

The Corncrake (*Crex crex*) in Romania

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1. Introduction

Before 1997 no reliable data was available about the real situation of corncrake in Romania - level and trend of population, habitat types, biology and ecology data - and there was no particular research of this species.

2. Development of knowledge about the corncrake in Romania

In 1997 a national corncrake survey project was organised by the Romanian Ornithological Society (ROS) with financial support from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The principal objectives of this project were:

- to identify corncrake habitats
- to estimate the corncrake population
- to draw a map of probable corncrake distribution

Thirty-nine co-workers participated at this project (biologists, ornithologists and forestry workers).

3. Size and distribution of corncrake population

The size of the Romanian corncrake population is between 10,000 - 20,000 males. (During the 1997 corncrake survey selected U.T.M. areas were visited by the co-ordinator of project, and additional U.T.M. areas were visited by some co-workers. The first estimation counted only the results from the selected areas and the second estimation was for all visited areas).

The habitat types where males were counted:

- mosaic of humid meadows, humid grasslands and cereal fields

- humid meadows
- interspersed bands of cereal fields and humid meadows
- dry meadows
- interspersed bands of cereal fields and humid grasslands
- humid grasslands
- cereal fields
- interspersed bands of dry meadows and dry grasslands
- lucerne fields
- dry grasslands
- potatoes fields (only in the Danube Delta)
- maize fields (only in the Danube Delta)

The largest counts in male numbers were recorded in the areas where the habitat types were a mosaic of meadows, grasslands and cereal fields (wheat, barley, oat and rye) and situated on the riverine meadows, on humid territories, frequently near swampy or floodable surfaces.

It must be noted that in some areas corncrake males were counted only during May: there is no explanation as to why the corncrakes left these territories. In the majority of the areas visited the numbers of males during May was larger than the numbers recorded in June. These fluctuations could be the result of migration and the males' movements during May to search the breeding areas. Some ornithologists - Dan Munteanu and Florin Feneru - counted corncrake males in the mountain meadows in the Summer of 1998; first, in the Western Carpathians and second, in the Eastern Carpathians.

Frequently there were large areas of suitable terrain for corncrake where the species was not found adjacent to occupied territories. In the areas visited, the corncrake was not found in 44,46% of territories with favourable habitats. Some co-workers tried to explain the missing corncrakes by intensive grazing; the habitats were humid we

grasslands and dry meadows. Sorin Trelea has suggested that wild cats and dogs could be another reason for the corncrakes' absence in some areas.

The breeding areas of corncrake spread from points following the riverine meadows in Romania. It is impossible to estimate with accuracy the trend of the Romanian corncrake population as there was no accurate information about this species before the ROS 1997 census.

4. Conservation Status

Since 1996 (Act nr. 103/1996) the corncrake is a species protected from hunting. From 1995 it appears in the Fauna Red Book Project of Romania.

5. Conservation Projects

Materials about "The Corncrake Survey in Romania, 1997" appeared in *ALCEDO* (magazine of the ROS) and in *MIGRANS* (publicated bilingually in Romanian and Hungarian by the *Milvus* branch of ROS), before and after the development of the survey.

We also broadcast brief talks during the development of the project on local (Radauti) and regional (Iasi) radio stations during May 1997. Ample material about the results of the project was broadcast in October 1997 at The Iasi Radio Station, which can be listened to in the whole territory of Romania.

A small folder about corncrake was developed and an open letter written by ROS. These were sent in the last week of November 1998 to ROS branches, the museums of natural sciences, Romsilva's county branches (the national forestry agency) and to the county agencies of environmental protection. In the letter the development and results of the "Corncrake Survey in Romania, 1997" are set out and also ROS proposals for the future. This letter was published in October's edition of *ALCEDO*, too. In this way

we try to find co-workers to cover the whole territory for the next project.

6. Ongoing or planned conservation or study projects

ROS established the objectives for the future conservation of the corncrake. Proposals for a new national project are:

- To estimate the real level of the corncrake population in Romania by a survey concentrated on the riverine meadows and on adjacent territories; in the second stage, to survey the mountain meadows, especially in the Western and Eastern Carpathians.
- To specify the distribution, the abundance and the density of corncrake in different habitats.
- To study corncrake biology and ecology in Romanian conditions by organising one or two teams of ornithologists in some areas with high corncrake density in 1997.
- To identify the reasons for corncrakes missing in some territories with favourable habitat.
- To identify a map of habitat types and corncrakes' distribution in Romania.
- To establish the trend of the corncrake population in Romania.

Difficulties:

During the field trips access is sometimes very difficult, especially on village roads which can only be travelled on foot. The most important problem - because of the economic situation and of the austerity budget existing in Romania - is obtaining sponsorship in order to develop a new project.

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