

Northern Ireland Species Action Plan
Chough
Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax
October 2000

1. Current status

- 1.1** The chough, *Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax*, is a member of the crow family and is confined mainly to western coastal cliffs throughout Britain and Ireland. They nest in crevices in the cliff face and feed on short coastal heath and grasslands on the cliff tops and slopes. Their diet consists mostly of insects, which they dig for in the soil or in cattle dung, though they will also supplement it with spilt grain from stubble fields in winter.
- 1.2** Historically, the chough has been in long term decline. Over the last 200 years, it has disappeared completely from parts of its former range in Britain and Ireland⁽⁴⁾. For example, in Northern Ireland, it formerly bred on the coastal cliffs of the Mourne Mountains. More recent evidence from surveys carried out in 1982 and 1992 suggest that throughout Britain and Ireland, the overall population is stable or even increasing in some areas^(1,2). The most notable exception to this trend is Northern Ireland where the population has continued to decline. In the early 1960's, there were 20-22 breeding pairs, 10-12 of which were on Rathlin Island, once the stronghold for the species in Northern Ireland. By 1982, the total was just 9-10 breeding pairs and by 1992, just 2-3, all confined to the mainland north Antrim coast; for the first time they did not breed on Rathlin Island that year. The population has remained more or less stable since then, though breeding success appears to be very poor: Only six young fledged in the period 1995 - 2000.
- 1.3** The chough is listed in Annex I of the EU Birds Directive (79/409/EEC) and is a SPEC 3, having undergone a large decline⁽⁶⁾. It is red listed in Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland and is included in the Irish Red Data Book⁽⁷⁾ in the INTERNATIONALLY IMPORTANT category. It is listed in Schedule 1 Part I of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985.

2. Current factors causing loss or decline

- 2.1** Low productivity and small population size are the main constraints on the current breeding population. These and the recent decline are believed to be related to a year-round lack of suitable feeding areas as a result of the loss, fragmentation and deterioration in quality of natural and semi-natural grasslands and coastal heath. These have resulted mainly from the intensification of pastoral and arable management and associated changes in stocking rates, increased in-housing of cattle and improved veterinary products^(3,5).

3 Current action

- 3.1 The remnant population is surveyed annually by RSPB and National Trust.
- 3.2 DARD have introduced a Chough Option into the Antrim ESA, based on research carried out by EHS and RSPB to identify the remaining important chough feeding areas. Relevant landowners have been targeted in these areas and all have taken up this option. DARD is monitoring the effects of this option and is concluding a scientific study on a range of fields.
- 3.3 RSPB and the National Trust have devised a monitoring scheme to assess the effectiveness of management carried out under the Chough Option.
- 3.4 The National Trust has acquired two farms on the north Antrim coast and manages these, *inter alia*, for chough.

4. Action plan objectives and targets

- 4.1 Maintain chough as a breeding species in Northern Ireland.
- 4.2 Restore the breeding population and range to at least 1982 levels by 2010.

5. Proposed action with lead agencies

The maintenance and restoration of suitable chough feeding habitat is essential, through a combination of agri-environment measures, land acquisition and specific management agreements where necessary.

5.1 Policy and legislation

- 5.1.1 Develop, promote, monitor and review the effectiveness of appropriate Agri-Environment measures in the Antrim ESA.
(ACTION: DARD).

5.2 Site Safeguard

- 5.2.1 Seek positive management agreements with landowners on ASSIs and other key sites, which support or have recently supported (within the last 5 years), feeding choughs at some time of the year.
(ACTION: EHS)
- 5.2.2 Establish a comprehensive condition and compliance monitoring programme for ASSIs to prevent further piecemeal damage to habitats.
(ACTION: EHS)
- 5.2.3 Consider designating sites of importance for chough as ASSI.
(ACTION: EHS)

5.2.4 Ensure cliff slopes within the current range are grazed short to provide suitable feeding areas.
(ACTION: EHS, DARD)

5.2.5 Ensure that nesting sites are protected from disturbance and other adverse developments.
(ACTION: EHS)

5.2.6 Consider the acquisition of further sites in Co Antrim and ensure that existing reserves are appropriately managed.
(ACTION: EHS)

5.3 Species Management and Protection

5.3.1 Ensure that breeding success is not further reduced by disturbance by visitors and rock climbers.
(ACTION: EHS)

5.4 Advisory

5.4.1 Ensure that those responsible for implementing and supporting agri-environment schemes receive training and up-to-date advice on the targeting and management of land for chough.
(ACTION: DARD)

5.4.2 Ensure that farmers and landowners are aware of the presence of chough on their land and promote and encourage them to adopt appropriate management for chough.
(ACTION: DARD)

5.5 Future Research and monitoring

5.5.1 Continue to monitor the breeding population and assess breeding success annually. Causes of failure should be assessed wherever possible by checking nests and investigating the possible impact of peregrines on newly fledged chicks.
(ACTION: EHS)

5.5.2 Continue to monitor the effect of the Chough Option on chough foraging distribution.
(ACTION: DARD)

5.5.3 Investigate further the effects of existing and new generation livestock anti-parasitic drugs on chough food resources.
(ACTION: DARD)

5.6 Communications and publicity

5.6.1 Reduce disturbance by visitors and rock climbers at nesting sites by providing information and advice.
(ACTION: EHS)

5.6.2 Use agri-environment schemes, including measures such as the Chough Option, to promote the need for agricultural and rural support schemes which encourage sustainable agriculture whilst protecting and enhancing biodiversity.
(ACTION: DARD)

5.7 Links with other action plans

5.7.1 It is likely that the implementation of this plan will also benefit the Northern Ireland populations of the following UK priority species: -skylark *Alauda arvensis*, linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

5.7.2 This plan should be considered in conjunction with the UK Habitat Action Plans for:-

- Lowland dry acid grassland
- Lowland heathland
- Upland heathland.

5.7.3 There may be additional links with species and habitats listed in the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy which will be added later.

6 References

- (1) Berrow, S.D., Mackie, K.I., O'Sullivan, O., Shephard, K.B., Mellon, C. & Coveney, J.A. (1992). *The Second International Chough Survey in Ireland*. Irish Birds **5:1** 1-10.
- (2) Bullock, I.D., Drewett, D.R. & Mickleburgh, S.P. (1983). *The Chough in Britain and Ireland*. British Birds **76** 377-401.
- (3) Colhoun, K. & Donaghy, A. (1996). *Breeding Choughs in Northern Ireland 1996*. Environment and Heritage Service Research and Development Series. No.RC97/9.
- (4) Holloway, S. (1996). *The Historical Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*. T & AD Poyser, London.

- (5) McCracken, D.I. & Foster, G.N. (1993). *The Effects of Ivermectin on the Invertebrate Fauna Associated with Cow Dung*. Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry **12** 73-84.
- (6) Newton. S., Donaghy, A., Allen, D. & Gibbons, D. (2000). *Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland* Irish Birds **6:3** 333-344
- (7) Tucker, G.M. & Heath, M.F. (1994). *Birds in Europe: their conservation status*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International. (BirdLife Conservation Series no.3).
- (8) Whilde, A. (1993). *Threatened Mammals, Birds, Amphibians and Fish in Ireland. Irish Red Data Book 2: Vertebrates*. HMSO Belfast.