

all about

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CORNCRAKE

Crex crex

The corncrake is a brown streaked bird with bright chestnut wings which show up in flight. Males and females look very similar. Corncrakes are about the same size as moor hens. They have a short deep bill and strong legs and feet, ideal for thrusting through the tall grass and rough vegetation where they spend most of their time. In fact corncrakes are very reluctant to emerge from tall vegetation – probably because they are vulnerable to predators if they do. For this reason, corncrakes are more often heard than

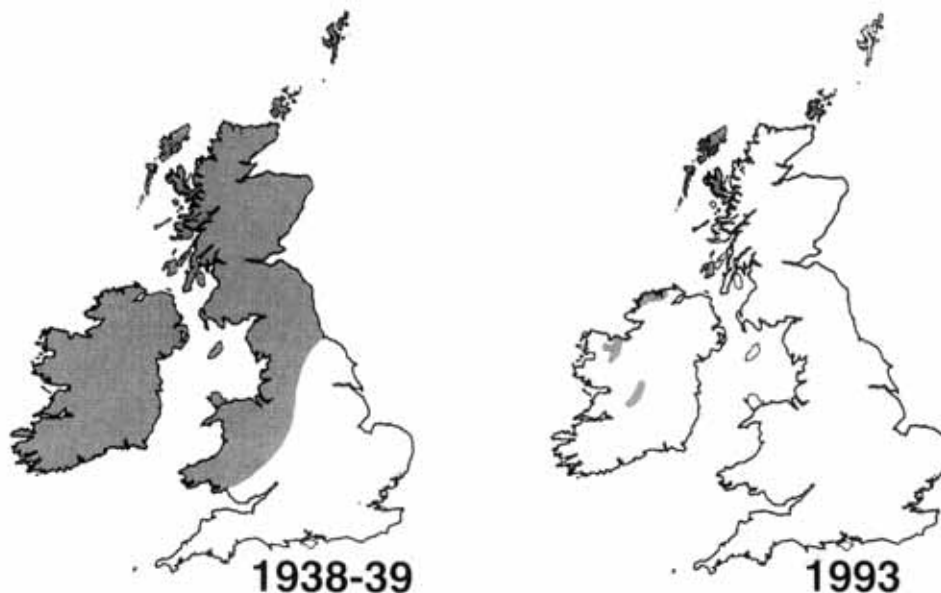
seen. It is usually only the male who sings with a distinctive rasping ‘crek crek’ call. Unmusical as this may sound to the human ear, it is used to attract females. In flight, corncrakes trail their legs, stay close to the ground and usually dive into the cover of tall vegetation as soon as possible. This has led people to assume that they are poor fliers but in fact they undertake some of the longest migrations known amongst birds. Corncrakes eat a range of small animals pecked from plants or the surface of the ground: mostly earthworms, beetles, slugs and snails.

Where does the corncrake live?

The corncrake is a summer visitor; it visits Scotland between April and September, and migrates to spend the winter in central and southern Africa.

In Scotland, corncrakes live in hayfields and farm grasslands. Their nests are made of dead stems and leaves and are so well hidden in tall vegetation that they





Changes in the distribution of Corncrakes in the British Isles

are rarely found by predators. Females usually lay 8–12 eggs with red-brown spots on a greenish grey background. Most female corncrakes raise two broods of chicks during the summer, laying their first clutches in May and June and second clutches in July and August.

One hundred years ago corncrakes were common in Britain but there are now only a few left.

You can see from the maps that most corncrakes are now only found on the Western Isles of Scotland, and Orkney. This decline in numbers has occurred because modern farming methods have destroyed the nesting sites and habitats of the corncrake. Mowing grass for hay or silage destroys corncrake nests and can kill young corncrake chicks as well as adult birds. Corncrakes are an endangered species, not only in Scotland but worldwide.

What is being done to help the corncrake?

Modern farming methods need not be destructive to corncrakes, and efforts to conserve this threatened species have focused on developing “corncrake-friendly” farming techniques.

There are now a number of farm conservation schemes which pay farmers to manage land in a corncrake-friendly way. This includes:

- delaying cutting fields of hay and silage until 1st August. By this time, all corncrake nests will have hatched and chicks should have grown large enough to run away from the mower.
- mowing in a “corncrake-friendly” manner which allows corncrakes to escape from fields without having to cross areas of short grass – something they are very reluctant to do. Corncrake-friendly mowing usually means mowing a field from the centre to the outside. Some schemes also ask farmers to fence off areas of tall

vegetation so they are not grazed by livestock like cows or sheep. This allows the vegetation to grow up tall in the spring and form “early cover” for corncrakes to use when they arrive back from migration in April and May.

A number of protected areas for corncrakes have been established in Scotland, including Special Protection Areas designated under the European Union Birds Directive and nature reserves managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and other nature conservation organisations.

Corncrake conservation efforts in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom are now co-ordinated through the Biodiversity Action Plan for corncrakes. This sets out a list of things that need to be done to conserve corncrakes. Three organisations take the lead in this action plan: The Scottish Office, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Scottish Natural Heritage.

There are encouraging signs that these efforts to help the corncrake seem to be working. After a hundred years of decline, the numbers in Britain have been slowly increasing over the last five years.

[What can you do to help?](#)

Find out more about bird life by visiting a local nature reserve. For more information, write to the RSPB.

Join a group which is concerned about birds and wildlife. Two groups are:

The Young Ornithologists Club (YOC) – the junior section of the RSPB; and WATCH Scotland – the junior section of the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT),

Take part in a census (survey) if you are good at identifying birds. For more information write to YOC.

[Contact addresses](#)

RSPB (YOC), Dunedin House, 25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP

SWT (WATCH), Cramond House, Kirk Cramond, Cramond Glebe Road, Edinburgh EH4 6NS

World Wide Fund for Nature Scotland, 1 Crieff Road, Aberfeldy, Perthshire PH15 2BJ

A poster of a corncrake is available free of charge from Scottish Natural Heritage, Publications Section, Battleby, Redgorton, Perth, PH1 3EW

Glossary

Habitat

Habitat is the place where an animal lives. The habitat provides the animal with the food and shelter which it needs to survive.

Migration

This is the journey that a bird makes between the places where it breeds and areas where it spends the winter. Many of the birds that breed in Scotland migrate away in the winter because the weather is cold and food is scarce.

Predator

A predator is an animal that eats other animals. In Scotland, cat, mink, otters and birds of prey may all hunt corncrakes.

Threatened or endangered species

An animal or plant that is in danger of becoming extinct.

