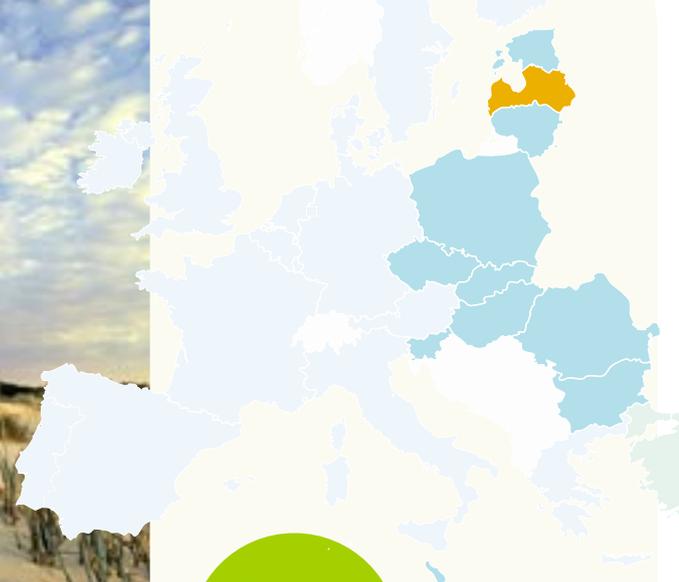




photo 1: © WWF-Canon / Edward Parker



Latvia **Baltic Beauty**

Latvia is about twice the size of Belgium and, like its Baltic neighbours, packed with flora and fauna that are rarely seen in Western Europe. Its 500-km of coastal landscapes, about half of which are relatively unspoilt, are some of Europe's greatest natural assets. Extensive wetlands cover more than 10 per cent of Latvia's land area and reed-fringed lakes, floodplains, swamp forests and rivers are home to rare plants and animals whose survival is threatened elsewhere in Europe.

Wildlife

Various species show the relatively pristine state of Latvia's wetlands and forests. As many as 4,000 **Eurasian otters** (*Lutra lutra*) can still be found in Latvian rivers. There are 200–400 **wolves** (*Canis lupus*), as well as 300–



photo 2: © WWF-Canon / Edward Parker

400 **lynxes** (*Lynx lynx*). **Beavers** (*Castor fiber*), hunted to extinction by the end of the 19th century, were successfully reintroduced to Latvia in the 20th century and now number some 80,000.

Latvia has more than 200 breeding species of birds, some of which are rare elsewhere, among them the **white-backed woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) and **lesser-spotted eagle** (*Aquila pomarina*). Populations of white storks have plummeted in much of western Europe over the past half century to the point that they are extremely rare or even extinct in many countries, but their numbers remain relatively strong in Latvia and other Baltic countries, with about 10,000 nesting pairs in Latvia alone.

From steep shores and sandstone outcrops to long sandy beaches, dunes, river estuaries, lagoons, and coastal forests, Latvia's coastal areas are internationally important as wintering sites as well as stop-overs for migratory birds. In the shallow **Gulf of Riga** alone, more than a million **long-tailed duck** (*Clangula hyernalis*) and 300,000 **velvet scoter** (*Meloniitta fusca*) have been counted during the winter months. This 12,000-km² "inland sea" also supports hundreds of thousands of wintering divers, **swans**, **diving ducks**, **mergansers**, and **auks**.

More than two thousand lakes covering 1000 km² provide feeding and breeding areas for numerous other waterfowl. Among the most biologically valuable are the shallow coastal lagoons situated along the Baltic coast. In other Baltic States, some of these

Area: 64,589 km² (about twice the size of Belgium).

Terrain: undulating plain with flat lowlands alternating with hills, with a mosaic of large forests alternating with fields, farmsteads, and pastures.

Elevation extremes: **lowest point:** Baltic Sea 0 m, **highest point:** Gaizinkalns 311.6 m.

Land use: agricultural land – 38.5%, forests – 45%, lakes and rivers – 3.7%, other – 12.8%.

Protected areas: 4 nature reserves, 3 national parks containing reserves and restricted areas, 1 biosphere reserve, 211 restricted nature areas, 22 nature parks, 6 protected landscape areas. 8.7% of Latvia's territory has been classified as specially protected areas.

Population: 2,346,000 (2002), 37 inhabitants/km².

Capital: Riga – population 788,000.

lagoons are separated from the sea only by sandpits and barrier islands and are brackish. In Latvia, the large lagoons – **Lakes Pape, Liepajas, Engure, Babites, and Kaniera** – were cut off from the sea long ago and are fresh water. The lakes and marshes are important stopovers for, among others, the **white-fronted goose** and **curlews** during their annual migration. Millions of land-dwelling birds and thousands of migratory bats travel across the area every year.



photo 2: © WWF-Canon / Edward Parker

Some of these lakes have wide floodlands covered in reed beds, wet meadows, fens, and swamp forests. The **Lake Engure** floodlands in western Latvia are home to birds such as the **Eurasian bittern** (*Botaurus stellaris*), **little bittern** (*Ixobrychus minutus*), **Slavonian grebe** (*Podiceps auritus*), **white-tailed eagle** (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), and **greylag goose** (*Anser anser*).

Forests occupy 45 per cent of Latvia's territory (compared with e.g. 59% in Finland, the most forested country in Europe, or 8% in Great Britain). Most are mixed coniferous and broadleaf, with **pine, spruce, birch, aspen,** and **black alder** being the most common species. About a quarter of Latvian forests are moist and wetland forests, which have been largely destroyed in most other European countries. Composed of black alder (*Alnus* sp.), birch (*Betula* sp.), and conifers, these "swamp" forests cover large areas of low-lying ground which are permanently or seasonally flooded. Home to more than 1,000 pairs of **black stork** (*Ciconia nigra*) – about 10% of the world population – 500 pairs of **lesser spotted eagle**, and dense populations of **woodpeckers**, Latvia's forests are a bird watcher's paradise and are rich in rare wetland plants such as **lady's slipper orchid** (*Cypripedium calceolus*) and **pale coralroot** (*Corallorhiza odontorhiza*).

Photo 1: Dunes at Lake Pape on the Baltic coast.

Photo 2: Man collecting raspberries from regenerating forest near Smiltene.

Photo 3: Raised Bog.

Conservation threats

Fifty years of Soviet rule had both positive and negative repercussions for Latvia from an environmental point of view. Under Soviet rule, all land was state-owned and large areas were depopulated, leaving much of the countryside untouched for many years. Much of the coast was restricted military area. This has left a legacy of ecosystems that are relatively unspoilt by European standards. Coastal areas are relatively untouched, not marked by the holiday homes and tourist developments found in much of the rest of Europe.

However, since independence, changes in land-tenure have often been accompanied by a complete change in land use. Land privatisation, intensification of agriculture and forestry, and the growth of tourism all pose threats to biodiversity. Latvia may be on the way to repeating mistakes already made by many western European countries.

Industrialisation under the Soviets also left a legacy of polluted streams, air, and soils in and around urban areas. The capital, Riga, is an environmental black spot, as is the port of Ventspils, site of a large petrochemical complex.

The Baltic Sea is especially vulnerable to pollution, as it is shallow and surrounded by land. The threats facing the Baltic are well documented and over the years it has suffered a number of environmental insults: overfishing of **cod** and **salmon**; oil spills (both accidental and deliberate); pollution by heavy metals and pesticides; and eutrophication caused by an excess of nutrients washed down in river systems or directly from the land.

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Useful links:

The Latvian Institute:

Website include factsheets such as Treasures of Latvian Nature and Ecotourism

www.latinst.lv

Latvia Ministry of Environment:

www.vidm.gov.lv

State of the Environment in Latvia (1998 English summary):

www.vdc.lv/soe/soe_ml1nm/index.htm

Baltic Environmental Forum:

www.bef.lv/index.htm

2nd Baltic State of the Environment Report:

www.bef.lv/baltic/baltic2/content.htm

WWF Latvia:

www.wwf.lv

Friends of the Earth Latvia:

www.vak.lv

All this has taken a heavy toll on Baltic wildlife. Fish are unable to spawn in oxygen depleted waters, sea birds die in oil slicks, and the immune systems and reproductive capacity of mammals such as seals are depressed. Populations of **ringed seal** (*Phoca hispida botnica*) and **grey seal** (*Halicoerus grypus*) in the Baltic are down from 100,000 at the turn of the 20th century to just a few thousand today, while populations of the **harbour seal** (*Phoca vitulina*) are now reduced to a few hundred individuals.