

The Corncrake (*Crex crex*) in Switzerland

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1. Introduction

The corncrake was common and widely distributed in the XIXth century, declining from the beginning of the XXth century and disappearing in the lowlands since the 1950s. Nowadays, the high valleys of the Alps in the east and of the Jura in the west are the only sites still occasionally occupied by singing males (7 in 1998), generally above 1000 m, but with no proof of breeding, these birds are probably related to the populations of the French Jura and Italian Alps respectively. Successful breeding under present conditions is very unlikely. The last breeding record was in 1990, after one in 1984 or 1985 and one in 1978.

2. Distribution of corncrake population

2.1. Spatial distribution

Most recent records show that from 1996 to 1998, 30 singing males have been recorded in Spring and Summer (Tab. 1), and three migrating birds have been recorded in Autumn (2 at col de Bretolet VS).

2.2. Arrivals and altitude

Most of the arrivals of singing males are in June, especially in the middle of the month (Fig. 1). Records in May are due to migrating birds. The

Table 1: Number of singing males recorded by cantons from 1996 to 1998; s = singing male, m = migrating bird in autumn.

Years	Grisons	Neuchâtel	Vaud	Valais	St-Gall	Schwytz	Tessin	Zürich	Total
1996	5 s	0	4 s	1 m	0	2 s	1 s	0	12 s/1 m
1997	3 s	min. 5 s	1 s/1 m	2 s/1 m	0	0	0	0	11 s/2 m
1998	4 s	1 s	0	0	1 s	0	0	1 s	7 s
1996-98	12 s	min. 6 s	5 s/1 m	2 s/2 m	1 s	2 s	1 s	1 s	30 s/3 m

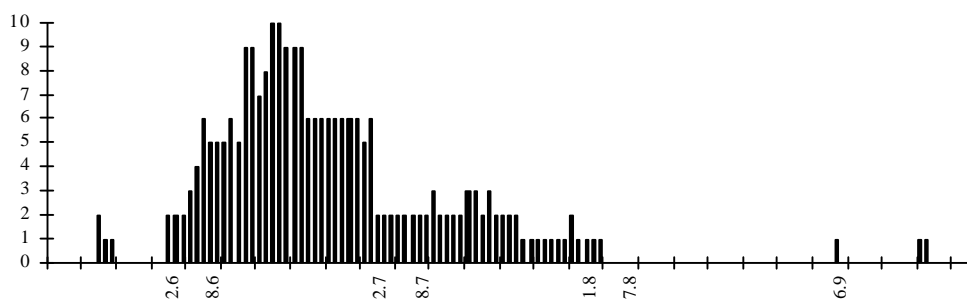


Figure 1: Presence of corncrake in Switzerland from 1996 to 1998. Records in May refer to migrating birds, those from June to August mostly to installed birds, those in September to migrating birds at high altitude (1400 m in Jura and 1923 m at Col de Bretolet).

species used to be a much earlier migrant when it was still breeding in the lowlands (March-April). The presence of sufficiently high cover is determinant for the presence of singing males. At 1000 m, the grass is usually cut between the end of June and mid July, which leaves at best only three or four weeks for breeding. Usually, absolutely no grass is left after mowing, because farmers think it must look „clean“.

3. Conservation and Protection

Since 1996, the Schweizer Vogelschutz (SVS) has been coordinating a three year study which should lead to a national action plan. All the po-

tential sites for corncrakes have been censused each year, and farmers have been informed of the presence of the birds. On some occasions, contracts have been agreed with farmers for delayed mowing until 1 September and friendly mowing. The official conservation offices were asked for cooperation in the most important cantons for the species (Grisons, Neuchâtel, Vaud, Wallis), and the financial compensations for delayed mowing were afforded by them.

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