

A6.54 Corncrake *Crex crex*

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status	
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection Schedule 1(1)	Species of European Conservation Concern	SPEC 1 Global conservation concern (vulnerable)
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection Schedule 1(1)	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance	Table 1
Wintering		EC Birds Directive 1979	Annex I Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book	Endangered

2. Population data

	Population sizes (calling males)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	480	5	204 (43% of GB population)
Ireland	173	2	No SPAs selected in Northern Ireland
Biogeographic population	87,500	875	204 (0.2% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Green 1995

All-Ireland population source: Green et al. 1997a

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeyer & Blair 1997

3. Distribution

Britain and Ireland are at the western limit of the Corncrake's global breeding range which extends through temperate regions of central Europe and Russia to the upper reaches of the Lena River at about 120°E. In winter, Corncrakes migrate through the Middle East and north Africa to the grasslands and savannahs of central and southern Africa (Green & Riley 1999). The species is monotypic.

In Europe, the range is highly discontinuous within most of the European Union, reflecting effects of habitat change consequent on agricultural intensification. Further east, and in parts of Fennoscandia, breeding distribution is more continuous, reflecting less intensive agricultural management.

Typical Corncrake breeding habitat in the UK comprises agricultural grassland grown for hay or silage in areas where tall vegetation cover (*e.g.* marshy areas or un-grazed fields and field margins) is available when the birds begin to arrive in spring, and where mowing does not take place until late summer (Stowe *et al.* 1993; Green 1996a; Green *et al.* 1997b). Over 90% of Corncrakes breeding in the UK are now concentrated in the western and northern islands of Scotland, with occasional scattered records from the Scottish mainland, England and Wales (Green 1995; Green & Gibbons 2000).

4. Population structure and trends

Corncrakes are difficult to survey and population data throughout their breeding range are incomplete. The best available estimate of the world population is about 3 million calling males, based on counts published in Green *et al.* (1997a) and unpublished data.

European Corncrake populations have generally declined in range and numbers over the last 100–150 years, reflecting similar trends, and for similar reasons as the declines documented in Britain and Ireland (Green *et al.* 1997a). The current European estimate is 87,470–96,920 calling males (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

Corncrakes once bred throughout Britain and Ireland (Holloway 1997), but have undergone a long-term and rapid decline in both numbers and range which began in Britain towards the end of the 19th century. The first survey of Corncrakes in Britain was carried out in 1938–1939 (Norris 1945, Norris 1947). No attempt was made to estimate actual numbers but questionnaires were circulated to obtain information on relative abundance in different parts of the country. This showed that Corncrakes were numerous only in the western and northern islands of Scotland; local and declining in mainland Scotland, northern England and north Wales, and irregular or absent in the south of England and Wales. A similar pattern was revealed by field surveys for the first breeding atlas between 1968–1972 (Sharrock 1976) at which time the total number of Corncrakes in Britain and Ireland was estimated at 5,000 pairs.

Subsequent national surveys of Corncrakes in Britain in 1978–79 (Cadbury 1980); 1988 (Hudson *et al.* 1990) and 1993 (Green 1995) showed a progressive decline from 746 to 480 calling males, of which over 90% were confined to the Scottish Islands. The 1993 national survey provided a baseline for this review and so the national population of 480 calling males has been used. However, since 1993, the British Corncrake population has undergone a modest overall increase with a total of 589 calling males recorded during the 1998 national Corncrake survey (Green & Riley 1999; Green & Gibbons 2000).

Corncrakes in Ireland have also undergone a long-term decline in numbers and range, starting in the early years of the 20th century (O'Meara 1979, 1986; Williams *et al.* 1997; Whilde 1993). Although the 1998 national census of Ireland indicated that the overall decline of Corncrakes may have halted, numbers are still declining in some areas of the Republic of Ireland and records of calling males in Northern Ireland have been sporadic since a count of just nine males in 1993. Regular breeding ceased in 1996, although confirmed breeding occurred on Rathlin Island in 2000 (RSPB unpubl.).

Corncrake declines in Britain and Ireland have been linked with intensification of agriculture, in particular the introduction of machines which allow mowing to be completed earlier in the summer and hayfields to be cut more rapidly than they were once by hand (Norris 1947). Under these circumstances Corncrakes and their chicks often suffer mortality through a reluctance to move from long vegetation and also lose this habitat earlier in the season (Green *et al.* 1997b). Further developments in agricultural practice have contributed to the long-term decline. These include an increased proportion of grass grown for silage; the use of fertilisers and faster-maturing varieties of grass; a decrease in the area devoted to grass crops; and extensive drainage of marshy areas of tall vegetation (Green 1995).

Although there are signs that the overall long-term decline of Corncrakes in the UK has halted, the population is still very small, vulnerable and concentrated in the Scottish Islands. The recovery has been attained through implementation of targeted species recovery measures involving delayed cutting of grass and Corncrake-friendly mowing methods. The species' future is very much dependent on appropriate farming practices which remain vulnerable to wider changes in crofting and the beef economy.

5. Protection measures for population in UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Corncrakes supports, on average about 204 calling males. This amounts to about 43% of the British breeding population. Since the mid-1990s, Corncrake no longer regularly breed in Northern Ireland. The suite contains about 0.2% of the international population in ten sites (Table 6.54.1) spread throughout the Western Isles of Scotland (the core range of Corncrakes in the UK), as well as the Lower Derwent Valley in Yorkshire.

Other measures

UK conservation for Corncrakes is co-ordinated through the Steering Group for the Corncrake Biodiversity Action Plan which aims to facilitate further increases in numbers as well as re-establishment of Corncrakes in parts of their former UK range (Green & Riley 1999).

A number of Corncrake Management Schemes, which provide payments for farmers and crofters to adjust their agricultural management for the benefit of Corncrakes are available. These include the RSPB/Scottish Natural Heritage/Scottish Crofters' Union Corncrake Initiative and Agri-environment Schemes run by Government. In Scotland, the Government schemes comprise Environmentally Sensitive Areas and the Countryside Premium Scheme (soon to be replaced by the Rural Stewardship Scheme) which have grassland bird prescriptions aimed at Corncrakes, while in Northern Ireland the Environment and Heritage Service and RSPB are initiating recovery measures on Rathlin Island. Scottish Natural Heritage has also operated a Corncrake SPA Management Scheme since October 1998.

In addition, voluntary conservation bodies such as RSPB, the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the National Trust for Scotland are undertaking intensive Corncrake conservation work on a number of nature reserves or recovery areas with suitable habitat.

A Biodiversity Action Plan has been drafted for this species (Biodiversity Steering Group 1995) and is being implemented as part of the UK's national response to the Biodiversity Convention. The Steering Group for the Corncrake Biodiversity Action Plan will co-ordinate the future development of Corncrake conservation measures in the UK.

6. Classification criteria

All nine sites in the UK that support more than 1% of the national breeding population were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements (especially population size, breeding density and range). In order to provide for additional range coverage, the Rinns of Islay was selected under Stage 1.4, in light of the small, but long-established population there (Stroud 1985).

Four of the selected sites (Lower Derwent Valley, North Uist Machair and Islands, the Rinns of Islay, and South Uist Machair and Lochs) are multi-species SPAs, although the remaining six sites (Aird & Borge, Benbecula; Coll (corncrake); Eoligarry, Barra; Kilpheder to Smerclate, South Uist; Ness & Barvas, Lewis; and Tiree (corncrake) have been selected solely because of their importance for Corncrakes. The sites are distributed throughout the current range of Corncrakes in the UK and all have a very long recorded history of occupancy – lying within areas where Corncrakes were identified as 'abundant' between 1875 and 1900 (Holloway 1996).

Distribution map for Corncrake SPA suite

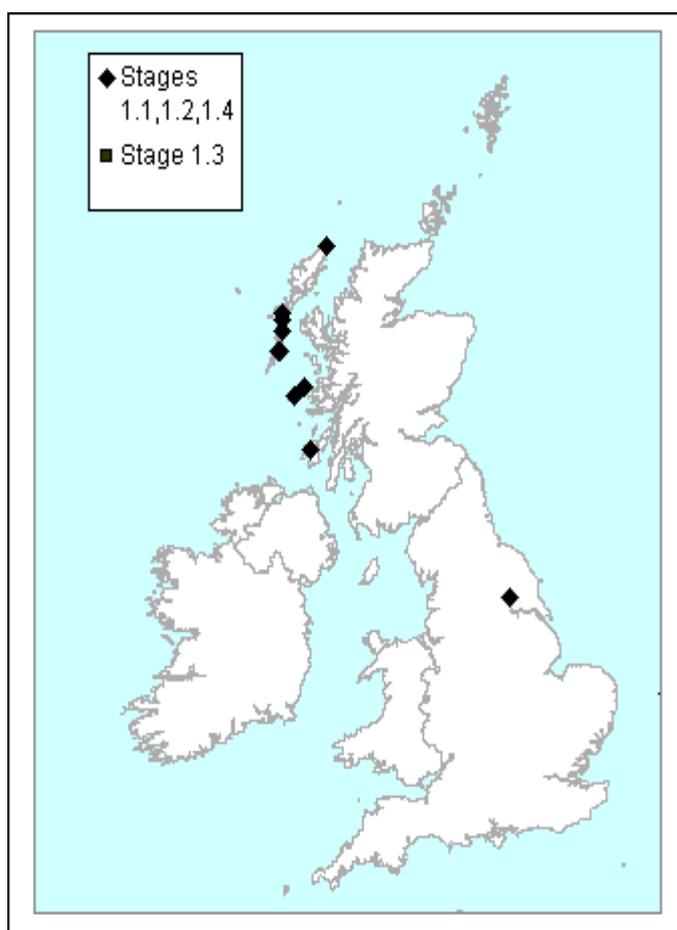


Table 6.54.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Aird & Borve, Benbecula	19	<0.1	4.0	1.1
Coll (corncrake)	24	<0.1	5.0	1.1
Eoligarry, Barra	28	<0.1	5.8	1.1
Kilpheder to Smerclate, South Uist	20	<0.1	4.2	1.1
Lower Derwent Valley	6	<0.1	1.3	1.1
Ness & Barvas, Lewis	18	<0.1	3.8	1.1
North Uist Machair and Islands	25	<0.1	5.2	1.1
Rinns of Islay	2	<0.1	0.4	1.4
South Uist Machair and Lochs	15	<0.1	3.1	1.1
Tiree (corncrake)	47	<0.1	9.8	1.1
TOTALS	204	0.2%	42.5%	