

The return of the corncrake to the Wensum Valley

Corncrakes were at one time widespread across the UK with the population declining steadily in the nineteenth and twentieth century to its position now.

The species is becoming increasingly vulnerable in the UK as a breeding bird, with numbers in the key breeding areas on the Scottish islands declining 33% since 2014 and numbers now at their lowest since 2003. This has been identified as a decline due to a variety of things, a combination of habitat destruction on the wintering grounds, hunting on their migration routes plus the recent changes in agricultural schemes and payments to crofters and landowners reducing the incentive to mow later, which is a considerable factor in the survival of recently fledged birds.

Pensthorpe Conservation Trust has been actively involved in the breeding of captive bred corncrakes for release back into the wild since 2006. Working alongside project partners ZSL, RSPB and Natural England to provide young healthy and genetically diverse birds for the corncrake release site at the Nene Washes in Cambridgeshire.

Achieving increasing breeding success, Pensthorpe were soon rearing more than a hundred chicks every year. The Nene Washes project whilst successful to a large degree was seemingly struggling to reach sufficient numbers to create a self-sustaining population with numbers of previous year's youngsters returning to the site to breed. So, in 2015 Pensthorpe Conservation Trust proposed a satellite release scheme here in Norfolk, offering a slightly different habitat to the Nene Washes.

In 2016, whilst still supplying the Nene Washes for its final release, 69 birds were released in Norfolk, comprising of 32 males and 37 females. Moving forward a year, 154 birds were released in 2017, 68 males and 86 females, so we are confident of a higher number returning to the area this year.

During the summer, four calling males were recaptured and identified. We also had reports of other calling birds, so there could have been more than this; but only 4 were confirmed as released birds from 2016.

Generally, they prefer grassland including wet and dry meadows, and tall crops. Last year the returning birds were heard in field margins and small areas of wildflower meadow. They also readily live at close quarters to humans.

We have also received one recovery of a female released in 2017 in southern France; unfortunately hit by a car. The bird travelling a distance of 925 Km in 66 days since its release at the beginning of August. This recovery was found along the route that "wild UK birds' have previously been recovered. So although sad that the bird didn't make it, the ringing recovery adds to the science showing that the captive reared birds are behaving as wild birds, following the correct route.

Previous studies with Geo-locators on corncrake show that the UK birds fly as far south as the Democratic republic of Congo, making the reintroduction of this migratory farmland bird challenging, but very exciting.

In order to gain a good measure of success of the release project it is vital to monitor all returning males in 2018. With this in mind we are asking people to listen out for their distinct 'crex crex' call, largely made at night and report any heard using the #corncrake tag on Twitter @wensummonitors or email crex@pensthorpe.com.