

Chough 1982

Title

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Description and Summary of Results

Through the 1970s there was general agreement that the Chough *Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax* was declining in numbers and used to be much more widespread, but the species had never been surveyed specifically in Britain and Ireland. There had been a few isolated regional surveys, but the only comprehensive census in 1963, undertaken by enthusiastic volunteers, was always questioned as to its accuracy. Hence, whether the population was increasing, stable or in decline remained uncertain.

Historically the species certainly declined in the 18th and 19th centuries and continued to do so with, for example, the last "Cornish Chough" proven to breed in 1947. The 1963 census found 700-800 breeding pairs in Britain and Ireland, with the latter holding an estimated total of 567-682 pairs. But there is no doubt that coverage was not complete despite heroic efforts by the few volunteers who undertook fieldwork. At that time too, little was known about the part played by non-breeders in the population, and in some cases figures based on post-breeding flocks almost certainly overestimated numbers of breeding pairs. A reanalysis of the results brought the 1963 total in Ireland down to 400-477 breeding pairs, but including areas not covered (most inland areas, plus some coastal sections, especially in Co. Kerry), brought the total back up.

The 1963 Welsh total (99-104 pairs) is considered to be reasonably accurate, but the Manx and Scottish figures for 1963 were almost certainly underestimates.

In 1982, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, BTO and Irish Wildbird Conservancy (now BirdWatch Ireland) organised an international survey, to determine the current breeding numbers and distribution in Britain and Ireland and to collect data on habitat types within the main breeding areas. A survey of the Brittany population was organised simultaneously by members of La Société pour l'Étude et la Protection de la Nature en Bretagne (SEPNB).

A total of 905 breeding pairs was counted in Britain and Ireland during the survey. This is a minimum, representing probable plus definite breeding pairs. A further 54 pairs possibly bred, and allowing for pairs that may have been missed (eg in Irish areas visited only once), a figure of around 1000 pairs can represent an upper limit for the British and Irish population. The bulk of these were in Ireland (656-685 pairs), with 139-142 pairs in Wales, 61-72 in Scotland and 49-60 pairs in the Isle of Man. In addition, 825-858 non-breeding Choughs were found.

The distribution in 1982 was almost exactly as shown in the 1968-1972 atlas. This recorded Choughs in 244 10-km squares (181 'confirmed', 25 'probable' and 38 'possible' breeding) with the 1982 totals being 200 'confirmed', 20 'probable' and 23 'possible' breeding (total 243 10-km squares).

Hence, overall, the declines that may have occurred in the 19th Century seemed to have been arrested and even reversed in a few areas. Declines were noted in a few areas in the

last 20 years, notably Northern Ireland, but in many others (eg the south coast of Ireland, Anglesey, Snowdonia and possibly Islay) there was some evidence of slight increases.

The Brittany Chough census located 25 breeding pairs in 1982, with a further ten pairs of uncertain status (which may include non-breeding pairs). This figure was an all-time low, having declined from the '30-40 pairs' recorded in 1973.

Of all pairs located, 86% were on the coast. The highest proportion inland was in Wales (32% of the pairs found), mostly at disused quarries and mineshafts in North Wales, and on Islay, using mainly old buildings, though the use of rafters in new farm barns was a recent innovation.

The survey also collected data on the number of successfully fledged young.

Methods of Data Capture

Observers were provided with instruction sheets and survey cards on which they recorded the Choughs seen: non-breeding flocks, any evidence of breeding, grid reference of any nest sites; and they estimated the proportions of habitat types on a 1-km square basis. Within these habitats, livestock types and any Chough feeding incidents were also noted. Only between April and late June are breeding pairs reliably distinct from flocks, and non-breeders tend to wander farther inland than do breeding pairs. With experience, the lack of purpose in non-breeding pairs can be distinguished from the urgency of breeding birds. Indications of definite breeding were taken as: wool-carrying in early April (to line the nest); single birds visiting nest sites in late April and early May (when males feed the incubating females); pairs visiting sites between early May and the end of June (to feed nestlings); and the noise of the nestlings themselves in late June. Probable breeding was recorded for birds seen feeding and then flying directly towards likely nesting terrain, but where no breeding site was confirmed. Lone pairs seen only briefly in likely breeding areas were recorded as possible breeders.

All previously known sites were visited, and coverage was extended to include other potentially suitable coastlines or likely inland areas. Observers were asked to visit each area twice in the breeding season, in mid May and again in mid June. This was achieved in Wales and Scotland but coverage in Ireland was less thorough owing to scarcity of observers, but all areas (except a few offshore islands) were visited at least once.

Purpose of Data Capture

To determine the numbers and range of the breeding Chough in Britain and Ireland.

Geographic Coverage

Britain and Ireland. In practice confined to western Wales, the Isle of Man, a few areas in SW Scotland, notably Islay, and western Ireland.

Temporal Coverage

The 1982 breeding season with two visits requested, mid May and mid June.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by BTO in partnership with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Irish Wildbird Conservancy (now BirdWatch Ireland). Several Charitable Trusts (CTs) contributed financially towards the survey: A.M. Pilkington CT, Miss G.M. Marriages CT, Mrs C.T.M. Dunn Foundation, The N. Smith Charitable Settlement, The Rank Foundation, S.A. Bell CT, Cliff Richard CT, The J. & L.A. Cadbury CT, Conder Conservation Trust, Weinstock Fund, Rokeby CT, The Lady Margaret Bateman CT, RSPB Leicester Members' Group, Oakdale Trust, Mitchell Trust, Swire CT, John Slater Foundation, British Aluminium CT, The Spooner CT, RSPB SE Hertfordshire Members' Group, G. W. Trust, Arthur & Rosalind Marsden CT and the RSPB itself. The Manpower Services Commission and National Parks Authority in Wales financed the Welsh survey workers.

Organiser(s)

Ian Bullock

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Publications

The main report of the survey is:

Bullock, I.D., Drewett, D.R. & Mickleburgh, S.P. 1983. The Chough in Britain and Ireland. *British Birds* 76: 377-400.

The survey was noticed in *BTO News* numbers 119 and 130.

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 contains the Chough archive originally held by Susan Cowdy – which contains a few letters and reports. The survey data are with RSPB.

Notes on Access and Use**Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**