

## The Corncrake (*Crex crex*) in Luxembourg

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### 1. Introduction

'*Wuechtelkinnék*', meaning 'the King of Quails', is the Luxembourg name for the corncrake.

### 2. Development of knowledge about the corncrake in Luxembourg

The corncrake is considered a regular breeding bird, but in fact it has never been particularly common in Luxembourg. Only two nests have ever been found (1938 and 1956), in each case with 7 eggs.

### 3. Distribution and important areas of corncrake population

Apart from some migrating birds, reports of "calling" males are all from the southern part of the country, most of them from the Alzette valley south of the city of Luxembourg. This is surely the most important area of corncrake conservation in Luxembourg. The *Roeserbann* is a large grassland area and is known to have the largest corncrake area in Luxembourg. About 90% of this zone is used as silage cut grassland (see threats). In good corncrake-years up to 5 males can be heard there.

### 4. Size of national corncrake population

HULTEN & WASSENICH (1961) estimated the population between 45 – 60 pairs, which was surely exaggerated. In the Breeding Atlas of Birds in Luxembourg (MELCHIOR et al. 1987), the author gives no population figure, but says that "the population has always fluctuated and there seems little doubt that a decline is taking place".

During the 1990s, the corncrake population has

been surveyed by the Ornithological working-group of the *Lëtzebuenger Natur- a Vulleschutzliga* and the maximum population is considered to be five singing males. In some years, not one bird was heard.

Even if the population given by HULTEN & WASSENICH (1961) was exaggerated (the authors made a survey of one area and then a projection for the whole country) it shows clearly that the corncrake population was much higher than today.

The minimum population is 0, the maximum population is 5.

### 5. Threats to the corncrake population

There is no doubt that the corncrake population in Luxembourg is decreasing. Major threats to corncrakes are intensification of agriculture, especially the trend towards early and repeated silage cuts instead of haymaking, which effectively removes the cover a ground nesting species so obviously needs. Other factors are the introduction of new strains of grass which, in combination with heavy applications of inorganic fertiliser, create an impenetrable jungle of lush grass to the exclusion of the variety of grasses and plants which used to be typical of hayfields. And as the variety in the vegetation has declined, so too has the range of food sources.

### 6. Conservation status

The corncrake is fully protected by law, but more significant is the fact that the Ministry of the Environment and other authorities get more and more involved in the protection of the corncrake. Nature protection organisations like LNVL - Lëtzebuenger Natur- a Vulleschutzliga

and the Luxembourg Nature Conservation Trust Fondatioun Hëlef fir d'Natur have the opportunity of making contract with farmers to ensure that grassland is cut only after the breeding period (mid June), so that the corncrake and other ground nesting species have time to raise their young.

The corncrake is listed as 2.1 (threat of extinction) in the Luxembourg Red Data Book.

### **7. Conservation projects**

A Life-Natura-2000 project to save the corncrake in the Alzette valley will be in place in two years' time. This means that grassland will be managed in a more extensive way, so that these

areas will be more favourable to corncrake and other species.

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### **References:**

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