

PROPOSAL FOR INCLUSION OF SPECIES ON THE APPENDICES OF THE CONVENTION ON
THE CONSERVATION OF MIGRATORY SPECIES OF WILD ANIMALS

- A. **PROPOSAL:** Inclusion of the Corncrake (*Crex crex*) on the Appendix II
- B. **PROPONENT:** Government of the Czech Republic - Ministry of Environment
- Czech Society for Ornithology
- C. **SUPPORTING STATEMENT**

1. **Taxon**

- 1.1. Classis: *Aves*
1.2. Ordo: *Gruiformes*
1.3. Familia: *Rallidae*
1.4. Genus/Species/Subspecies: *Crex crex* (Linnaeus, 1758) - monotypic
1.5. Common names English: Corncrake
French: Rale des genets
Spanish: Guión de Codornices

2. **Biological data**

2.1. Distribution

Palaearctic. The breeding grounds extend right across Eurasia to Siberia 120°E, from about 42°N north in Europe to southern Fennoscandia, and in western Russia to ca. 62°N. Less than half of the global population breeds in Europe, with most of these in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Poland, and fairly good numbers also in the Baltic states and Romania.

Though still widespread in Europe, the species is now much restricted within its former range, and is disjunct and fragmentary. Declines in range have been particularly catastrophic in NW Europe during this century.

Practically all birds winter in the Afrotropics, mainly in the east, from southern Tanzania to northern South Africa. (All mostly Tucker et al. 1994).

2.2. Population

See Appendix 1 for breeding population estimates in each European Range State. Since the late 19th century, and particularly since the 1950's, numbers have declined considerably. This was first evident in the British Isles, Fennoscandia and west-central Europe. Between 1970 and 1990 the decline has spread throughout the continent and numbers have fallen by 50% in ten countries, including some of the east European strongholds. The populations of the British Isles and Benelux fell from ca. 8,500-10,000 calling males in 1970 to 2,000-2,700 in the early 1980's and to 1,600-2,300 in 1990 (Tucker et al. 1994). In 1993, 479 singing males were recorded in Britain - a decline of 17% since 1988, and only 174 singing males were censused in Ireland - a decline of 80% in five years (Williams et al. 1995).

On the contrary, the species is still fairly numerous in eastern Europe. Survey in nine regions of Russia in 1995 gave an estimate of 260,000 - 400,000 calling males in these regions, and a rough estimate for the whole territory of European Russia has been 2-3 millions of calling males at present (Mischenko 1995, Anonymous 1996).

2.3. Habitat

Tall grass and herbs are a crucial requirement all year. Natural breeding habitats are riverine meadows of Carex-Iris-Typhoides, and other grasslands with few trees or bushes like drier parts of extensive fens, grassy peatbogs, wetland margins, as well as alpine meadows. Moist, unfertilized meadows in areas of low intensity agriculture are the most frequently used type of man-made habitats. Corncrakes also breed in clover and cereal fields, hay/silage fields in dry lowlands, clearcuts in forests and on abandoned land. (All mostly CE 1995).

2.4. Migration

Corncrakes breed in Europe and winter in Africa. Southward movement through Africa lasts from September to December and is linked to occurrence of rainfall and growth of cover in which to hide. Spring migration route to Europe concentrates through Morocco; autumn migration through Egypt (Stowe & Becker 1992).

3. **Threat data**

3.1. Direct threats to the population

A primary threat to Corncrakes in Europe is the agricultural mechanization and early dates of mowing of hay and silage that cause destruction of eggs, chicks and (rarely) adults.

Population declines have been fastest in those areas which have adopted earlier grass cutting dates - usually associated with conversion from hay to silage production.

Other direct causes of mortality are predation by domestic and feral cats, mink, feral ferrets and otters (Scotland and Ireland, e.g. RSPB 1994), collisions with fences, overhead wires and other structures on migration routes, and road traffic.

Hunting occurs regularly on autumn migration in Egypt - up to 14,000 individuals are killed each autumn (0.5-2.7% of the European population) (Stowe & Green 1995). Some birds are also killed during a hunting season on quails in eastern Europe - e.g., 39 killed Corncrakes, despite the legal protection, in surveyed areas of Bulgaria in autumn 1995 (Delov et al. 1995).

3.2. Habitat destruction

Population declines are caused by loss of suitable breeding habitats as well. Meadows are threatened by drainage, conversion to arable cropland and flooding of river valleys due to constructions of water reservoirs. Intensification of agriculture with more inputs of fertilizers and number of agricultural operations have got also adverse effects on Corncrakes.

Corncrakes are not considered to be under threat on their wintering grounds in south-east Africa (Stowe & Becker 1992). Although local burning of grasslands or overgrazing may have displaced birds, the area of suitable habitats is increasing as woodlands are felled or as previously cultivated areas fall out of agricultural production.

3.3. Indirect threats

Possible impact of nutrient enrichment, particularly aerial deposition of nitrogen, that could detrimentally change the vegetation structure, making it too dense for Corncrakes to penetrate.

3.4. Threats connected especially with migrations

Despite being a trans-Saharan migrant, there is no evidence that recent droughts in sub-Saharan Africa have affected Corncrakes. Whilst the progressive reduction in rainfall experienced in sub-Saharan Africa since the early 1950's (Avery, unpubl. RSPB analysis) may have made the Saharan crossing more perilous in recent decades, the decline in Corncrakes has been of a chronic nature, spanning over a century.

3.5. National and international utilization

In Africa, especially Egypt, by-catch from the ancient practice of quail/passerine netting in autumn accounts for deaths of many birds (Stowe & Becker 1992). Survey on the Egyptian coast gave estimate of ca. 14,000 individuals killed each autumn (Stowe & Green 1995).

4. Protection status and needs

4.1. National protection status

Fully protected in all European Union countries and in majority of east-central European countries. However, not protected (even a game species) in Russia and Ukraine. Not protected in Egypt.

4.2. International protection status

Listed as Globally Threatened on the basis of widespread and rapid declines in Europe and western Siberia (Collar et al. 1994).

Fully protected in all member states of the European Union (listed on Annex 1 of the European Council Directive 79/409/EEC). It is also listed on Appendix II of the Bern Convention.

4.3. Additional protection needs

The BirdLife International, with funding from the European Union and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, produced the "Action Plan for the Corncrake", the plan for the recovery of this globally threatened species. This plan was prepared through a process of international consultations and consensus, engaging the active participation and support of all relevant parties, including a workshop in October 1994, in which representatives from almost all European Range States participated. The Action Plan was accepted at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention, attached to the Council of Europe in December 1995. The Action Plan contains specification of conservation actions with two common main aims:

- maintain or increase the area of habitats suitable for Corncrakes (both natural and man-made),
- manage suitable habitats for Corncrakes in a „corncrake-friendly“ way.

The situation is extremely diverse across Europe. In the north-western part of the Corncrake's range (Ireland, UK, France), intensive conservation actions are undertaken in last remaining Corncrake sites (e.g., RSPB 1994, Green & Williams 1995). On the contrary, Corncrake seems to be ecologically plastic, numerous and widespread species in eastern Europe so far (Russia, Baltic states). The main strongholds are huge areas of extensively managed meadows in Russia with no need of specific conservation actions.

Protection needs:

(1) Preservation of marshland (prevent succession of scrub, etc.), hay meadows and low-intensity farming (preserve and/or restore mosaics of late-mowed hay meadows and stands of marsh vegetation or other tall herbs) in areas of a size adequate to maintain populations.

(2) Promotion of appropriate hay/silage-cutting techniques (reduce area from which two cuts of silage are taken, late harvesting - preferably after mid-July, cut from centre of meadows outwards or from side to side, add bird-flushing equipment to agricultural mechanization, leave patches uncut a day or so during harvesting, etc.).

(3) Hunting bans in eastern Europe and at migratory stop-overs.

(4) Some control of predators, including cats and mink in western and central Europe and foxes and cats in eastern Europe.

The main actions involve advising farmers and land management techniques, use of nature reserves to undertake experimental land management trials, as well as ecological monitoring, censusing and field investigations to evaluate success of the actions and to assess future management needs.

In addition, it will allow as many areas as possible to be included in environmental aid schemes under the European Council Regulation 2078/92 on agricultural production methods compatible with the requirements of the protection of the environment and the maintenance of the countryside.

5. Range States

See Appendix 1 for Range States with breeding populations of Corncrakes (no actual information obtained from Bosnia & Herzegovina and Yugoslavia, contingently from Albania and Macedonia).

6. Comments from Range States

The proposal is based on materials resulting from wide discussions of specialists from different Range States (esp. the Action Plan).

7. Additional remarks

None.

8. References

- Anonymous 1996: *Corncrake*. BirdLife in Europe 7, 16: 2.
- Burger P., Pykal J., Hora J. 1996: *Report on the corncrake working group in 1995*. CSO News 42: 29-30.
- CE 1995: *Action plan for the corncrake*. Council of Europe, Strasbourg.
- Collar N.J., Crosby M.J., Stattersfield A.J. 1994: *Birds to watch 2*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife Int. (Conserv. Ser. No. 4).
- Delov V., Iankov P. & Petkov N. 1995: *Pilot national survey on the corncrake in Bulgaria*. Unpubl. report, BSPB/BirdLife Bulgaria.
- Green R.E. & Williams G. 1995: *Corncrake conservation: research, implementation and future policy*. Manuscript (9 pp.).

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- Stowe T.J. & Green R.E. 1995: *Dangers for corncrakes during migration and wintering - observations from Egyptian migration sites*. Oral presentation on "Internationales Wachtelkönig Symposium", Freising, 25.11.1995.
- Tucker G.M., Heath M.F., Tomialojc L. & Grimmett R.F.A. 1994: *Birds in Europe: their conservation status*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife Int. (Conserv. Ser. No. 3).
- Williams G., Holmes J. & Kirby J. 1995: *Action plans for United Kingdom and European rare, threatened and internationally important birds*. Ibis 137, 1 (suppl.): S201-S213.

Appendix 1

Breeding population sizes of Corncrakes (in pairs) in Range States of the species (mostly Tucker et al. 1994, Bulgaria and Latvia: Anonymous 1996, Czech Republic: Burger et al. 1996, Russia: Mischenko 1995).

	PopMin	PopMax	Year
Austria	400	600	-
Belarus	55,000	60,000	90
Belgium	10	45	81-90
Bulgaria	1,000	1,500	95
Croatia	250	300	-
Czech Republic	1,000		95
Denmark	6	6	91
Estonia	5,000	5,000	-
Finland	500	1,000	92
France	1,050	1,150	92
Germany	260	260	85
Hungary	300	500	-
Ireland	174	174	93
Italy	100	500	-
Latvia	20,000		-95
Liechtenstein	2	4	-
Lithuania	2,000	3,000	85-88
Luxembourg	0	10	-
Moldova	700	1,100	85
Netherlands	50	150	90-92
Norway	50	100	90
Poland	6,600	7,800	-
Romania	3,000	6,000	-
Russian Federation	2 millions	3 millions	95
Slovakia	600	900	-
Slovenia	200	300	-
Spain	4	13	90
Sweden	250	1,000	-
Switzerland	1	13	-91
Turkey	0	10	88
Ukraine	2,000	2,500	93
United Kingdom	487	487	93