Fifth meeting of the Corncrake Conservation Team 2015

The BirdLife International Corncrake Conservation Team held its fifth meeting in Pilsen (Czech Republic) on 7.-9.10.2015. The meeting was attended by 51 participants from 16 countries. The aim of the meeting was to give an overview of the current conservation measures delivered in countries within the species' breeding range. Recent population estimates and trends were also presented for each country. The following statements are agreed outcomes from the meeting.

Current knowledge

Through the delivery of 20 years of corncrake conservation work, our knowledge of the biology and conservation needs of the species has significantly improved. A number of conservation actions have been successful. Today the world population of corncrake is not in immediate danger. Indeed, the current European Red List treats the corncrake as "secure". However, this assessment is partly based on poor knowledge of the population size and trends in some of the countries where 90 % of the population occur. As such, the current status of the world corncrake population is subject to a high degree of uncertainty. Data presented during the meeting show that populations in several countries have declined over the last ten years. Moreover, the process of land abandonment, which eventually results in unfavourable conditions for corncrakes, is still occurring in parts of the core breeding range. In addition, our knowledge of the species' breeding biology is largely based on research in Scotland and Ireland where populations may display different behaviours and exist in different environmental conditions from populations in continental Europe.

Conservation measures

Today, corncrakes are largely dependent on appropriately managed grasslands. Under these circumstances the species is fragile as it is unable to withstand the rapid and widespread changes in farming systems that have commonly occurred in recent times. The two principle negative changes being observed are intensification and abandonment. Intensification of farming systems has to be expected in countries that have joined the EU recently and are beginning to adapt as they come under the influence of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Corncrake is a short-lived species. To sustain a stable population it must have a high rate of reproduction and produce more than one brood annually. To support breeding success, suitable agri-environment measures are in place in a range of countries. Their impact is still limited because uptake of these measures covers less than 25 % of the respective national populations. Because existing agri-environment measures are under constant pressure, it is important that they are designed to be cost-effective and evidence-based.

Without effective improvements, we expect that corncrake populations in all European range states will come under increasing pressure from the spread of modern farming practices. In more marginal farmland, where it is no longer economic to manage grass crops, abandonment is occurring and this leads to loss of suitable habitat over a 5 to 10 year timescale. This might lead to the loss of local or national corncrake populations in future.

Recommendations

To maintain the current geographic distribution of corncrake, it is important that populations within several range states are stabilised, and that the species is able to expand into areas most recently vacated. Within these states, these outcomes may be achieved through the provision of carefully selected corncrake breeding areas in which targeted agri-environment measures are delivered at an appropriate scale. The measures should be attractive for farmers, maintain suitable habitat throughout the breeding season, and be flexible enough to be deployed in reaction to corncrake occurrence. There is a pressing need to accompany these measures with credible and expert advice to farmers. Table 1 summarises key factors that should be taken into account when designing conservation schemes.

Specifically, suitable agri-environment measures need to be restored in Latvia and Slovakia. In the important corncrake breeding areas of Transylvania (Romania), an adapted agri-environment menu is needed, which meets the requirements of both corncrake populations and High Nature Value grassland habitats.

Although we know more about this species than at any previous time, there are still questions that need to be addressed if large-scale conservation measures are to deliver optimal results while being cost effective. Therefore, range states should support monitoring and research into large-scale population dynamics. This should include Europe-wide efforts to:

- Estimate trends in numbers and shifts in place and timing of breeding, and identify the drivers of change.
- Estimate demographic rates such as survival and breeding success, and dispersal of birds between breeding sites, especially in continental populations. Continental corncrakes move much greater distances within the breeding season and have different environmental factors to deal with. They may require higher productivity levels to remain stable and this needs urgent assessment.
- Establish monitoring schemes in countries where knowledge of population size and trends is insufficient.
- Keep track of the impact of land abandonment, especially in Russia, through the analysis of satellite images and field-validation.
- Identify the key sites utilised by corncrakes and the threats they face during migration and wintering, using recent information from satellite and geolocator tracking.

Pilsen, 9.10.2015

Table 1

Currently available methods to secure Corncrake breeding success

In order to maintain a stable population, each female corncrake needs to raise approximately 5 young to independence (i.e. to an age of 2 weeks). According to available information on nest and chick survival, on average more than a single breeding attempt is required per year without the female being disturbed by farming operations. The opportunity to raise late broods to independence may, therefore, be crucial for the survival of corncrake populations.

The conservation measures listed below are considered suitable under the conditions outlined above. These measures can be applied in agri-environment schemes or in other types of management of corncrake breeding sites: Some of the conditions may be difficult to achieve by agri-environment schemes alone.

Measure	**Conditions for suitability**
First mowing or grazing dates	
from 16.8. onwards	Generally suitable
from 1.8. onwards	with CFM or if mowing progress is slow *
from 16.7. onwards	for early/first broods with CFM *or* if mowing progress is very slow *
Corncrake-friendly mowing techniques (CFM)	
General	if applied after young are > 2 weeks old (1.7. or later, depending on timing of breeding)
centre-out mowing	if performed from the beginning, and if adjacent uncut vegetation remains as a refuge
leaving refuge strips	if the refuge is ≥ 10 m wide
Grazing	if applied after young are > 2 weeks old (1.7. or later) and if adjacent uncut/ungrazed vegetation remains as a refuge
Mosaic management / rotational mowing to solve conflicts with needs for early mowing	
Cutting 30-50% of the area before Corncrakes arrive and leave the rest until 1.-15.8.	Mowing is sufficiently early before Corncrakes arrive, remaining area is large enough
Apply late mowing only on sites and in years when Corncrakes are present	Advice from experts on Corncrake occurrence is available

* mowing progress depends on field size and machinery. Note that during moult, flightless adult birds may be present in the breeding areas in July/August.