

Corncrake 1978

Title

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Description and Summary of Results

The only previous national survey of the Corncrake *Crex crex* in Britain and Ireland was organised for 1938 and 1939. This collected information on the distribution and frequency of the species. The 1968-1972 Breeding Atlas mapped the distribution in the British Isles, but again provided no more than an estimate of population size, and the map did not differentiate between those 10-km squares in which the Corncrake was still regular and those in which it was a sporadic breeder.

The Irish Wildbird Conservancy decided to carry out a full survey of the species in Ireland in 1978 and the BTO and Scottish Ornithologists' Club organised a simultaneous survey in Britain, with the main objective to estimate the current numbers and distribution. (A few important areas missed in 1978 were counted in 1979 or some 1977 counts were used.) An attempt was also made to obtain information on its recent past status and the habitats frequented.

214 contributors produced records from 260 10-km squares. Most of the main centres of the Corncrake population in Britain were well covered, though some of the remoter areas depended on visiting birdwatchers. No attempt was made to survey systematically many of the areas in Wales, northern England and mainland Scotland where the species occurred only sporadically. The number of Corncrakes missed was considered small.

The 700-712 calling Corncrakes in 160 10-km squares in Britain were considered to have at least probable breeding status. All but 12 of these were in Scotland, with the Outer and Inner Hebrides accounting for 37% and 34% of the total respectively, and Orkney 15%. Of the 88-91 birds recorded on the mainland of Scotland and the Clyde islands, 43% were in west Sutherland. Over 80% of the 10-km squares with confirmed or probable breeding had no more than five calling birds, and only 6% supported more than 15 – all in the Outer and Inner Hebrides. The highest number was 71 in one of the Tiree squares in 1977 (50 in 1979), a number twice the next highest (35 in one on North Uist). The counts on Orkney (in 1979) were probably affected (reduced) by it being one of the wettest and most sunless years on record. Allowing for this there was an estimated 730-750 calling birds of breeding status in Britain in 1978.

The range on mainland Scotland had reduced considerably in the years since the 1968-1972 atlas. On the east side, from Caithness to the English border, apparently breeding Corncrakes were reported from only 19 10-km squares compared with 88 in 1968-1972, an 89% decrease. In SW Scotland, including the Clyde islands, the figures were 20 squares compared with 67 in the *Atlas* period, a 70% decline. And even on some of the islands along the west coast the numbers had declined. Overall the number of 10-km squares with at least probable breeding in 1978-1979 was only 30% of the total occupied during the 1968-1972 Breeding Atlas.

In the parallel survey of Ireland 1062 birds were recorded giving an estimated 1200-1500 breeding pairs, also a considerable decrease since the 1968-1972 atlas period.

Over 60% of the calling Corncrakes were recorded from grass cut for hay or silage, but in the Outer Hebrides almost half the birds in May and June were in marshy areas. Over three-quarters of those recorded from meadows in Orkney and the Hebrides were in recent leys or 'improved' grass.

Methods of Data Capture

Participants were asked to survey calling birds over a block of suitable habitat and to record numbers in each 10-km grid square within the area covered. Where they occurred at relatively high densities it was recommended that the locations of birds were plotted onto a 1:50000 map. Observers were asked to give information on any nests and broods observed, but it was accepted that this would be possible only occasionally.

The majority of the survey was carried out between dusk and dawn (which in the north of Scotland in June is 2300-0200 hrs GMT) on relatively calm nights. Tape recordings were rarely used to stimulate calling. More than one visit to an area between late May and mid-July was encouraged, but if only one was possible it was considered that this was best carried out in June or even early July when territories are well established.

Birds recorded on only a single occasion in May, and not subsequently, were classed as possible breeders (conforming with the 1968-1972 atlas codes). It is known though that in areas with few birds they may even attempt to breed without advertising their presence vocally.

Observers were asked to record the habitat from which Corncrakes were calling, classed as: a) mown grass, differentiating where possible between the more recent leys, fairly 'natural' meadows (permanent grass) and those which had been 'improved' by the introduction of sown grasses and clover; b) marshes, including damp fields; c) rough and rank vegetation on banks, verges and waste ground; and d) other habitat such as cereal crops. Some more detailed habitat information was obtained on some of the islands by professionals and these data are incorporated in the published report.

Purpose of Data Capture

To estimate the numbers and distribution of the Corncrake in Britain.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain, in practice primarily the north and northwest of Scotland. (Ireland was covered by a parallel survey run by the Irish Wildbird Conservancy at the same time.)

Temporal Coverage

The fieldwork was done largely in 1978 but for a few important areas not covered in 1978 counts in 1977 or 1979 were used: Tiree (Inner Hebrides) – an average of the 1977 and 1979 counts; Iona – a 1977 count; Orkney – fieldwork in 1979.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run jointly with the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. A parallel survey was organised in Ireland by the Irish Wildbird Conservancy (now known as BirdWatch Ireland).

James Cadbury organised the survey while employed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds who gave him sabbatical leave to survey the Outer Hebrides.

Organiser(s)

James Cadbury

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Cadbury, C.J. 1980. The status and habitats of the Corncrake in Britain 1978-79. *Bird Study* 27: 203-218.

The survey was noticed in *BTO News* numbers 92 and 98.

The Irish survey carried out at the same time was reported in:

O'Meara, M. 1979. Distribution and numbers of Corncrakes in Ireland in 1978. *Irish Birds* 1: 381-405.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

1 Transfer Case containing a summary of the data and some letters. The original data are assumed to be at RSPB.

Notes on Access and Use

Other information

Notes on Survey Design

Specific Issues for Analysis