Corncrakes are part of the family of crakes and rails; small waterbirds with distinctively large feet, adapted for wet and marshy habitats. However, the corncrake differ from most, in that they live on dry land. They are well-known for their distinctive rasping call, heard day and night. Males and females appear identical, with brown and grey plumage and chestnut wings. Their habitat is meadows or grassland, particularly fields of grass grown for hay or silage, and they need plant cover of at least 20cm tall so they can hide. Fields with margins of nettles, cow parsley or flag iris are necessary as early cover in April, when they return from their wintering grounds in southern Africa. They eat insects and seeds.

Mechanised mowing of fields and meadows led to their decline, as it was carried out earlier in the year, during the breeding season, and virtually all nests would be destroyed. From tens of thousands of birds, their numbers fell to an estimated 2,500 singing males in 1970, 750 in the first full census in 1978, and by 1993 it had reached 480 calling males being recorded.

RSPB Scotland and government departments, supported by SNH and the Scottish Crofters’ Union, began an urgent programme of species recovery. RSPB carried out research to find out the species’ exact requirements, and then began a conservation programme. This included payments to farmers and crofters to delay mowing until August, and to change the method of mowing to reduce chick mortality. For instance, mowing from the centre of the field outwards, allows chicks to escape. Farmers and crofters were (and are) encouraged to provide margins of tall vegetation in the fields to provide cover after mowing – so called corncrake ‘corners’ or ‘corridors’. Changes in grazing management have also had a positive impact.

The last census recorded 1,200 singing males in Scotland, so the species is recovering. It is vital that funding for agri-environment measures under the Scottish Rural Development Plan (SRDP)’s Rural Priorities. Cuts to the agri-environment budget in the last couple of years are a very great threat to a great deal of our farmland wildlife. The hard work that has gone into turning the species’ status in Scotland back from the brink should not be allowed to be reversed.

MSP SPECIES CHAMPION

Michael Russell MSP
Member for: Argyll and Bute
Region: Highlands and Islands
Party: Scottish National Party