	1.1
Poole Harbour	11	0.1	16	1.1
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>0.4%</b>	<b>70%</b>	