

The Corncrake (*Crex crex*) in Denmark

Ole Thorup

1. Introduction

In the 19th century corncrakes were widespread and common in hay meadows all over Denmark and, on a more limited scale, also in cultivated fields.

2. Development of knowledge about the corncrake in Denmark

During this present century the species has disappeared almost completely as a breeding bird in Denmark. Analogous to the situation in most other countries in Northern and Western Europe, introduction of mowing machines and intensification of agricultural practices in general caused a dramatic population decrease, which started in the most developed parts of Denmark in the first years of this century and spread to the remainder of the country in the 1920s (THORUP 1999). The last two permanently occupied breeding sites - Varde Ådal and Store Vildmose - were abandoned in 1972 and 1984, respectively, and in the most recent Danish Red List (STOLTZE & PIHL 1998) the corncrake was considered extinct due to the fact that the species was not found regularly in any site in Denmark.

3. Distribution and important areas of corncrake population

Very recently, corncrakes have re-established small populations in a few former breeding sites. This re-establishment has taken place partly in areas where action plans directed towards the needs of the corncrake have been implemented, partly in temporarily set-a-side areas.

4. Size and development of national corncrake population

4.1. Size of national corncrake population

Recently, a study estimated the Danish corncrake population 1875-1996 (THORUP 1999). The total in the 19th and early 20th century was estimated by comparing general statements of abundance of corncrakes with those of other species from a large number of qualified sources from 1800 to 1930, and by considering present densities in Belarus, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in suitable habitats to be equivalent to densities a hundred years ago in Denmark. During the last 25 years almost all corncrake observations done by birdwatchers are believed to have been reported to regional bird report committees.

Population levels (see Table 1) were estimated by extracting probable breeders applying criteria put forward by SCHÄFFER (1994).

Table 1: Estimated level of the Danish corncrake population 1875-1998 (THORUP 1999 and unpubl.; S. SKOV in litt.).

Year	No of pairs	Accuracy (scale 0-3)
1875 - 1920	10, - 20,000	1
1971 - 1974	25 - 100	2
1984 - 1994	5 - 20	2
1995 - 1997	10 - 30	2
1998	50 - 200	2

4.2. Development of population

The current increase in observations of long-staying calling corncrakes appears to be real and is hardly solely explained by increased attention

towards the species. Whether the high number of birds - especially in 1998 - is the result of a fluctuation only, or is the onset of a more long-standing improvement of the situation of the species in Denmark it is obviously too early to ascertain.

5. Threats to the corncrake population

Intensive farming, including machine mowing.

6. Conservation status

No data available about the conservation status by law. In the Red Data Book the species is listed as "extinct".

7. Conservation Projects

In Varde Ådal a project named "Operation Corncrake" provides funding for farmers who make a contract with the county involving paragraphs concerning intensification of farming. In its present form these contracts are not sufficiently far-reaching and they will not ensure proper breeding possibilities for corncrakes.

8. Ongoing or planned conservation or study projects

In the mid 1990s two projects are in progress with the goal of creating "recovery areas" for breeding corncrakes. In Store Vildmose parts of the meadows have been strictly protected in a corncrake friendly way, and the preservation plan for the area includes tools permitting the authorities to influence management in other meadow

areas as well. These protection measures may permit successful breeding of corncrakes in the area in future, and in 1998 - the first year after the preservation plan was begun - six calling corncrake males returned (S. Skov in litt., Pedersen 1999).

Most recently, a Corncrake Conservation Action Plan has been worked out, and if this action plan is put into practice, Varde Ådal may very well also be able to function as a corncrake recovery area in future.

Ole Thorup
V. Vedsted Byvej 32,
Vester Vedsted
DK-6760 Ribe
Denmark

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