The decline of the corncrake during most of the 20th century was one of the longest and most severe of any bird in the UK. The main cause was the destruction of nests and chicks in hay and silage meadows by mowing machinery. Action to reverse the decline, involving many crofters and farmers in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, was initiated by the RSPB in 1992 and now involves many other organisations, including the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department, Scottish Natural Heritage, National Trust for Scotland and the Scottish Crofting Foundation.

Has this action worked?

Corncrakes are counted annually within the core of the species’ range and every five years in the whole of the UK. The fourth full survey was undertaken in 2003, when 832 singing males were counted. This represents a considerable increase since previous full surveys in 1998 (589 males) and 1993 (480 males) and exceeds the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) target of 573 males (the number recorded in 1988). Annual monitoring of the core area for corncrakes in Scotland (which holds more than 90% of the birds) indicates that numbers increased in 10 of the last 11 years.
with the population in 2004 reaching 1,040 birds – more than twice the number in the same areas in 1993. Between 1978 and 1993, the corncrake population declined by an average of more than 3% each year, but since 1993 it has been increasing by more than 5% per year.

Schemes to enhance conditions for corncrakes were implemented during this period of increase. By 2003, more than 5,500 ha of land were under management to change the timing and method of hay and silage mowing or to provide suitable habitat in spring and autumn. The estimated improvement in corncrake breeding productivity from these actions has been sufficient to account for the observed change in population trend.

A second target of the BAP is to expand the breeding range of corncrakes in the UK. While the population and the number of occupied 1 km grid squares have increased substantially within the core area of the species’ range, there has been a further decline in the number of 10 km squares occupied away from this core area. Future work needs to focus on expanding the breeding range of corncrakes away from the core areas in the Western Isles.

Contact: mark.o'brien@rspb.org.uk
