

Corncrake 1938

Title

The status of the Corn Crake (Land-Rail) 1938-1939

Description and Summary of Results

In the 16th and 17th centuries the Corn Crake *Crex crex* was very uncommon in the greater part of England south of Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Cheshire, was much commoner in the north (and perhaps also in Wales), and very plentiful in Ireland. By the 18th century, the breeding range in England extended south to Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire, though they were obviously local, and much less common than in Ireland, Scotland and Anglesey. This was maintained through the first half of the 19th Century, although by 1914 a *British Birds* paper noted there had been a decline in many areas, and which continued for the next few years. In the early 1930s there appeared to be something of a revival in fortunes in some parts of the Midlands, and so for 1938 it was agreed to do a full survey to try to find out the true status.

In 1938, 1180 questionnaires were returned (including a fair number of "no bird" returns which had been specifically requested), and in addition over 800 letters and postcards were received. In 1939 a further 650 questionnaires and nearly 400 letters were received. This total did not include any reports from abroad, which were rather few because of the outbreak of the Second World War, but they provided valuable information as to the position in several continental countries.

The published paper summarises the status of the species in 1938 by county and records much information on recent changes (and included details from mainland Europe where these had been received). In summary the species was found still to be numerous in most of the northern and western Scottish islands and NW Ireland and to have been subject to little or no change of status beyond local fluctuations. In the greater part of Ireland, Scotland, N and NW England and most of Wales it was still found locally but had greatly decreased. However it had almost disappeared from E, C and S England and SE Wales as a regular breeding species, though in most counties odd pairs or small colonies occasionally bred for a year or two.

There was little doubt that grass mown for hay was by far the most usual and favoured habitat for nesting birds. However birds were also found in other rough grass, marshy land and pasture, but the records in cereals and other crops were largely thought to be of passage birds.

The reason for the decline seemed to be heavily weighted towards the introduction of the mowing machine which was stated by many observers to cause the destruction of eggs, young and even adult birds. This was increased by such grass being cut earlier in the season. Other suggested reasons for the declines included predators, human interference (including shooting them because they made so much noise at night!), disease, telegraph wires, artificial fertilizers and mortality both on migration and in their winter quarters.

Methods of Data Capture

The primary data collected were the numbers of breeding (singing/calling) males. Appeals for information were published in a large number of newspapers, a short talk was given in a BBC News Bulletin, and questionnaires were circulated with a number of ornithological journals.

The questionnaire asked for: a) the numbers of birds heard in the observer's stated area in 1938, or when they had last been heard there, and whether or not they continued to call throughout the season; b) information on habitat (type of soil and crops), and whether grassland was cut by mowing machine; c) notes on any changes in numbers during the previous 20 years and any suggestions as to reasons for any of these, especially the use of fertilizers and manures.

In 1939 a special effort was made to fill gaps in the information received in the previous year, to obtain additional information from certain critical areas and to get particulars from mainland Europe.

Purpose of Data Capture

To determine the status and distribution of the Corn Crake in Britain and Ireland following reports of its decline in many areas. Any historical information on status was accepted and attempts were made to determine the causes of the declines.

Geographic Coverage

All of Britain and Ireland.

Temporal Coverage

Primarily the breeding season of 1938. A special effort was made in 1939 to fill the gaps, to get further information and to get information from mainland Europe.

Other Interested parties

The survey was organised and run by C A (Tony) Norris for the BTO with considerable help from Harry F Witherby and W B Alexander as Tony Norris himself joined the army at the start of the Second World War.

Organiser(s)

C A (Tony) Norris

Current Staff Contact

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Publications

The main report of the actual survey is:

Norris, C.A. 1945. Summary of a report on the distribution and status of the Corn-crake (*Crex crex*). *British Birds* 38: 142-148; 162-168.

Part 2 of this considers some more general aspects especially the causes of the decline:

Norris, C.A. 1947. Report on the distribution and status of the Corn-crake. Part 2 A consideration of the causes of the decrease. *British Birds* 40: 226-244.

The survey was noticed in *BTO Annual Report* numbers 4, 5, 6 and 9; and in *BTO Bulletin* numbers 7, 9, 10 (supplement), 11, 12, 13.

Available from NBN?

No.

Computer data -- location

None.

Computer data -- outline contents

N/A.

Computer data -- description of contents

N/A.

Information held in BTO Archives

3 boxes contain the data cards sent in, 2 boxes and a large folder contain letters, other correspondence, drafts of reports etc. All data held by BTO have been scanned. Some folders of letters and all information relating to the European part of the survey are stored in the Edward Grey Institute archive in Oxford.

Notes on Access and Use**Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**