

What are Corncrakes?

Corncrakes are a thrush sized migratory bird which spend their winters in Central and Western Africa and their summers in Northern Europe. They are a member of the rail family and are a similar shape to a moorhen but slightly smaller. Their plumage is brown and grey, but they have bright chestnut-coloured wings. The rasping 'crex crex' call of the male is heard throughout mid-April to mid-June and is used to attract a mate.

Population trends

The UK population remains precarious, with total UK figures still dropping. The demise of the corncrake has been linked to changes in agriculture such as earlier and increasingly efficient ways of cutting hay and silage. Providing them with habitat when they return in April and cutting grass crops later can make significant differences. Once found throughout the British Isles, corncrakes are now found mostly in the western and northern islands of Scotland and in small areas in Ireland and mainland Scotland & England.

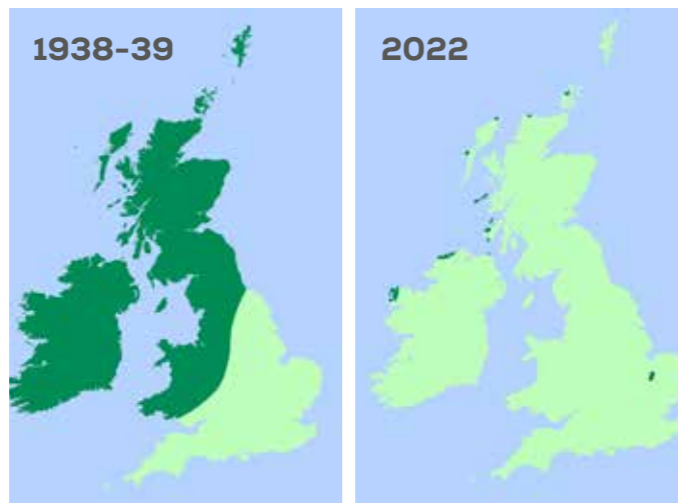


Corncrake chick Cliff Redden



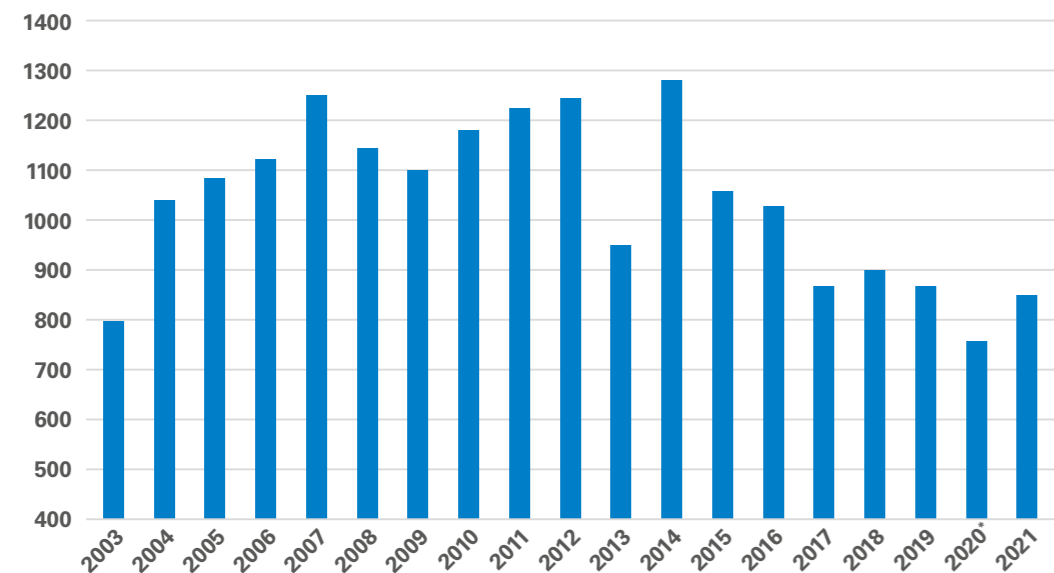
Male and female corncrake Simon Rowlands

Corncrakes only live for 2-3 years and only about one third of the adult birds present in any one summer will survive to breed in the next. This means every breeding corncrake must produce large numbers of young each year to maintain overall numbers. One successful breeding season can have large positive effects on the population, but management must take place year after year to ensure a sustainable population.



Corncrake annual counts across 16 core areas in Scotland

*2020 is only a partial count because 2 core areas were not surveyed.



Uist Machair Heather Beaton

Corncrakes and Biodiversity

Corncrakes are part of a landscape where semi-natural habitats are vital to the species which live in them. Low intensity farming and crofting, particularly cattle grazing, create species-rich habitat mosaics which are vital for biodiversity. Machair, a naturally fertile grassland not only supports farming and crofting but a wealth of other species such as greater yellow bumble bee, Irish ladies tresses and several wading bird species.

Corncrake friendly management advice and schemes

Throughout Scotland, several organisations can help you with your queries regarding management for corncrakes and schemes which offer payments for corncrake-friendly management. Local offices of RSPB Scotland, NatureScot, SAC Consulting, Scottish Government Agriculture and Rural Economy and National Trust Scotland can provide you with advice and further details of those who can help you with corncrake conservation.

Farming and Crofting with wildlife

Small changes to farming and crofting practices can ensure corncrake can co-exist with people. There are three elements to successful corncrake conservation.


- Areas of tall vegetation should be available from April to October
- Corncrake-friendly mowing must be carried out
- Areas of grass crops and pastures should be left until mid-August before harvesting and grazing.

This leaflet has been created through the Corncrake Calling project, managed by RSPB Scotland and supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and NatureScot. Agencies work together in Scotland to help deliver corncrake conservation.

The RSPB is the UK's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.

The RSPB is a registered charity in England and Wales 207076, in Scotland SC037654.

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Corncrakes

A guide to habitat management

Agencies work together in Scotland to deliver concrake conservation:



Corncrake calling image Helen Skuodas

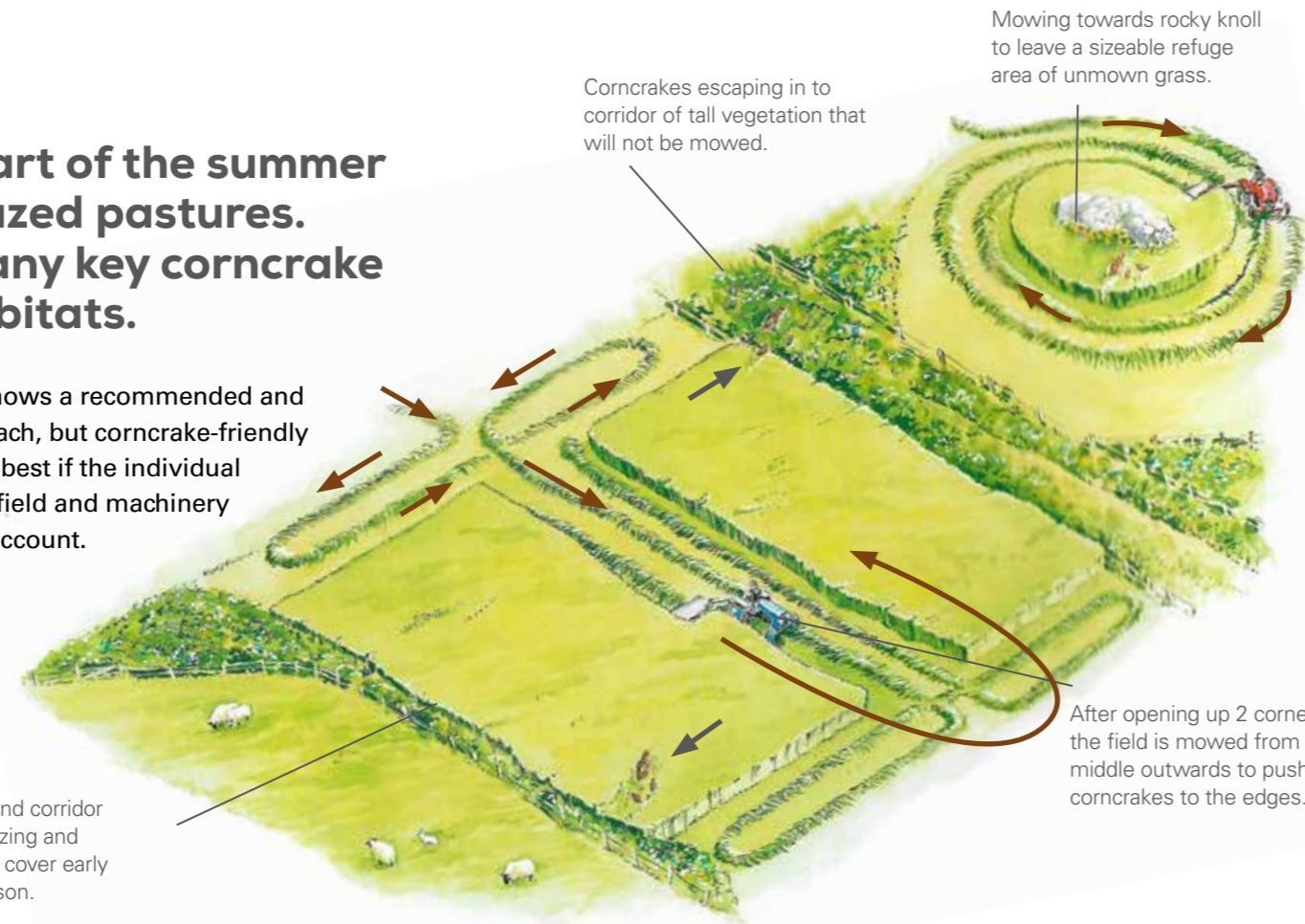
In-Bye and Machair

Corncrakes will spend a considerable part of the summer in silage fields, hay meadows and ungrazed pastures. The 'machair' is also a key feature of many key corncrake areas providing nesting and feeding habitats.

Corncrake Friendly Mowing

Corncrakes are reluctant to break vegetation cover and cross areas of field which have been cut, as it leaves them at risk from aerial predators. If a mower works from the outside of a field inwards, then any chicks present will become trapped in the diminishing area of tall grass in the centre. Eventually most or all are likely to be killed by the mower. Mowing slowly and corncrake friendly pushes chicks and adults towards safe cover without them running into the open.

The diagram shows a recommended and practical approach, but corncrake-friendly mowing works best if the individual features of the field and machinery are taken into account.



Corncrake corner and corridor protected from grazing and mowing to provide cover early and late in the season.

Cutting and grazing dates

Mowing in May, June & July can destroy corncrake nests and kill chicks. Even adult birds are vulnerable in August during their moult. Leaving cutting until at least the middle of August will enable a second brood to be reared; an important element for population growth. Avoiding grazing until mid-August is likewise important as pastures also provide good nesting and feeding habitats. Corncrake areas should not be heavily grazed before the end of September to ensure some areas of tall vegetation are available for the second brood.



Corncrake friendly mowing, Coll Mark Mitchell



Late cover



Silage bales for shelter and nutrients



Farmyard manure for nutrients

Vegetation cover for Corncrakes

From arrival in early April to departure in October corncrakes prefer to spend all their time in tall vegetation (at least 20cm high). A network of 'early and late cover', adjacent to areas of late grazed or mown grassland, provides them with protection from predators, as well as nesting and feeding habitat.



Iris beds for early cover

Creation and maintenance of cover

In April, vegetation in most parts of northern Britain is scarce, making corncrakes vulnerable to predators. Beds of irises, nettles and cow parsley, common reed, and comfrey all provide good early cover if managed properly.

Creating good vegetation cover can often be done by ceasing grazing in these areas from late winter to the following autumn. Corncrakes will not use areas of vegetation cover which are too dense or where there is a mat of dead or woody stems at ground level.

Grazing over the winter is important, but levels and timings will be different at each site and it is important that 20cm high vegetation is available in early April. Fencing off corners or corridors within fields where there is shelter from a wall, building or ditch can create good areas of cover. Vegetation growth can be encouraged by spreading farmyard manure (FYM) or old silage bales on these areas over winter. Where no cover is present roots, rhizomes and seeds can be spread alongside FYM in suitable areas



Late grazing near iris beds



Nettle cover between silage fields

The Corncrakes' year

- 1 Arrival from Africa begins.** Birds which survive the journey are likely to return to the area in which they bred or were born the previous year.
- 2 Males start calling from early cover.** They call occasionally by day and almost continually by night.
- 3 First nests.** Females lay 8-12 eggs and incubate them alone. Nests are so well hidden they are rarely found by predators.
- 4 Females stay with chicks from the first brood for about 12 days. Independent young from the first brood are unable to fly until they are just over a month old.**
- 5 Males call from early cover or hay and silage fields. Most females mate again and lay second clutches. They stay with the second brood chicks for about 17 days.**
- 6 Males stop calling.** Independent young from the second brood are flightless for just over a month.
- 7 Adult males and females moult their wing feathers** and are unable to fly for about 2 weeks.
- 8 Migration to Africa begins.** Most second brood chicks should be able to fly by the end of September.

April	May	June	July	August	September	October
Arrival						Departure
		First nests		Second nests		
		Females with chicks		Females with chicks		
		Flightless chicks		Flightless chicks		
				Moulting adults		