On 22-24 May 2002, about 140 specialists from Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and other countries, including representatives of several international organisations and conservation NGOs, gathered in Minsk, the capital of the Republic of Belarus, for the second international conference on the ecology and conservation of floodplains and lowland mires in the Polesie region, exactly five years after the first conference on this topic in May 1997. The Polesie region is shared among Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine - the Pripyat river forms its central artery, flowing eastwards to enter the Dniepr soon after crossing the Ukrainian border near ill-starred Tchernobyl. While more than one million hectares of the Polesie area were drained between 1966 and 1990, large parts of the Pripyat floodplain are still exposed to the natural flooding regime. This created habitats such as alluvial oak forests, wet meadows and lowland fen mires. The land is used for hay making, pasture and fishing and is extremely rich in biodiversity. The floodplains of the Pripyat and its tributaries hold the largest part of the remaining population of the aquatic warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*), a small, globally threatened, wetland songbird. To illustrate the extent and importance of the Pripyat floodplain, it can be safely said that it comes second in Europe only to wetland areas such as the Danube Delta or the Waddensea.

In 1995, a first Belarus-German ornithological expedition explored the vast floodplain, most parts of which are only accessible by helicopter during flood events, and put the Pripyat on the conservation map. APB-BirdLife Belarus (created in 1998) joined up with specialists of the National Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of Belarus. They have since been supported by RSPB, the BirdLife partner in the UK, and the United Nations office in Belarus. The UK Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species and the Michael Otto Foundation for Environmental Protection (Germany) provided financial support to prepare, amongst other activities, management plans for three fen mires that are now ready for implementation.

Belarus joined the Ramsar Convention in 1999 and has since declared three Ramsar Sites: the Sporovo fen mire in the Yaselda floodplain (a tributary to Pripyat), the Olmany mires, and the Mid-Pripyat landscape protected area, covering together over 200,000 ha. In his opening statement, First Deputy Minister Vasily Podolyako announced that another three wetland sites are ready for Ramsar designation in 2002. With the help of OMPO, the Paris-based NGO supporting conservation projects along the migratory bird flyways in the Western Palearctic and West Africa, the Institute of Zoology of the National Academy of Sciences identified yet another 15 potential Ramsar Sites in Belarus. One of them is Kotra mire, adjacent to the Lithuanian Ramsar Site Cepkeliai mire. Together with other transboundary wetland areas in Belarus, Lithuania and Kaliningrad (Russian Federation), these sites are currently benefiting from a Ramsar Small Grants Fund project, managed by the OMPO office in Vilnius, to prepare for efficient transboundary management.

During the conference, several UNDP-GEF projects were presented as well. First, the project to conserve the globally significant biodiversity in the Pripyat floodplain through wetland management and protection of key sites, as a follow-up to the current Darwin Initiative project. Then, the project for the ecological rehabilitation of the Dnipro/Dniepr basin, linking conservation actions with hydrological rehabilitation and extending the local approach in the Pripyat floodplain to the wider Polesie region. UNESCO's Man and Biosphere programme is developing a transboundary eastern European model of a regional ecological network for the trilateral Polesie region, in view of its integration into the Pan-European Ecological Network. The GEF projet for the conservation, restoration and wise use of degraded peatlands in Belarus addresses yet another important issue, namely, Belarus's vast area of peatlands - exploited, degraded or still nearly pristine. Professor Michael Succow, of Greifswald University (Germany), made a thought-provoking reflection on the global importance of mire conservation. He presented ideas for sustainable use of mires that should replace current
damaging drainage and exploitation schemes. Alder trees (*Alnus*), reed (*Phragmites, Typha, Schoenoplectus*) and grasses (*Glyceria, Phalaris*), growing on restored mires, can provide sustainable resources (3-25 t/ha) for furniture, fuel, insulation, and livestock grazing. Advanced peatbog restoration techniques allow now regular yields of white peat (*Sphagnum mosses*) that can be sustained. Experiments are being conducted to these ends in eastern Germany on an area of 150,000 ha.

A highlight of the conference was the launch of the book “*Treasures of Belarusian Nature*” presenting with clear text (in English and Belarusian) conservation data and numerous brilliant photographs of 24 areas of international significance for the conservation of biological diversity in Belarus (obtainable from APB-BirdLife Belarus, dimago@mail.ru). Another highlight was the first showing of the nature film “*Pripyat - the Radiant River*” by Professor Mathias Freude from Germany. After adopting a resolution and a seven point action programme for the conservation of the Polesie floodplains and fen mires and the closing banquet, on 25 May, the conference participants traveled south to visit the Mid-Pripyat Ramsar Site during a 5-hour boat trip on the meandering river between Turov and Mokrovo with a few stopovers in the extensive grazing meadows. Despite a looming thunderstorm, exciting the numerous mosquitos and midges under the heavy sky, the participants were happy to grasp at least a small glimpse of the impressive landscape. The partners in wetland conservation in the Polesie region, from Belarus and abroad, are to be congratulated for their impressive achievements in little time, their efficient cooperation, and the organization of this perfect meeting.

-- reported by Tobias Salathé, Ramsar Bureau

Minsk town: View of an old part along the shores of Svisloch river in the centre of Minsk, the 2-million capital of the Republic of Belarus.
Pripyat and flag: View over the river in the Mid-Pripyat Ramsar Site.

Pripyat anglers: Leisure angling along the Pripyat shore has become a popular passtime for Belarus citizen, locals and those coming from more distant cities.
Pripyat experts: Neil Buhne (UN resident coordinator in Belarus), German interpreter, Dr Norbert Schäffer (RSPB), Dr Martin Flade (Michael Otto Foundation) and Dr Alexander Kozulin (Academy of Sciences and APB) discuss wetland management in the Pripyat reserve (from left to right).

Dr Michael Otto (Michael Otto Foundation), Prof. Michael Succow (Greifswald University), Dr Johannes Merck (Michael Otto Foundation) and Dr Martin Flade (with binoculars) in the Pripyat floodplain meadows (from left to right).
Pripyat sandbank: Natural river shores with shallow areas, sand banks and willow shrubs, providing dynamic habitats for many species of fish and birds.

Pripyat floodplain with oak forests and wet meadows.
Pripyat floodplain

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