

Executive Summary

This book presents the new and up-dated list of Important Bird Areas in Latvia, and is the third national inventory published by Latvian Ornithological Society (BirdLife partner in Latvia) since the start of IBA programme in 1994. The new list builds on the previous national IBA inventory (Račinskis & Stipniece 2000) largely supplemented by results of the so called Emerald project carried out during 2001-2004, and identifies Important Bird Areas of the European Union importance selected by using C level criteria, applied for the first time in Latvia. The review is very timely given the recent EU enlargement on May 1, 2004, and the consequent adoption of the Birds Directive by the new member states – including Latvia.

After a brief summary on the concept of Important Bird Areas (p. 9) and a guide to this book's site account structure (pp. 10-11), methods and materials used for compilation of this inventory are presented (p. 15). Detailed information on the current IBA list is covered by Chapters 4 and 5. There are summaries in English for all main chapters in this book as well as for each site account. The survey of nature territories during the last four years, the data of which was used for this inventory, covered only inland sites. Marine territories identified earlier were retained on the list but their site accounts and maps were omitted from this publication. The current IBA inventory only applies the IBA C level criteria to bird population data. Compilation and publication of this IBA inventory was generously funded by the RSPB (BirdLife partner in the UK), with continuous help and guidance provided by Zoltán Waliczky.

In total, 71 Important Bird Areas have been identified in Latvia (Fig. 4-2, Table 4-1), 64 of those are inland territories with a total of 534,056 hectares comprising 8.3% of the country's land surface. The other seven areas are marine territories with a total coverage of ca. 339,470 hectares of the Baltic sea waters. In comparison with the previous national IBA inventory (Račinskis & Stipniece 2000), the total number of the inland IBAs has increased by 10 sites with their total extent increasing two-fold by 274,368 ha (Fig. 4-3). All marine IBAs have remained unmodified, as the application of the BirdLife IBA criteria at sea are still under development. Significant changes to the IBA list have been imposed by the first-time application of the C level criteria for selection of Important Bird Areas of European Union importance. Five former IBAs were merged to form two new territories, one IBA was split into two separate territories and 19 new territories were identified. Seven former sites are no longer considered as IBAs and have been deleted from the current list. Comparison of the IBA codes, names and status changes since the second European IBA inventory (Heath & Evans 2000) and the latest national IBA inventory is presented in Appendix 3.

Six out of seven C level criteria (C1-C6) were used to select IBAs in Latvia. About a half of all IBAs qualify under one criterion (Table 4-7). C6 criterion is the most frequently used, allowing for the qualification of

51 IBAs (Fig. 4-5; see Appendix 4 for a detailed summary). One third of all IBAs in Latvia qualify for populations of one bird species, with the majority of sites being important for one to three species (Fig. 4-6). All IBAs have records of one to 35 other important (Birds Directive Annex 1) bird species (Fig. 4-7). All sites and populations for every qualifying species are listed in Appendix 5. IBAs were selected for 59 bird species. Forty-nine of these are listed in the Annex I of EC Birds Directive, the other 10 being regularly occurring migratory or wintering species (Table 4-8). At least 17 more Annex I species occur in the identified areas but are not used for site selection. Most sites are qualified by breeding bird species. As expected, populations of less abundant and more habitat specialist species have larger proportional coverage by IBAs (see also Fig. 4-11).

Forests dominate as a habitat group in the inland IBAs, followed by wetlands as the second most common habitat (Figs. 4-12 and 4-13). An overview of coverage of all inland IBAs by the six main habitat groups is presented in Appendix 7. Detailed data on particular CORINE Land Cover habitat types and their areas is given for each inland site in Chapter 5, in tables within site accounts.

All 64 inland Important Bird Areas in Latvia are at least partially covered by national Specially Protected Nature Territories (SPNTs) and potential Natura 2000 territories. The total IBA surface area covered by five different categories of SPNTs is 503,833 ha (94.3%). Fifty IBAs (78% of all inland sites) have high protection level with more than 90% of their area protected. All IBAs but one have at least 75% of their territory protected. This represents a major improvement in the protection level of IBAs since the previous IBA inventory, largely due to the site survey and designation activities by the Emerald project. The relative protection level for inland IBAs has increased from 71% to 94.3%, while the absolute protected area increase has been even bigger: from 183,119 ha in 2000 to 503,833 ha in 2004 (+64%). All six wetlands of international importance designated in Latvia under Ramsar Convention overlap largely with IBAs (Table 4-12).

The main threats to woodland IBAs are forest harvesting, including logging by clear-cuts (operating even into parts of nationally protected IBAs), restoration and development of drainage and road networks. Natural raised bogs are most negatively affected by extensive drainage networks, resulting in fragmentation and loss of open bog habitats through lowered water levels. Some IBAs suffer direct degradation by active peat extraction. Hunting of migratory geese at their night-time roosting sites in autumn within IBAs is causing disturbance. Overgrowing by trees and shrubs due to abandonment is a serious threat to many grassland sites. The main future directions of IBA programme in Latvia are laid out along the following main lines: survey and monitoring, protection and management, communication and awareness focusing on IBAs.