

## *Irish Farmers Help Save a Bird Whose Calls Used to Herald Summer*

The corncrake's cry, thought to be loud and harsh, is a poignant reminder for older people of the advent of warmer weather. Efforts are underway to preserve its call for younger generations.

By Ed O'Loughlin

Aug. 4, 2022

BELMULLET, Ireland — The call of the corncrake — a small, shy bird related to the coot — is harsh and monotonous, yet for older generations it was a beloved sound of summer in Ireland, evoking wistful memories of warm weather, hay making and romantic nights.

These days, though, its call is seldom heard outside a few scattered enclaves along the western coast, like Belmullet, a remote peninsula of County Mayo. Once numerous, the birds became threatened in much of their Western European range in the late 20th century, mainly because of changes in agricultural practices that deprived them of places to breed.

“Older people still talk about coming home from dances in summer nights and hearing the corncrakes calling from the fields all around them,” said Anita Donaghy, assistant head of conservation at Birdwatch Ireland. “You hear about them making special trips to places in the west where they are going to hear the corncrake again. It’s sad that many young people have never heard it.”

But there is hope for the return of the corncrake's call. In recent years, conservationists, government agencies and farmers have come together to try to reverse the decline in numbers of the corncrakes — and preserve the corncrake's “kek kek” for new generations.

The corncrake (Crex Crex)



Efforts to rescue the corncrake in Ireland began in the 1990s and included the banning of early mowing of meadows where corncrakes might breed. Those rules, though, were often resented by farmers, who wanted to use the grass for animal feed.

A new state-led program, Corncrake Life, takes a more proactive, collaborative approach, working with farmers to preserve and even recreate the kind of rough meadows beside the Atlantic Ocean where the tawny birds, with their long necks and round bodies, mate and raise their young.



Corncrakes became extinct in much of their Western European range in the late 20th century, mainly because of changes in agricultural practices that deprived them of places to breed. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

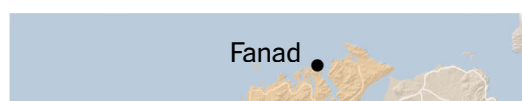
The 25 acres of Feargal Ó Cuinneagán, a veterinarian and corncrake enthusiast near Belmullet, once grew only grass, but now bristle with clumps of stinging nettles, cultivated on rotting bales of straw.

John Carey, director of Corncrake Life, the government-led program, said that such efforts were a result of changing attitudes. “For generations, farmers have been told that nettles are weeds. They’re dirty. Get rid of them,” he said. “They’re a hard sell for farmers, but they are really good cover for corncrakes.”

As if to back his point, a male corncrake started calling from a nettle bed nearby.

Corncrake Life started 18 months ago with a pilot group of 50 farmers in the Atlantic coastal counties of Donegal, Galway and Mayo. Seventy-five percent of Corncrake Life’s initial budget of 5.9 million euros, about \$6 million, for five years came from the European Union.

Corncrakes evolved to nest and feed on the ground in the loose grass and weeds of natural floodplains, and the bird’s numbers are still strong in parts of Asia and Eastern Europe.





By The New York Times

But in Western Europe, over thousands of years, the corncrake also adapted to the similar conditions that were created by traditional, low-intensity farming in grassland meadows and field margins. There, the grasses were long enough to provide cover from predators, but thin enough for the corncrakes to run through. Though corncrakes are good fliers, and migrate each year from winter feeding grounds in Africa, their instinct, when threatened, is to run and hide.





A sign with information about corncrakes in bushes of stinging nettle, a plant treated as a weed but one that offers good cover for the birds. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

As agriculture modernized and industrial farming expanded, artificial fertilizer allowed farmers to mow their meadows earlier in the year, interfering with the corncrake's mid- to late-summer breeding season. Their habitats were erased in many places in Western Europe. But in remote coastal areas like Belmullet, and a few other enclaves in England, Ireland, Scandinavia and Scotland, poor land and wet climate delayed the arrival of industrial farming, allowing corncrakes to hold out.

Though their numbers have stabilized in recent years at an estimated 150 breeding pairs, the Irish population is estimated to have fallen 96 percent since the 1970s, and the survivors remain vulnerable.

In such wet and windblown parts of western Ireland, farms are typically small, at 20 acres to 40 acres, and suited mainly for raising low numbers of sheep or cattle. Few farmers earn a full-time living from their land, and alternative sources of income are often welcome.





Cattle grazing in Brendan Lynsky's field. Mr. Lynsky is one of the farmers working with Corncrake Life. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

In return for annual payments of up to €304 euros per acre for the most thoroughly corncrake-friendly preparations, farmers are required to plant a proportion of their land with crops not intended to be food, but to provide cover for breeding corncrakes. The rest of the grassland, ideally, is left to revert to traditional meadow, where multiple species of native grasses mix with wildflowers and weeds. Artificial fertilizers and weed killers are not allowed.

“We don’t reward farmers for having a corncrake on their land, we reward them for having the habitat,” Mr. Carey said. “Even if a corncrake never showed up, you’d get skylarks, meadow pipits, all kinds of flowers, invertebrates and butterflies. The greatest value of this land isn’t in food production, it’s in public goods and services — clean water, wildlife diversity, carbon sequestration. It’s time we started paying for that.”

Patrick Mangan, 57, a farmer and corncrake enthusiast, stood recently in his partly rewilded meadow on the Belmullet Peninsula, proudly pointing to the nettles, cow parsley, long grasses and wildflowers where corncrakes are growing in number again. At one point, the Belmullet population fell to as low as four calling males; 38 were counted in 2021.

“I remember in the 1970s, this area was full of corncrakes,” Mr. Mangan said. “Then farmers started mowing grass earlier, and that ruined it, until the last corncrake in this area was right here, on this land. The corncrake was nearly wiped out here. And if he is, we’ll never get him back again.”



Corncrake incubators at Fota Wildlife Park in County Cork, where 10 eggs found in a field in Fanad were brought and later hatched. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

In corncrake habitats, farmers are asked to reverse their normal mowing practice, and to start cutting grass in the middle of their fields, and work their way out to the edge. This gives the ground-dwelling birds a chance to creep away. Shane McIntyre, a Belmullet mowing contractor who volunteers with Corncrake Life, has invented a new “flushing bar” to be fixed to the front of tractors — a boom fitted with jangling chains — to scare off corncrakes and other wildlife before the mowers snare them.

Last month in Fanad, at the tip of County Donegal in the north, a farmer mowing his field uncovered a corncrake nest with 11 intact eggs. Under a new protocol, the eggs were driven 300 miles to Fota Wildlife Park in County Cork, at the other end of the country. There, they were hatched in a special facility, to be released back into the field where they were found.

The park is also home to a small captive breeding population of corncrakes. When it first announced the program in 2013, the park was surprised to be contacted by numerous farmers hoping to get birds to recolonize their land.

“It’s part of history. It’s in their memory,” Sean McKeown, the director of the park, said of the farmers. “The good old days, when they were young.”





Clumps of stinging nettles, deliberately cultivated on rotting straw bales to encourage restoration of the corncrake population. Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times