

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

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### 1. Introduction: situation of birds in Yugoslavia

It is difficult to understand the corncrake situation in Yugoslavia without reference to the condition generally of wild bird populations living here.

Birds have been neglected for decades. The fact they exist, the diversity of species and their place in nature are things in which very few people are interested. A feature that in other countries is considered a thing of beauty, and a cause for pride and inspiration, here has been noticed only if can provide monetary gain - by hunting, for example. Generations of people in the past 50 years have had little chance to learn about birds either at school or via the news media. They also never had the opportunity to realise the importance of bird protection. Nor did they have knowledge of, or influence over, protective measures in law.

The responsibility for this situation must lie with government attitudes and the administrative system. Two ministries, one for each republic (Serbia and Montenegro), are responsible for birds and wildlife. They are the Ministry for the Protection of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Waterpower Engineering. They are widely criticised by the NGO community for lack professional expertise and their failure to react to public demand for improved nature protection.

There are bird-protection laws, but they are almost never enforced. There are national parks, nature reserves and other areas that should be under special care, but natural phenomena in them are destroyed. Even hunting in them is legal! Forest rangers and environment or hunt inspectors generally, even ornithologists in government service, cannot recognise the basic bird species.

There are no coherent research programmes and few reliable data about any bird species. There

is hardly any literature published about birds. What exists is of poor quality and usually has many mistakes. Birdwatching and ecotourism are activities which are totally unknown to most people.

### 2. Corncrake population in Yugoslavia

Corncrakes have shared the destiny of other birds in Yugoslavia. There are no coherent data about population size and distribution, not even an approximation. We can assume with some confidence that the population is not large and that it is declining.

In Serbia corncrakes may be found in Vojvodina, in meadows close to the Sava and Danube rivers, and in south Serbia in the vicinity of the town of Leskovac. However, no systematic information is available. In Montenegro, there is no current indication that corncrakes are present at all.

### 3. Corncrakes and law in Yugoslavia

#### 3.1. Serbia:

According to "The Regulation about the Protection of Natural Rarities of the Republic of Serbia", the corncrake is first on the list of the most endangered species, which also includes another 272 bird species. It might be asked what justification exists for these birds to be included in the list when there is no national survey of, or monitoring programme for, any species? It may be supposed the species enumerated are copied from another country's regulation. Anomalies such as the Canada goose suggest an origin to the west of Yugoslavia.

Corncrakes are, like the other birds listed in the Regulation, protected from killing, trapping

or being kept in captivity. The collecting or destroying of their eggs and nests is prohibited, as is disturbing them or destroying their habitats. Being in possession of empty shells of their eggs or dead birds is not allowed. The Regulation also states clearly that unless special conservation measures are provided, many species listed can disappear from the countryside.

In reality all this protection exists only on paper - it is almost never enforced.

### 3.2. *Montenegro:*

According to "The Decision about the Protection of Rare, Reduced, Endemic and Endangered Plant and Animal Species of the Republic of Montenegro", corncrakes are protected in similar terms to those in Serbia.

## 4. Factors that endanger the corncrake's survival in Yugoslavia

By analogy with other countries, we may assume that the population trend of corncrakes in Yugoslavia is negative. There are many arguments that support this conclusion.

The main factor is probably the destruction of the corncrake's habitats. During the summer of 1998 volunteers working for The Society for the Protection of Wild Birds of Yugoslavia visited many localities in Vojvodina close to Sava and Danube. This was part of a general survey of the present condition of the countryside and bird habitats. Activity was not dedicated to corncrakes alone but to all bird species. What we found was devastation, resulting from actions both by the State and by individuals.

This was caused mainly by a major recent increase in house-building, the construction of factories and other businesses, and agricultural expansion. From 1991 until now the human population of Serbia has increased by several million war refugees. They settled mostly in the area around Belgrade and in Vojvodina in marginal areas of land, for example in or close to wetlands. Even when hostilities stopped, most of the refugees remained there. Tolerated by the govern-

ment, these people have totally changed the countryside in just a few years. The region of main impact is where we assume that most corncrakes in the country are found.

Even wetlands that are under State protection are in a poor condition. For example, Obedska Bara, a Ramsar site and nature reserve adjacent to the Sava river, has suffered agricultural and other encroachment. It is now largely dry. Riparian forest in the reserve is overexploited for timber and over-run with domestic pigs. Marginal wet meadow systems and other grazing lands have been eliminated. Naturally, the bird community has suffered from these many changes in recent years. Maladministration by the Ministry for the Protection of the Environment and the Institute for the Protection of Nature (which manages most of the national parks and nature reserves in Serbia) has led to these areas being damaged.

Most hunting takes place in Vojvodina where, although nominally protected, corncrakes often fall victim. They are sometimes killed on purpose, but probably suffer also because of their similarity to quail or grey partridge. Indeed it is known that corncrakes have been treated as game birds. This is probably because the enforcement agencies lack the knowledge, recognition skills or interest to protect them. It is also well-known that domestic and foreign hunters bribe the hunting guards, allowing them to shoot whatever they like endangered or not. That hunting is legally permitted in national parks and nature reserves is inexplicable.

Modern, large-scale agriculture has been practised for decades in Vojvodina. Although there is still no investment in agriculture by large foreign companies, the situation is bad enough for corncrakes. By law, agricultural machines must be fitted with devices for scaring mammals and birds out of their way. In reality this almost never happens, but even if this law were enforced it could do little to save corncrake nestlings from mowing machines. Intensive farming is little practised in other parts of Yugoslavia but the use of agrochemicals is widespread, with attendant risk of damage to wildlife, corncrakes included. All this

is informed conjecture: again, there are no studies to demonstrate cause and effect.

### **5. Required conservation measures for corncrakes in Yugoslavia**

It is important to organise the first corncrake survey in Yugoslavia. Only then will we gather exact knowledge of where they are and how many. Knowing that, we can study the factors influencing numbers and establish preventative measures.

Funding available to The Society for the Protection of Wild Birds of Yugoslavia is insufficient to undertake a full-scale project. However, in 1999 we hope to gather basic information about where corncrakes are found, and perhaps monitor some of those places. We must also insist that the laws to protect corncrakes is enforced in these areas, and pressure the responsible public authorities.

It is also important to introduce corncrakes to the people. While knowledge of birds is very limited, the corncrake may be totally unknown except to specialists. Promoting the corncrake to people as a beautiful creature which requires protection, using all kinds of media, is an absolute need if we are to make any progress influencing public authorities. These measures would aim to raise people's knowledge, interest and feelings of love and care, and would stimulate attention by explaining all the factors which make them an endangered species. Opportunities also exist to target farmers, forest rangers, hunting/environment inspectors and others with printed materials aimed at raising their awareness of the bird and related issues.

In this matter of awareness-raising our society has already taken some steps. After the Corncrake Workshop in Hilpoltstein, we gave some talks about corncrakes on television. In the spring of 1999 we will be showing films on several TV stations, teaching people about corncrakes and asking them to report their presence locally. Plans exist to produce and distribute posters and pamphlets about corncrakes to raise public awareness and encourage reporting of the birds'

presence, subject to funding being available.

Campaigning against the drainage of wetlands including wet meadows, and awareness-raising about its impact on wildlife generally, is another task needed to prevent further destruction of corncrake habitats. We are already dealing with this matter.

Turning to more eco-friendly ways in agriculture should be promoted, as well as producing healthy food without the use of artificial fertilisers and other chemicals. Organising ecotourism and raising interest in birdwatching with local people and foreign tourists could bring a totally new perception of birds, corncrakes included.

Presenting hunting as something primitive, cruel and old-fashioned - as balanced against the realisation of human benefit from the enjoyment and protection of wildlife - is also very important. A large part of the activities of our society are dedicated to this last objective.

### **6. Conclusions**

The corncrake population in Yugoslavia is poorly known and under threat, as are the populations of many other birds. Much is to be done to promote change; probably many years will pass until positive results emerge. Decades of total neglect and no significant action to protect nature have had serious consequences for birds generally. In order to save corncrakes and other birds there are many things to be done, and the struggle will have no end. As a national NGO, and the first which promotes bird protection in this country, we are surely willing to do just that.

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