



# CREX FUTURES: Pan-European Corncrake Conservation Workshop

Hosted By Corncrake/Traonach LIFE and the National Parks  
and Wildlife Service

## Abstract

The proceedings of the Crex Futures Workshop as part of the Corncrake LIFE project (Grant Agreement No. LIFE18 NAT/IE/000090 LIFE Atlantic Crex) HELD IN Belmullet, Co. Mayo, Ireland on 7/8 May 2024



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agus Fiadhúlra  
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## Introduction

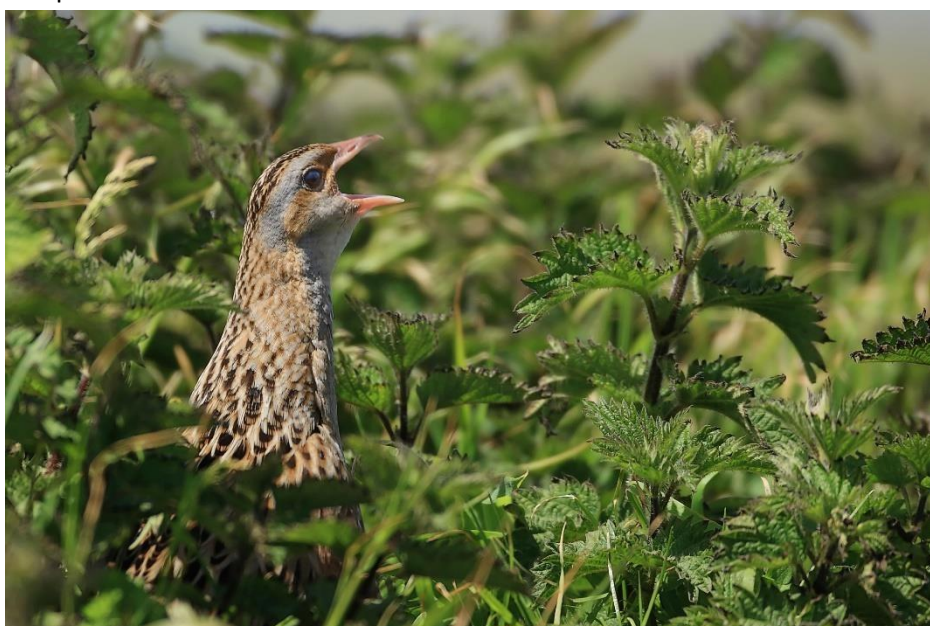
Corncrake conservation experts from across Europe converged on Belmullet Co. Mayo on May 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> 2024 as part of a workshop hosted by the Corncrake/Traonach LIFE project and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The workshop showcased the work of farmers and local communities across Ireland which has seen a population rebound of the endangered corncrakes in recent years, particularly during the tenure of the LIFE project. The workshop also acted as a catalyst to improve communication between corncrake conservation practitioners from across Europe and to generate new synergies between all stakeholders working in the area of corncrake conservation.

Corncrakes are shy and secretive farmland birds, which have become the archetypal species indicator of landscape level alteration of grassland management due to agricultural intensification. Across northern and western Europe their decline has been staggering and many member states now have populations that are critically low. Despite being an Annex species under the Birds directives, efforts to restore corncrake populations have been limited and often curtailed by funding and resources.

Under the stewardship of Corncrake/Traonach LIFE, the conservation efforts in Ireland have seen a dramatic improvement in the bird population nationally and the LIFE project hosted a workshop to ensure dissemination of results and to promote knowledge exchange within the birds range in north and west Europe. The learnings from Corncrake/Traonach LIFE, both in terms of concrete conservation actions delivered by specialist teams, and the development of integrated systems such as results-based agri-environmental payments schemes (RBPS) highlight that a multi-faceted and adaptable approach is the key to species recovery.

The corncrake workshop ran over two days and was attended by a range of conservation experts as well as local farmers and participants in the Corncrake/Traonach LIFE project from across Ireland. The workshop was delivered under project action E4: Networking with other LIFE and/or non-LIFE projects. The format and structure of the workshop allowed for a combination of talks, seminars, field visits and workshop with target outputs over the event. Over 80 participants attended the workshop with a further 100 people tuning in via a live Facebook stream across the globe.

These proceedings outline the workshop outputs and considers the findings from groups as surmised by the workshop chair.





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## Workshop Agenda

# Crex futures

Belmullet, Co Mayo, Ireland

**Tue 7 & Wed 8 May 2024**

A two day workshop focussing on bringing knowledge of Corncrake conservation in North-West Europe up to date and identifying future approaches

### Day 1

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11:00 Tea/Coffee

**11:30 Welcome and introduction (Alan Lauder; Workshop chair)**

**12:00 Workshop opening (Minister Malcolm Noonan)**

**12:15 Population trends across Western Europe (Chris Bailey; RSPB)**

**12:35 CorncrakeLIFE: Progress, learnings and the future (John Carey; CorncrakeLIFE)**

**12:55 Interwoven Futures: Findings from the Socio-Economic Evaluation Baseline Survey of Traonach Corncrake LIFE' (Caroline Crowley)**

13:15 Lunch

14:00 Corncrake Reintroduction project: A long Journey (Chrissie Kelley: Pensthorpe Conservation Trust)

14:20 International collaboration as a tool for Corncrake conservation (Thibault Cottineau and Ryan Boswarthick)

14:40 Balancing corncrakes and other species priorities (Mary McAndrew; ACRES Project)

15:00 Bioacoustics and Thermal Imaging drone trials (Andrea Paresi-ATU)

15:20 Break

15:45 Short communications session (12 minute talks)

- [Arnault Laudelout- Corncrakes in Belgium](#)
- [Ciaran Cronin – Trailing the use of Conservation detection dogs \(Wildeye\)](#)
- [Shealgh Parlene- Corncrake Conservation Skye \(RSPB\)](#)
- [Alfie Caravhalio- Invertebrate Biodiversity in corncrake habitats \(ATU\)](#)
- [Caitríona Ní Cheallaigh- Community engagement in Ireland \(Corncrake LIFE\)](#)

16:45 Synopsis from the Chair

17:00 Session close

19:00 Dinner

21:00 Evening Corncrake tour



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## Day 2

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Workshop attendees will be broken into pre-determined groups for the site visits and workshop breakout sessions.

### **09:00 Site visits/Field Trips**

- 1) Corncrake LIFE land management area (Led by Corncrake LIFE)
- 2) Annagh Marsh (Led by Corncrake LIFE/LIFE on Machair)

### **12:30 Working Lunch: Networking and comments board**

### **13:45 Round up from site visits & points made during lunch (Chair: Alan Lauder)**

### **14:15 Workshops**

1. Corncrake Conservation- a SWOT analysis (30 minutes)
2. Role of predation and its management (30 minutes)

### **15:15 Break (15 minutes)**

3. Balancing species priorities (30 minutes)
4. Results-based agri-environmental schemes; lessons and learnings (30 minutes)

### **16:30 Workshop feedback**

### **17:00 Final questions, summing up, discussion and identified actions**

### **18:00 Workshop end**

## **Thursday May 9<sup>th</sup>**

Some workshop attendees will still be in Mayo on the 9<sup>th</sup> and the LIFE project will facilitate other site visits as required



## Minister Noonan's Opening Address

*Dea-tráthnóna gach duine. Tá an-áthas orm a bheith anseo leat i mBéal an Mhuirthead inniu chun an ceardlann seo a sheoladh go hoifigiúil. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an mbainisteoir tionscadail John Carey as cuireadh a thabhairt dom.*

*Good afternoon everybody. I am delighted to be here with you in Belmullet today to launch Crex Futures, and I wish to thank Project Manager, Dr John Carey for inviting me.*

*I would like to particularly welcome our visitors from overseas, including Scotland, England, France, Belgium and Switzerland. I hope that I have not left anyone out!*

*I think the presence of so many people from other countries is a good indicator of the reach of, and interest in, this fascinating bird and the efforts that are being by many people to protect it. I am looking forward to hearing about their experiences of corncrake conservation.*

*Corncrakes have been a feature of Ireland's grassland and farming landscapes that for many generations heralded the start of summer and the beginning of a schedule of work that brought family, neighbours and communities together. The unseen but often heard corncrake provided a metronome to the rhythm of the summer. Its persistence and determination to make itself known was an attribute which didn't always win it friends, but invariably made it conspicuous. A bit like a politician!*

*The male bird's unique call in many ways offered a sacrificial distraction to the real treasure- that being the female corncrake on her nest. Of course, ultimately it is the female bird that requires protection and too often she was the one who suffered the most. Her instinct to protect and nourish her young left her vulnerable and exposed.*

*The corncrake's voice has been quietened, along with many other creatures with whom we had previously lived in a balanced harmony. The corn bunting comes to mind- the last pair were known here on the Mullet peninsula. They are gone now and the fear of other losses is palpable. Corncrakes require a slower pace- whether that be the speed of the mower in the field or simply the cadence of life, there is a richness to be found in finding the time to do more by simply doing less.*

*Healthy landscapes that support communities and nature are an ambition we need across Europe.*

*Here on the Mullet peninsula, and indeed across the western seaboard where corncrakes can still be heard, we are still gifted with landscapes that support that fine balance between biodiversity and humanity- which are not mutually exclusive. I have visited many of the places where farming and nature co-exist, and despite narratives to the contrary, I have seen that when leadership emerges on the side of nature conservation and on the side of community, great things are manifest.*





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*Farmers in these high nature value areas increasingly find themselves in receipt of payments for products once considered 'intangible' as they had no market value. But we know that these outputs from farmland are considered fundamental to our wellbeing such as clean water, water attenuation, carbon sequestration and wildlife.*

*Rewarding farmers to manage their land for wildlife, with wildlife, is without doubt the future we need to embrace. We have seen the progress in the past few years, where an approach of results-based agri-environmental schemes are paving the way to new and better outcomes to managing our landscapes.*

*For 30 years, the National Parks and Wildlife Service have been involved in the conservation of corncrakes. The birds reached their lowest ebb in the 1990s and despite the loss of the Shannon Callows and Moy populations they held on. In the past five years, the cumulative effort of the Corncrake LIFE project and the NPWS Corncrake Programme has seen a 35% increase in the national corncrake population.*

*Like all LIFE projects, partnerships and collaboration are an essential component and Corncrake LIFE is a collaboration between the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Atlantic Technological University, Fota Wildlife Park and Údarás na Gaeltachta. From focusing on saving individual birds to focusing now on landscapes as a whole, we have seen remarkable progress. I have seen during my own tenure as the Minister with responsibility for nature conservation, how it is people that drive this change in attitude, and while politics may be slow to respond at first, it is responding as people increasingly demand it.*

*In various poems, the corncrake has been used a metaphor by poets for the decline of the Irish language as in Pádhraic Ó Finneadha's poem 'Don Traonach' ('To The Corncrake') where he says:*

*is trua liom do chás, 'gus is rómhaith mar a thuigim  
duit, mar is amhlaidh 'n scéal le glór na nGael, is tá  
imeacht as i léas an dóchais*

*O gentle corncrake,  
I feel for you and understand your plight because  
it's like that of the Gaels  
whose voice is vanishing in a ray of hope.*

*My hope is that both the Irish language and the Corncrake will continue to survive and thrive as an intrinsic part of our cultural landscape. In conclusion, I am much heartened by the title of this workshop: Crex Futures – to me this means that there is a future for this unique bird.*

*I would like to warmly welcome you again to this workshop on the protection and conservation of these birds, which for many people are a representation of a landscape and a way of life.*

*I look forward to meeting you as the day progresses and wish you all a Céad Míle Fáilte to Co. Mayo.*



## Seminar session- Day one

### Presentation synopsis

#### **The changing populations of Corncrake in Western Europe focusing on Scotland as a case study. Chris Bailey (Chris Bailey; RSPB)**

Chris Bailey from the Royal Society of the Protection of Birds (Scotland) gave an overview of the decline, resurgence and then slight decline again of Scotland's corncrake population. The birds are now largely limited to the western Scottish Isles. Chris outlined research conducted by the RSPB on corncrake survival and movements and how changes in payment structures and funding gaps to farmers lead to a drop in bird numbers since 2014- despite a significant positive change between 1994 and 2014 which seen a tripling of numbers. RSPB are currently managing 'Corncrake Calling' which is working with land managers to improve habitat conditions for the birds across Scotland as well as an education programme. Corncrake calling is also active in advocacy with workshops, technical leaflets and the development of a corncrake action plan. Chris also outlined the return of Corncrakes to Rathlin Island in Northern Ireland the potential of a wider range synergy between sites.

#### **Corncrake LIFE: Progress, learning and the future (John Carey, Corncrake LIFE)**

John Carey from Corncrake LIFE gave participants a synopsis of the work of the project to date, focusing on the background to the project, its progress in the first three years and it's key learnings. The project is managing a significant land holding in cooperation with landowners and farmers across the northwest and western seaboard of Ireland where the population of corncrakes remains. Highlighting some of the primary actions such as ELC creation, farm planning and habitat restoration, John also presented some of the ancillary actions such as predation risk management, schools programmes and a significant level of community engagement. The presentations key message was to '*Think Corncrake, act landscape*' and encouraged stakeholders to work at a broader scale to restore habitat integrity beyond typical corncrake territories as in the model of Corncrake LIFE. He finished by outlining that Corncrake Conservation in Ireland needs dedicated support systems and continuity as well as strong cooperation across borders, a new European Species Action Plan and increased synergy between conservation groups.

#### **Interwoven Futures: Findings from the Socio-Economic Evaluation of Corncrake/ Traonach LIFE (Caroline Crowley/Brendan O'Keefe)**

Brendan and Caroline gave a detailed and comprehensive oversight of their work with Corncrake LIFE to explore interaction between the many stakeholders of Corncrake LIFE including farmers and landowners, community members and professional stakeholders. Their baseline work has looked at the theme of integration and how an integrated approach is key to delivering conservation action and build a more resilient socio-ecological system. They gave an overview of the impressions of farmers, Professionals, and local community stakeholders about the project and nature conservation in general. They also provided a synopsis of the demographics of project participants. The findings of the baseline study included recognising the need for local conservation advocates, integrating conservation objectives with local farming needs via adaptable approaches and developing payments with local informants to ensure they are fair, appropriate & attractive.

## **Corncrake Reintroduction project: A long Journey (Chrissie Kelley: Pensthorpe Conservation Trust)**

With over two decades of experience of working on corncrakes, Chrissie Kelley gave an overview of the efforts to reintroduce corncrakes via a captive breeding programme in the UK. A comprehensive insight into corncrake captive breeding and husbandry was demonstrated as well as an overview of monitoring the success of the reintroduction. The importance of undertaking a feasibility study and using strong genetics was highlighted. Birds from Scottish parents were four times more likely to return to release sites and clutches vary from four to ten eggs. The birds are now parent-reared which takes longer get a high numbers of chicks and are captured and taken from parents at 14 days old and released at 35-40 days old. Initial release at the Nene washes went well but numbers began to drop and focus moved to the Wensum Valley but unsuitable habitat lead to wide dispersal. Release then moved to WWT Welney as birds had returned to this site and wild breeding was happening. While there has been a lot of success, a sustainable population is still not established.

## **International collaboration for Corncrake conservation (Thibault Cottineau/ Ryan Boswarthick)**

France has seen a dramatic decline in the corncrake population from almost 2800 males in 1975 to less than 90 in 2023. The range has significantly contracted with the populations now restricted to isolated meadow and mountain areas. A new project aims to draft a medium to long-term strategy to restore the population and will be based on the collective mobilisation of stakeholders who have the levers to act in favour of endangered species. The goal is to implement a new LIFE project focused on land acquisition, habitat restoration, and research. The project will also attempt implementation of MAEC and emergency measures - government-funded agri-environment schemes, a literature review of the current status and condition of the birds and maintain a strong survey nationally. Research will focus on habitat selection of males, female and chick behaviour and the birds' wintering areas- which may be West Africa. The current objective is to improved knowledge gaps and collaborate on action. The data obtained from the group will be of significant interest to Ireland and Scotland in terms of population dynamics at the western European range.

## **Balancing Corncrake and Other Species Priorities (Mary McAndrew)**

The ACRES (Agri Climate Rural Environmental Scheme) in Ireland is using a Hybrid results-based approach to reward farmers for the delivery of habitat at national level with a special focus on Natura 2000 sites including those which overlap with Corncrake target areas. The Cooperation Project element is locally led and works in close collaboration with NPWS, LIFE projects and other programmes to ensure consistent messaging and feedback. Mary gave an overview of how ACRES CP determines the actions and targets for each farm which can mean prioritizing certain targets but this is achieved using a complex screening matrix that limits or removes any potential negative impacts on other sensitive species or qualifying interests. Mary emphasized the requirement for collaboration and good communication between projects and programmes working in the same geographic space to ensure the best outcomes for nature and landowners.



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### **Improving Conservation Status of Corncrake using Innovative Technologies (Andrea Paresi)**

Passive Acoustic Monitoring (PAM) and thermal imaging were explored as technologies which may be utilized to complement conservation efforts to improve corncrake populations. PAM is considered a cost-effective and low impact method for species detection though has limitations when it comes to establishing abundance and is susceptible to both weather and analysis expertise. Andrea gave an overview of corncrake vocalizations and tracking individual males. Low wind speed is crucial to detection with PAM. Andrea has shown that males move >400m in a season and that habitat suitability is an influence on this movement. Recommendations include implementing conservation measures up to 500m from calling males. The research has also highlighted that bioacoustics indices (diversity of biological sound) is increased in more natural habitats. Thermal imaging trails on corncrakes gave mixed results but did produce guidelines on studies of ground-nesting birds using the technology.

### **The Corncrake in Wallonia – recent evolution (Arnaud Laudelout)**

The Wallonia region of Belgium has an average of 12 calling male corncrakes per annum with peak numbers in recent years as high as 100 birds. The area has had multiple LIFE projects including two focused on Corncrakes in the past. The birds are attracted to wet meadows and generally prefer intermediate levels of fertilization. However, they are also known from set-aside, young conifer plantations and extensive grasslands. The Fagne-Famenne region has held the most birds in the last number of years but the population has now declined to zero. The main drivers of population decline appear to be drainage of land, climate change, conversion of grassland to arable, intensification and no refuge areas/ELC. There has also been a lack of resource for comprehensive surveys of the birds. The outlook from Belgium is poor and considered high risk without significant intervention.

### **Trialing the Use of Wildlife Detection Dogs for Corncrake Conservation (Ciaran Cronin)**

Wildevye (Ciaran Cronin) is working with Corncrake LIFE to explore the potential of utilizing detection dogs to find corncrake nests as part of a trail strategy to reduce conflict with landowners. The scope of the study followed three objectives: Disturbance Distances - Corncrake/Dog; Can a Dog Locate Live Corncrake (adult/chick/nest)?; Can a Dog Locate Dead Corncrake? The various constraints of the work were discussed and results shared. Key findings included the response of corncrake to dogs at a near as 25m, the use of Getexnt tubes as a proxy for egg scent and relative efficiency of the dogs finding dead birds in mown fields. There are lots of potential benefits to the use of dogs in this work and there is a hope to consider using them in trails in active wild bird breeding sites.

### **12 minutes on Skye's Corncrakes (Shelagh Parlane)**

Shelagh Parlane has been the RSPB corncrake officer on Skye for 15 years and seen the work to protect the birds grow from spades and wheelbarrows to a much larger scale. The RSPB have no land on Skye so Shelagh relies heavily through the good will of landowners. Pressure on the birds on the island comes from agriculture and tourism. The bird population on Skye is small and widely dispersed and are maintained largely by the various agri-environmental partnership schemes. However, since 2015, a reduction in payments to farmers for delayed mowing has seen decline in the uptake of corncrake measures. Shelagh has leveraged support for corncrake farmers and crofters through the RSPB and The Corncrake Calling Project and undertakes a lot of hand on management at sites. The bird population is low but there is hope of a return to better times.

### **Assessing Corncrake conservation measures on wider biodiversity (Alfie Cavaliero).**

The aim of this research is to measure the contributions of different Early and Late Cover (ELC) types and quality to conserve and increase invertebrate diversity and abundance. Results from this will help inform decisions related to the establishment and restoration of ELCs. Thereby, facilitating improved guidance and enabling the identification of key factors that influence prey diversity and abundance in ELCs for Corncrake. The average carabidae (ground beetle) species richness in the ELC plots was 11.3 whereas in the surrounding farmland it was 9.25 with peak invertebrate abundance in May to mid-July. There was higher abundance of Carabids and invertebrates per trap in ELCs than surrounding farmland highlighting the importance of ELC not just as cover but also as feeding areas. Carabid beetles may be a good proxy for overall invertebrate abundance and thus corncrake prey availability.

### **Community Engagement: Caitriona Ni Cheallaigh**

The final talk in the session was by Caitriona Ni Cheallaigh of Corncrake LIFE who gave insight into the wide range of activities and programmes that the LIFE project utilizes to integrate itself into local communities. The project uses an active outreach model and one to one chain referral to engage landowners. It also uses information sessions to facilitate understanding of complex issues around such things as regulations and mediating ways of people and communities to together with nature conservation. As community engagement officers working in a complex social dynamic a key message was to be accessible, to listen and to be integrated. An overview of outputs relating to the LIFE schools programme, public awareness via the media and social media and community events was presented.

## Field visits

### Field visit one

#### Corncake calling experience

One the first night of the workshop, the participants visited the project site in Barhauve which is one of the most densely populated corncrake sites in Ireland, despite being outside Natura 2000. The site is a former mushroom growing facility which closed down in 2010. A by-product of mushroom production was a material called spent mushroom compost and it was this organic matter that fertilized the surrounding barren soils bringing forth a bounty of nettles each year providing valuable cover for the corncrakes which have thrived here now for over 15 years. Corncrake LIFE assumed management of the site via a lease agreement and undertook habitat management works and predator control to improve the habitat. Compost has also been removed and used to create early cover plots at satellite sites in close proximity.



*Ciaran Reaney (National Corncrake Census Coordinator) discusses the status of the birds in Ireland in Co. Mayo during the Corncrake Calling Experience. A 35% increase in population has been recorded nationally in the period 2018-2023.*



The site hosts >10 calling male corncrakes across a nine hectare area. A large proportion of the site is currently under conveyance to the LIFE project and will be designated as a nature reserve at a later date. The remainder of the site is in a long-term lease agreement with The National Parks and Wildlife Service which allows it to be secured and managed for the birds. Funding has now been approved for a predator-proof perimeter fence which will significantly reduce predation risk and allow the site to become a local source of corncrakes which can repopulate the wider landscape; this is already evident in the increase in bird numbers within 5km of the site.



*The corncrake calling experience. For some of our workshop attendees, this was their first time to hear a corncrake calling in the wild.*

The site has excellent road access which allows the project to bring larger groups of people to experience the call of the corncrake. Each year, the NPWS and LIFE project facilitates two corncrake tours with over 100 participants; many of whom have never heard the birds before, and some who have not heard them in 50 years. The event has become a pilgrimage for many and it is the hope that it will continue into the future to ensure the call of the corncrake remains accessible to all.





*Some of the 60+ participants in the Corncrake Calling Experience. The group is comprised of conservation practitioners, farmers, farm advisors and range of stakeholders across academia and state agencies.*

## Field visit 2

### **Annagh Marsh and Termoncarragh Machair**

For field visits two and three, the workshop was split into two groups to ensure limited disturbance at sites and allow workshop team members closer interaction.

Annagh Marsh and Termoncarragh Machair is complex SPA site where corncrakes are a qualifying interest along with breeding waders. The site offered workshop participants an opportunity to discuss prioritizing different species with different needs whilst being cognisant of the needs of local farmers and sensitive habitats like Machair. The National Parks and Wildlife Service, BirdWatch Ireland, Corncrake LIFE and LIFE on Machair all work with the local stakeholders to deliver for this area. The site has now seen an increase in both breeding wader and corncrake numbers through a combination of predator risk management via a new predator control fence and active predator control as well as land management agreements. The site visit was intended to stimulate conversations related to Workshops 2 and 3.



*Dave Suddaby (BirdWach Ireland) and Irene O'Brien (NPWS) gave participants a history of the core breeding wader area at Annagh Marsh which has been secured by predator-proof fencing (recently upgraded) for a decade.*



*The site is a complex mosaic of wetland and Machair, most of which is actively farmed. Land management agreements ensure that the fenced area is grazed at appropriate times. Threats to the site include eutrophication and climate change as sea levels rise and rainfall increases. Corncrake regularly utilize the site but are not considered the priority target owing to the presence of a high number of breeding waders; most of which are red-listed in Ireland and whose range has significantly contracted. However, it was demonstrated that sympathetic management for corncrake and waders can co-exist when farmers and landowners have clear communication on what actions to take and how those actions are rewarded.*





*A breeding Lapwing at Annagh Marsh seen during the site visit. The Lapwing population has increased significantly in recent years. (Photo courtesy of Wildeye)*



*A Common Snipe drumming during the Annagh Marsh field visit. Common Snipe are now red-listed as a breeding species in Ireland. (Photo courtesy of Wildeye)*

## Field visit 3

### Corncrake LIFE management areas

The workshop groups also visits multiple sites managed as part of the Corncrake LIFE project including owned, leased and farmer-managed land. The project staff demonstrated the many technical aspects of growing excellent early and late cover for the breeding corncrake and explained the format of the pilot results-based agri-environmental payments scheme (RBPS). Corncrake LIFE has >180 participants in total with ~1150 hectares of land under management. In the Mayo sites, there are 60 project participants and >500 ha of land under management. The region has seen a doubling of bird numbers to 59 in less than 5 years.



*Liam Loftus (Corncrake Field officer) and Patrick Lally (Corncrake Field operative) discuss the mechanisms of ELC creation and how the project works with both farmers and agricultural contractors to ensure synergy with farming needs.*

Knowledge exchange between the group was facilitated by the LIFE project team. The discussions provided valuable insight into how the move to a results-based model has seen the farmers who take the most action and have the best habitat rewarded for their output. The model is a paradigm shift from older schemes which paid a set rate for prescribed actions and offered limited support to achieve goals. Corncrake LIFE created an RBPS model which has now been integrated in the national agri-environmental scheme (ACRES CP) and works in a flexible and adaptable way to identify complementarity and additionality to existing payment structures.





*Workshop participants examine a natural ELC plot created by the project in 2022 which now hosts a calling male corncrake- the first one in this area for five years. Rich herbaceous vegetation gives early cover to the bird when they arrive back to coastal locations in mi-April each year.*



*Innovations such as the Corncrake Flusher bar (seen here attached to the tractor) and excellent communication between the project team and agricultural contractors helps to significantly reduce mortality to young flightless corncrake or moulting adults. The emphasis on good relationships with landowners was made- with the message from Corncrake LIFE that conservation must be integrated into the workings of each farm and seen as part of the system when it comes to grass harvesting and farm planning.*

## Mural launch and communications

The workshop drew national media attention and featured on the national news channel (RTÉ) as well as several newspaper and radio stations. As part of the programme of events, Malcolm Noonan T.D. (Minister of State for Nature, Heritage and Electoral Reform) launched a dedicated mural featuring the local legend of St. Breandán and of course the Corncrake! The mural work was supported and facilitated by the LIFE project and co-funded by the NPWS and the LIFE beneficiary Údarás Na Gaeltachta.

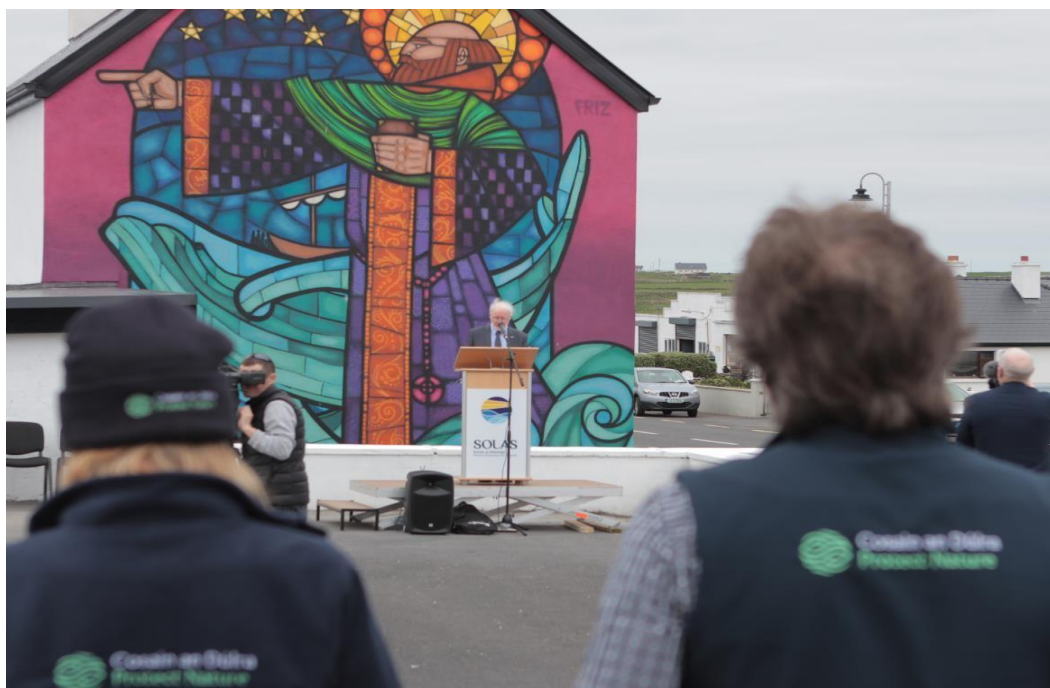


*The Traonach Mural which now welcomes visitors to the village of Eachléim in Co. Mayo also features the Corn Bunting which went extinct in Ireland in the early 1990s. The local community have been very supportive of the corncrake conservation in recent years and it is hoped that the population increased will see birds naturally return to this area in the coming years.*





Pat Fitzmaurice and Caitríona Ní Chellaigh (Corncrake LIFE Community engagement officers) prepare reports for national news



Malcolm Noonan T.D. (Minister of State for Nature, Heritage and Electoral Reform) launches the nature and heritage mural at Eachléim in Co. Mayo. The launch was attended by over 150 local representatives and school children and highlight the work of the Corncrake LIFE project both with farmers and in eth wider community. highlighting the workshop and the project.

## Workshop sessions- Day two

### Workshop synopsis

## Workshop 1

### A SWOT analysis of Corncrake Conservation

Participants were asked to conduct a SWOT analysis of corncrake conservation at both project-level and across the birds range in relevant countries as a whole. The SWOT analysis explored **S**trengths and **W**eakness (internal to corncrake conservation) and **O**pportunities and **T**hreats (external to corncrake conservation). The major themes that emerged are detailed below:

#### Internal factors affecting corncrake conservation

Groups identified a number of strength for corncrake conservation much of which focused on people. This included the individuals involved in driving corncrake action and also people at a wider scale in terms of both community and culture. Communication was also a factor identified as a major strength, and community engagement and personal relationships were identified as key factors in delivering concrete conservation action. However, some of these factors were also identified as weaknesses. Short project lifecycles, capacity building limitations and technical knowledge gaps relating to these issues were identified as weaknesses in corncrake conservation. Other internal factors considered as weaknesses were strategy on species prioritization, lack of ability to widen the targeted areas for action and over-reliance on key personnel through limitations of capacity building and staff retention.

#### External factors affecting corncrake conservation

The opportunities identified by the groups were largely focused on economic options and ability to future-proof conservation efforts via funding. Private equity, tourism and branding were all considered which further identifies the role of the conservation economy model. The Nature Restoration Law and National Agri-Environmental Schemes were both singled out as opportunities to improve efforts. Finally, the groups determined the need for a more cohesive working group and improvement on knowledge exchange around research and innovation as an opportunities worth exploring. Threats identified were all about 'change'. It would appear that the groups collectively identified the current status of operations (in Ireland) as generally stable and improving but there is concern about several factors. Loss on continuity was a universal threat voiced by the groups and a fear of project conclusion and loss of staff, resources and expertise was considered the primary threat. Other factors such as political changes across Europe, climate breakdown and land abandonment and consolidation were highlighted as future issues.

#### Chair/facilitator summary

The SWOT analysis was a good entry workshop which challenged participants to objectively view corncrake conservation and determine where gaps exist and how they can be filled with appropriate resources. The major themes that emerged were recognition of a good model in the Corncrake LIFE project but the threat of loss of continuity and expertise post-project. A range of ideas and factors were identified and collated for dissemination and are illustrated in the SWOT analysis diagram.

# SWOT ANALYSIS



SWOT analysis diagram: Outputs from Workshop one SWOT analysis.

## Workshop 2

### Predation management as a priority for ground nesting birds

Participants were asked to review predation management for corncrakes and other ground nesting species in the context to landscape management approaches. :

The group identified that community engagement to inform as to why predation risk management is being carried out is important.

There is a negative perception of predator control in some areas and a need for education and understanding. This negative publicity can force some organisations to shy away from controlling predators for fear of public backlash.

There is also limited research on the impact of predation on corncrakes and this gap needs to be filled. As a cryptic and secretive species, it is hard to gauge the impact of predation other than from a few accounts. How big an effect is predation on corncrakes compared to habitat management and farming intensification?

At what point does predator control drop back and what loss of corncrake is deemed acceptable? Predator control can create ecological release on other species (rabbits, stoats) which may also impact corncrakes. Restoring habitat that does not lend itself well to foxes such as wetlands might be key too.

Larger targeted measures such as nest protection fencing and the need to build capacity for more professional nest protection wardens. What specific predators in specific areas should be targeted? There cannot be a general approach as it's impossible to control all predation.

There are significant capacity issues with respect to predator control staff. It is a specialist role and there are very few new entrants to the work stream. It is only becoming recognised now and many practitioners are not at professional level and some training is required. Legislation also requires updating to better accommodate the protection of vulnerable species from predation.

Identifying a way of protecting protected species from protected species! The impact of domestic pets and pressing need for a strategic and long-term approach to meso-predator control on a much wider scale.

The impacts of predator control are holistic in that most ground nesting species will benefit from it. We need more data to convey the magnitude of the issue in some areas and to identify the priority areas. As a conservation measure it is a key factor in the protection of red-listed ground nesting species including corncrake and part of the multi-disciplinary approach. There is also potential for a collaborative approach at the landscape level with projects linking up such as Corncrake LIFE and LIFE on Machair.

Is predator control vulnerable to continuity issues and will the landscape not just revert back to similar predator densities if the work stops?

Is this a long-term process or is there an exit-strategy? A few ecologists don't agree with predator control and believe it is akin to meddling with natural processes, others disagree with this view and acknowledge that in the absence of a functional ecosystem we have a duty to fulfil the role of apex predators in their absence. What are the risk of 'phasing out' predator control? Does that mean also allowing infrastructure such as fences to fall into disrepair?





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### Chair/facilitator summary

The issue of predators remains a challenging area for the conservation of ground-nesting birds and the workshop recognised this. Participants brought direct experience of control measures to the discussion and focussed on lethal predator control to reduce loss of Corncrakes. It was widely expressed as a positive feature of conservation projects for ground nesters, but there was wide acknowledgement that there remains fairly limited conservation evidence around understanding the role and level of effect of predator control in Corncrake conservation. The best approaches were also acknowledged to be very site specific and sometimes labour intensive. There was however a clear acknowledgement that it makes sense, when it is done in a targeted, planned, professional and safe way. Longer-term, multi-species benefits could further with better information and understanding and with wider strategic approaches.

## Workshop 3

### Balancing Species Priorities

Participants were asked to select a real or theoretical site of their choosing where there were multiple qualifying interest for conservation and develop a decision making tree or process to determine the approach to managing for a variety of species needs. This particular workshop was designed to make participants think about conservation of corncrake at a wider scale, considering both the potential positive and negative aspects of a single-species focus and to try and develop systems to assist conservation decision-making that was not rendered risk-averse due to the fear of conflicting outcomes.

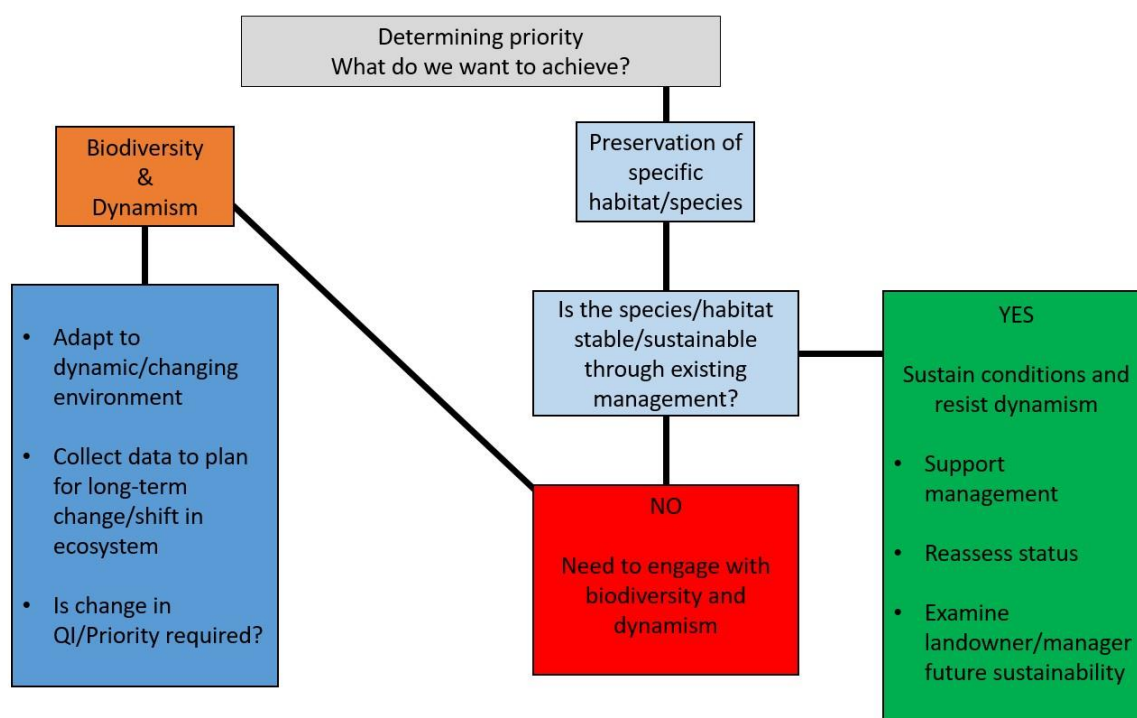
The groups generally split priorities into species and habitats and then listed them in order of their status at both site, region and national-level. Consideration was also given to the historical management of sites and what actions would bring most benefit to most species at both site and landscape-level.

Some key approaches were common across the working groups:

- The need for adaptable and flexible approaches governed by regular reviews of sites and status of their interests
- Exploring flagship and umbrella species for sites where management for one would have the widest benefit to others
- Considering 'beyond site boundaries' and ensuring that site priority management is mirrored at a wider scale to increase resilience

Pragmatic consideration was also explored in terms of the cost of management and the willingness of landowners to engage in the needs of sites or species needs.

For decision making in relation to site management, it was generally agreed that the objectives for the sites should be clearly laid out and not subjective and that the delivery of the objectives should be led by the best available data and scientific understanding of the needs of the habitats and species. These objectives should also include potential conflicts between species as a result of natural interactions but also where habitat management may favour one over the other. This again, led to a consensus that priorities must be clearly defined and reviewed, particularly in light of climate change and its effects on some habitats and species. This was reflected by one group who considered 'Biodiversity and Dynamism' vs Preservation of a certain habitat/species as illustrated,



*Biodiversity and dynamism- a model for selecting priorities at complex sites.*

Another group produced a linear model for exploring species priorities:

1. List target species feature
2. Examine conservation status at national and site level
3. Gather or utilize existing data to determine site integrity
4. Determine site species conservation objectives including threats and pressures
5. Determine external/upstream issues and their sources
6. Examine additional consideration e.g. Protected species and non-annex features
7. Identify actions, focusing on multi-beneficial measures
8. Plan actions to minimize other risk factor e.g. timing of measures
9. Set clear metrics for objectives to be considered achieved
10. Ensure consents and relevant assessments conducted
11. Implement actions
12. Monitor actions
13. Report actions
14. Reassess and refine actions

In this linear model, priority was given to International Annex species, then national level priorities and then local priorities. It was suggested that this system would follow the SMART model in which in SMART goals stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound.





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### Chair/facilitator summary

The workshop groups produced high quality, well-structured responses to the question posed, bringing their long experience of this challenging issue. A means of identifying species priorities for targeting conservation measures remains the primary response to the question. However, adding in an ecosystem view of dynamism within the prioritisation process is perhaps reflective of the challenge we face as conservationists when so many ecosystems require restoration of their function. The role of strategic predator management (see workshop one) then is further obviated where apex predators are absent.

## Workshop 4

### Results-Based Agri-Environmental Schemes- the future?

For the final workshop, the participants were asked to consider their experience of RBPS programmes and their place in the future of corncrake conservation and nature conservation at a wider scale. Each group was charged with listing, in their opinion, the three key components to a successful RBPS programme.

#### **Group A**

- Funding- the need for secure funding and to demonstrate to funders that farmers and conservation can function co-operatively to deliver results. Demonstration areas are key to this e.g. Corncrake LIFE
- The need to upscale RBPS schemes to further reward landscape-level improvements
- Ensure simplicity and flexibility of actions

#### **Group B**

- Stability and continuity- programmes need to be longer than 5 years and have adequate funding
- Transferability of actions from innovative projects like Corncrake LIFE into wider schemes like ACRES CP
- Ensure that schemes are compatible with NATURA needs and that no loopholes exist to reward damaging activities

#### **Group C**

- Flexibility at individual farm level and bespoke plans for each participant
- Ensure that supporting actions are co-designed with participants to maximise learning and knowledge exchange
- Ensure equity of payments and ample headroom from increased ambition



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### **Group D**

- Programme must be adequately funded and funded for a longer period to ensure continuity of output
- Flexibility of scheme and co-designing actions with participants
- Core staff retained so knowledge and relationships are not lost. This ensures that knowledge transfer is effective and familiarity with participants reduces administrative burdens

### **Group E**

- Specifically for corncrakes, there needs to be a continued focus on ELC creation and centre-out mowing
- A co-operative approach across wider areas would generate better results and get more support
- Further supports for the reduction in fertilizer use and more sustainable grassland management

### **Group F**

- Landscape-level approaches and approaches which link species up at flyway level. We need RBPS models for corncrakes across their breeding range.
- Longer-term funding models- we need to act beyond 5-years.
- Flexibility for participant farmers and a willingness for plans to be able to change but keep risk to a species at a minimum

### **Group G**

- Reduce administrative burden and create a system that allows farmers to do their own plans and scoring.
- Regular reviews of scorecards and targets with build in flexibility for participants
- Support downscaling from intensive agriculture to buffer economic shift for farmers- maintain livelihoods and move towards an economy of conservation.

### **Chair/facilitator summary**

Common themes came up in all group discussions and these focussed on:

Landscape level impact: RBPS needs to be co-operative, to function at a landscape scale to achieve a step-change in conservation benefit.

Funding and stability: adequately funded and with stability for a long period to consolidate on the benefits that accrue and ensure proper supports and minimise bureaucracy, as well as enable continuity for staff teams and their communities.

Flexibility: bespoke plans, listen to the landowner and be flexible to change within a scheme if it isn't working for the target species/habitat will ensure good uptake and commitment from farmers and likely achieve an effective result.

## Overall summary and recommendations

It is a long time since the last international gathering of Corncrake conservation professionals. It was clear throughout workshop that the level of knowledge exchange between individuals, projects and countries was highly valuable. The gathering also provided an important opportunity for emotional support, this is of increasingly recognised importance for those who work in conservation and are faced with multi-faceted challenges on a daily basis.

The shared challenges are recognised, while the mechanisms for population change may vary from region to region, the basis for change – habitat and agricultural change, pressure from climate change and human derived pressures such as increased meso-predator populations – is consistent.

The success of individual projects and programmes is apparent though, and where these can be maintained, populations see good recovery, illustrated well by recent success in Ireland. The bigger challenge is ensuring that this is maintained and embedded, and becomes part of the normal landscape. Two key recommendations are proposed:

1. Continuity in perpetuity

The success of Corncrake conservation action is clear. Wherever it is effectively applied it achieves population recovery. The methods are well known but in each case site specific challenges need to be overcome. It is recognised that where short term projects are implemented initial growth can see a subsequent decline if continued funding support is not forthcoming or where measures are no longer able to be sustained.

***Recommendation 1: to advocate for a permanent, established corncrake conservation programme in key areas in Ireland (and elsewhere), seeking to embed the key measures as part of agri-environment supports, suitably delivered by well trained, effective teams.***

2. Pan-European action

The conference has identified the high value that knowledge exchange brings. By the nature of Corncrake conservation, the population are often small and isolated. There was wide recognition that the population declines in France, Belgium and Switzerland were not widely known before the conference and that knowledge exchange, as well as collegiate support, is of high value to struggling areas. We can help each other, we can work to mutual benefit.

***Recommendation 2: A pan-European Corncrake Action Group should be established to facilitate knowledge exchange, cooperative working and to foster professional partnerships and emotional supports.***

Recognition and thanks is given to all participants for bringing their expertise, experience, personal and professional perspectives to the workshop.