

PROJECT PROGRESS UPDATE (December 2008)

Demonstration Project: Nemunas River Delta, Lithuania

Prepared by the WOW Project Coordination Unit
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The newly launched website of the WOW/IEVU team in Lithuania www.ekoi.lt/info/wowlit provides a comprehensive overview, pictures and more details on the status of activities at this WOW demo site that started in March 2007.

Significant progress was made towards all planned results. A new Bird Observatory was inaugurated on Rusne island, located on the State border between Lithuania and Russia. The renovated facilities include a laboratory and meeting room, plus basic accommodation for visiting researchers on migratory waterbirds and the ecology of the Nemunas Delta. This newly operational facility will be managed by the IEVU and will facilitate collaborative research, training and exchange of experience with neighbouring countries that share the Nemunas river. The centre will also host community meetings and awareness events, to boost the local community's understanding of the importance of the Delta and its biodiversity, as a basis for sound and environment-friendly economic development.

A new monitoring scheme was set up in 2007/2008 to improve our understanding of important concentrations of waterbirds in the Nemunas River Delta. The scheme has already enabled the designation of all important areas in the Nemunas River Delta Regional park during spring, autumn migration, and moulting period. On the basis of this improved knowledge of key bird staging areas, a special management plan - for the Delta's flood plains - is now being implemented, so that migratory waterbirds can stay in their favourite habitats even longer.

The WOW/IEVU team in Lithuania contributed to raising awareness on the conservation importance of the Nemunas Delta by organizing the international seminar "The Nemunas River Delta - internationally important bird area" on 24-25 October 2008. Together with participants from 8 countries and several international organisations the conservation of the globally threatened bird species and management of the cross-border Nemunas River delta and the entire river basin were discussed. The results of the workshop underscored the willingness of all participants to joint forces to safeguard this complex critical site for migratory birds.

A new observation tower and route for visitors has been established and officially opened in May 2008 at the Ventes Ragas bird-ringing station. From May until October 2008 more than 30,000 visitors used the new facility! With the newly established route in Ventes Ragas peninsula, tourists can now enjoy and learn about the beauty of this important bird area without disturbing the important ringing work being conducted at the Ventes Ragas station. A look from the new observation tower gives a view over important staging sites in the Curonian Lagoon and all the waterbirds they inhabit.

The newly established eco-tourism facilities were used successfully during two large scale events called 'Bird Days' (aimed to observe migratory birds during autumn passage) and 'Bird Rally' (targeted to record all bird species in a specially designated route), implemented together with the Lithuanian Ornithological Society (BirdLife-Lithuania).

With more than 3,000 participants joining these public events in 2007-2008 and a lot of media attention, the events can be regarded as a flying success.

Large stretches of natural open habitats with the characteristics preferred by certain waterbirds were restored in July-August 2008. Cutting shrubs, bushes and dense reed in overgrowing meadows cleared up the 30 ha large area in the Rupkalviai Ornithological Reserve, allowing the increase of numbers of waterbirds like swans, geese, ducks and waders and globally threatened species like Corncrake *Crex crex* and Great Snipe *Gallinago media*. In September 2008 already an increase was seen: The number of staging waders (Lapwings, Dunlins, Roofs) counted per day in restored sites with adjacent areas increased from 0 to 700 and the number of staging geese (Greylag and White-fronted Geese) increased from 0 to 1,600! From now on, cattle belonging to local farmers will help keep the habitats open.

Preparations for a new publication on the biodiversity and conservation of the Nemunas Delta National Park have already started and in April 2009 the special illustrated publication highlighting the importance of the Nemunas River Delta as internationally important area for migratory birds will be published.

This report was prepared by the WOW Project Coordination Unit (PCU) and is based on project reporting documentation and personal accounts made during visits to the WOW Demonstration Site.

For more information please visit the Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) Project Website:
www.wingsoverwetlands.org

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