

PUTTING CORNCRAKES BACK INTO THE WILD

The corncrake (*Crex crex*) was once a common summer visitor to the fields and meadows of rural Britain. Well known for its rasping call, the corncrake has suffered major population declines, and is of high conservation concern. The main cause of its decline is agricultural intensification, leaving few suitable habitats. In response, ZSL has entered into a conservation partnership to breed corncrakes and release them into a specially managed reserve. Our partners are English Nature and the RSPB.

The corncrake has a distinctive call that is a feature of "Old England" folklore, but it has almost disappeared from Britain. The reasons for its decline are wetland drainage, loss of hay meadows, early silage cutting, and damage to chicks from agricultural machinery. Until very recently the only remaining British population was found in the Orkneys and Hebrides.

Corncrakes are migratory. Birds make the long journey to southern Africa by September, and return every April. On their return the males immediately start calling to attract female birds. Breeding then takes place between May and July, when females lay 7 - 12 eggs. These hatch after 17 - 19 days. Chicks grow rapidly, feeding on insects and seeds, and are ready to fly on their first migration after only 45 days.

Starting the programme

A Whipsnade-bred corncrake is identified and measured after successfully migrating to Africa and back
© RSPB



Although corncrakes have been successfully bred in Germany with evidence of released captive-bred birds migrating to and from their breeding area, no birds had been successfully reared and released in the UK before this project. The first step was to set up a captive breeding protocol for these shy birds.



The well camouflaged feathers allow the corncrake to hide in grassy meadows.

In February 2001 fifteen captive-bred birds were imported from Germany, (but too late for the start of the breeding season). They were quarantined at Chester Zoo before being transferred to specially designed aviaries at Whipsnade in 2002. Males began calling to attract females, but with only four males there were periods when males were not calling. A number of potential matings were lost as a result. The first breeding season went well, but because of wet weather and predation by a weasel (which managed to get into the aviaries and kill several birds), only ten chicks were reared. Six of these passed their health checks and were released into the wild.

In subsequent years, improvements to the breeding protocol along with new



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breeding birds from Poland and Scotland resulted in many more chicks being successfully reared at Whipsnade.

Breeding in captivity

Once the males start calling, females are introduced into an aviary. Following successful mating a shallow nest is built by the male in a grassy tussock and eggs are laid. The male is removed after the fourth egg is laid, and makes no further contribution.

Eggs are collected from nests before they are due to hatch, and are moved to an incubator. This is partly to improve survival rates, but also to prevent newly-hatched chicks seeing the surroundings and sky at Whipsnade. If this happens, chicks will imprint on Whipsnade and will return here after migration.

Hand-rearing is intensive. After hatching, the chicks are moved to rearing pens with artificial turf bases. They are fed hourly between 0700 and 2100 for the first six days, and are already beginning to forage for themselves at this time. Chicks are fed using tweezers from behind a screen to minimise the risk of imprinting on humans. By day 10 the birds are self-feeding, and by day 14 they are fully independent.

Intensive animal husbandry is need to rear the corncrake chicks.



Release

Before any birds are released they must have a health check. This is best practice for any reintroduction as it ensures that no pathogens are released into the wild. ZSL vets have a contract with English Nature to carry out the pre-release health screening.



ZSL and RSPB staff survey for corncrakes at the release site in Cambridgeshire

By the end of August 2006, over 280 captive-bred corncrakes had been bred and released into the wild. 14-day old birds are handed over to the RSPB, kept in pre-release pens and fed on a natural diet. The birds are kept outside for the first time, which allows them to get their bearings by looking at the sky. They are released when they are 28 - 35 days old, provided that they are in good health and condition. By now, the birds are adept at feeding themselves, and continue to gain body weight in preparation for their migration.

Care has been taken to select a reserve which has been managed to provide suitable habitat, so that the corncrakes will have a site to return to after their migration. It is very encouraging to report that four male corncrakes bred at Whipsnade have returned to the release site after migrating to Africa. It is very likely that some females returned also.

The breeding programme will continue until the population at the existing release site is much larger, and may also provide chicks for several other potential release sites in future.

The Corncrake Project is a conservation partnership between ZSL, English Nature and the RSPB. English Nature runs the Species Recovery Programme, and the RSPB creates and maintains suitable habitat for corncrakes in its reserves.

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Conservation Programmes