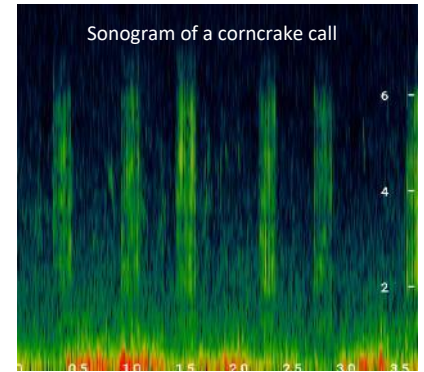


## Corncrake Caller ID August 2020 Update



A huge thank you to all of you who took the time and had the patience to make recordings, videos, or note information on the corncrakes of Skye and other places in 2020.

As a quick recap on the Corncrake Caller ID project, Robert Arnold devised a method, based on Tim Peake *et al*'s research in the 1990s, to analyse corncrake calls and quickly identify their patterns. For the [technical details please see here](#).

From these early studies, we know that a male corncrake's voice pattern remains the same through the season and between years. These call patterns, although likely to be unique to the corncrake's ear, can be quite similar to us. As Peake *et al* stated, we can only say which birds are definitely different rather than confirm which are the same as we do not know if there are genetic similarities in the calls of related birds or if the calls may be 'learned' from neighbours. However, some are sufficiently different to confirm that they are definitely from different birds and it is this information that we use in this study.

To get recordings most of us just used our mobile phones and many of these have been of sufficiently good quality to analyse so it is always worth a go. John Hawell, with great ingenuity, created a directional sound recorder (using a collander!), which allowed for top quality recordings. Robert also had a remote recording device, the Audiomoth. Although no corncrakes were heard on it, he did hear some interesting bats and other night noises.



So for the details of what we found, please [see Robert's report](#).

If you're interested in even more details, anecdotes and personal confessions relating to our corncrake season of 2020 so far, then please read on!

**First report 2020** came from Earlish on 29<sup>th</sup> April. Unusually, this bird was seen and not heard suggesting it may be a female. This was in the time before I'd learned that females very occasionally do indeed call. I had to quickly reevaluate when, low and behold, a high pitched *crex crex* call was heard in this area on 28<sup>th</sup> May – [this is apparently a female!](#)

**Females calling:** to top the surprise of the Earlish female calling, 2 days later on May 30<sup>th</sup> we received a recording of a female calling on Waternish. What was the chance? Well, one theory is that it signals a population in extremis. Researchers think that females will only do this in cases of desperation - where they have lost a mate before completing laying or where no males are around. There is no Tinder app for lonely crexes so we can only hope she found one of the males who were less than a mile away.

**Males calling:** On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May reports of a calling male at Stein started coming in accompanied with some excellent recordings. Robert's analyses confirmed that there were in fact 2 different males there, and as the weeks passed and recordings kept coming, it became apparent that possibly 4 different males had been in the area. The last of the Stein birds was heard on 19<sup>th</sup> May.

Trotternish: Again we got great recordings confirming that we had different males at Lionacro, Scudiburgh, Totescore, Uig Bay and Grealine, one of which may have been in Stein and Geary. There were reports from Balgown and Monkstadt but no recordings.

In June, a bird with a similar call to one of the Stein birds turned up in Hallin Park after some 6 weeks of silence, then a 'new comer' showed up in Carnach, and these birds were heard intermittently until the end of June. Another of the Stein birds may have been in Geary for a short while then moved to Scudiburgh on Trotternish where it continued to call well into July. We got reports of a bird in Ebst in early May but no recording. A month later one turned up in Ose where it stayed for a couple of weeks. Coinciding with Ose stopping calling, the new comer in Carnach had a very similar call - possibly the same bird?

**RSPB Annual Corncrake Survey of night calling males (midnight-3am)** – the survey started a couple of weeks later than usual but is designed to provide a comparable index of the numbers between years across the whole of Scotland. The bad news is that Skye numbers are down again from 13 last year to 8 this year. Robert's analysis showed that there were at least between 9-11 individuals here but that is still a frighteningly low number. Due to the situation with Covid-19, some areas were not surveyed this year so we will not have a total for the UK to see if this downward trend is happening across the corncrakes range.

**The last report of a calling bird** from Trotternish was on 22<sup>nd</sup> July. If he found a female then she would be on a nest until mid August which makes any delay in mowing very important. On Waternish, the last report came on 11<sup>th</sup> August – a faint call from Paric Mhoir.

**Corncrake Friendly Mowing** - Most males will stop calling in August and it's easy to forget that they are still around, very likely in the silage fields, along with females and the chicks through August and into September. The adults are moulting and cannot fly, and neither can the chicks until they are a few weeks old which makes them particularly vulnerable during mowing. We are fortunate on the island to have so many contractors and crofters who are skilled enough to do this and happy to support their corncrakes along with lots of other wildlife that will be in the fields. [Check out Kerstina-Louise MacLeod's video of Iain Leitch baling after corncrake friendly mowing.](#) All of these fields were mown so that the corncrakes and other wildlife were kept in the safety of long grass. The RSPB can support both delaying and corncrake friendly mowing through the Corncrake Initiative – please see below for contacts).



**Last sighting (so far!)** and to prove they are still around, one was seen in the as yet uncut silage fields of Waternish Farm on 30<sup>th</sup> August - they always cut corncrake friendly (cue sigh of relief!!). The juvenile corncrake in the picture below was rescued from a cat on the 24<sup>th</sup> August (please see [how cat owners can help](#)). It is only about 15 days old and won't be able to fly for another fortnight at least (again thank goodness for crex friendly mowing!). Happily, it was released onto the RSPB [Loch Stiaphabhat nature reserve](#), and will hopefully survive its migration to return next year.



### Thanks to your efforts and contributions, we have learned many things:

1. Getting a recording can be quite hard, even if you aren't on a quad or cycling with your dog on a lead! That we got 80 recordings is totally amazing and greatly appreciated – so excellent job everyone!
2. Although having crystal clear recordings from a nearby singing corncrake is ideal, any recording is better than no recording. Even poor efforts of distant corncrakes on rainy nights can prove useful – so always worth a try and always worth sending the files to Robert as he can often work wonders.
3. Our corncrakes seem to move around a lot. This means that we need to keep as much as possible of the habitat they require, and, that they range widely, so corncrake friendly mowing, where ever you are on the island, could mean survival to your corncrake and its chicks.
4. Skye corncrakes are a rare and precious thing and the more we can find out about them, for example by tracing individuals from their calls, the more likely we are to find ways to help them.

And 5. Let's do it again next year!

Thank you again.

For more information please contact us:

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