NPWS
An tSeirbhís Páirceanna Náisiúnta agus Fiadhúlra
National Parks and Wildlife Service

Corncrake/Traonach Conservation Programme

Bird survey and habitat management report

2024

Prepared by the National Parks and Wildlife Service

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1 Executive Summary

This report describes the measures carried out under the National Parks and Wildlife Service Corncrake/Traonach Conservation Programme (CTCP) in 2024. It presents the results of the 2024 census, and wider monitoring, together with information on the uptake of conservation measures and associated activities including ongoing habitat creation and management works.

A total of 233 corncrake breeding territories were confirmed in Ireland during the 2024 breeding season. This figure represents a 6.8% increase on the 218 territories confirmed in 2023. County Donegal supported 120 confirmed calling male territories (52% of the national total) and West Connacht, which comprises the western seaboards of counties Mayo and Galway, supported 112 male territories (48% of the total). County Kerry had one calling male, the same as 2023, while no breeding activity was recorded in Sligo. There have been no confirmed records of corncrakes in the Shannon Callows since 2014.

Offshore islands supported 51% of the national population with 49% found on mainland sites. At a regional scale, islands accounted for 75% of the population in Co. Donegal and 25% of the population in West Connacht. The corncrake Special Protection Areas (SPA) supported 58.4% of the national population, accounting for 77% of territories in Co. Donegal and 39% of territories in West Connacht. Compared to 2023, there was an overall 16% increase in territories recorded within the corncrake SPAs.

There were 148 participants within the CTCP in 2024 and 421 hectares of land was subject to conservation measures during the season. Coupled with the ongoing Corncrake LIFE project, over 1500 hectares of land was under management for corncrakes in 2024.

Conservation measures applied in 2024 included habitat management (particularly the creation of early and late cover) and the administration of grant schemes for delayed mowing/grazing, wildlife-friendly mowing, and the retention of refuge areas in meadows.

The status of corncrakes within the SPA network and wider landscape is discussed.

2 Introduction to the Corncrake/Traonach Conservation Programme

The Corncrake Traonach Conservation Project (CTCP) is funded by the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) via the Nature Conservation Directorate. The Programme undertakes the monitoring of the breeding birds for the annual survey and administers payments to farmers and landowners for conservation measures during the breeding season (April to September). CTCP is a continuation of the previously established Corncrake Conservation Project also known as the Corncrake Grant Scheme (CGS).

The Corncrake Conservation Project began in 1993 as a response to the species' population decline in Ireland. Initially funded by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and implemented by BirdWatch Ireland, the project monitored populations annually and took measures to protect nesting habitat. The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) began funding the whole programme of measures in the late 1990s and in 2009 the project was taken into its direct administration.

The project operates in four core breeding areas, South Mayo & Connemara, the Mullet Peninsula (Co. Mayo), West Donegal and North-East Donegal. Each region has one fieldworker that carries out survey work, offering the Corncrake Grant Scheme to landowners and monitoring Wildlife-Friendly Mowing (WFM) during the breeding season. There are 10 Special Protection Areas designated within Ireland for the conservation of corncrakes. Nine of the ten national corncrake SPAs are within these four core breeding areas. There has been no breeding corncrake population in the Middle-Shannon Callows SPA since 2015 and the SPA does not have a dedicated fieldworker. The CTCP fieldworkers largely operate within four geographic regions which cover the core breeding territories. Fieldworkers also have capacity to implement measures for the birds where they establish territories beyond the SPA boundaries and sometimes even further afield.

The corncrake monitoring census period is from 20th May to 10th July annually, during the hours of 23:00 to 03:00, though bird territories are also recorded outside of these dates and times as records allow (NPWS Guidance document). The fieldworker team responds to reports from the public, including farmers/landowners, and all confirmed

breeding territories are added to a database. This database is monitored and updated throughout the season with the movements of the birds also recorded. Eligible landowners/farmers that meet the criteria for the grant scheme are provided choices of conservation measures. The NPWS Corncrake Grant Scheme (CGS) is a voluntary, short-term management agreement with a landowner and designed to protect corncrakes through measures which include delayed mowing, delayed grazing and Wildlife-Friendly Mowing (WFM), separately or in combination. Eligible habitat consists of any suitable grassland-type habitat situated wholly or partially within a 250 metre radius of a calling male's centre of territory as determined by monitoring.

Farmers can avail of the grant whether they are in the Department of Agriculture & Food Marine (DAFM) Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) or within the Basic Income Support for Sustainability (BISS) payment scheme; on condition that no double payment is identified. The conditions within the grant include that nominated fields are free of livestock for the duration of the contract and that agricultural practices such as topping, spraying and maintenance must be delayed until the end of the contract i.e. WFM Only option, till the 15th August or 1st September delay date.

Once the chosen delay date arrives, farmers are then required to notify fieldworkers of the mowing date and time and within at least a 24-hour notice period. Fieldworkers then attend all mowing while observing the contractors' speed and ensuring that the correct method of centre-out mowing has been adhered to during the mowing activity. In the case of grazing lands that have been entered into the scheme, farmers must contact the fieldworker to confirm the correct date has been adhered to and livestock can be re-entered into the field.

3 2024 Corncrake core area census and wider monitoring programme

3.1 Survey coverage and methodology

Contracted fieldworkers undertook the majority of census survey efforts in 2024, assisted by NPWS and Corncrake LIFE on coordinated surveys and offshore islands. Four fieldworkers, including a lead census coordinator, were contracted in 2024. These fieldworkers were located in Mayo, Donegal (2) and Galway. A local volunteer carried out additional surveys on the Mullet peninsula (Co. Mayo) two nights per week. No census was carried out on the Shannon Callows in 2024 though reports of birds were received close to former breeding locations. These reports were followed up but no valid records were confirmed.

All 10km national grid squares in Co. Donegal, Co. Mayo and Connemara in which corncrakes were recorded in recent years were surveyed for calling males. Core areas in Donegal and West Connacht were visited at least twice during the core census period which ran from May 20th to July 10th. A particular focus was concentrated on the Special Protection Areas (SPAs) where corncrakes are listed as a Species of Conservation Interest and there remains an extant population (Appendix 1). Birds outside these dates were also counted where they remained on territory for a minimum of five days (Fig. 1). Within these squares, survey efforts were focused on traditional breeding locations and nearby areas of suitable habitat.

Habitat considered suitable included grassland with a height exceeding 20cm (from which vegetation is periodically removed) and herbaceous vegetation such as nettles, common hogweed, cow parsley and yellow iris. Reports received from the public via the website (https://www.corncrakelife.ie/report-a-corncrake/) and hotline were followed up on a case-by-case basis, either by a census fieldworker, Corncrake LIFE project staff or an NPWS Conservation Ranger

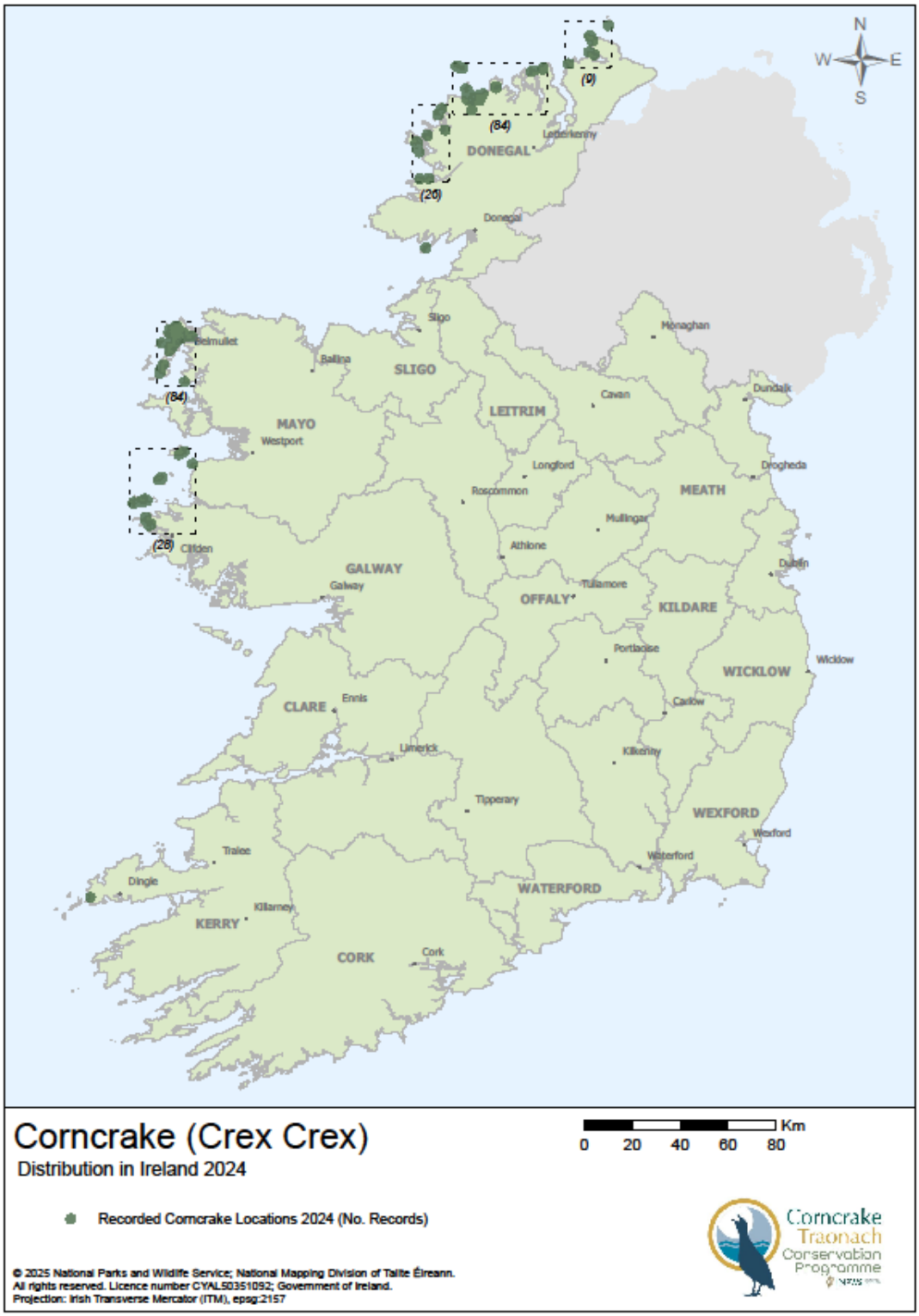


Figure 1: The distribution of Corncrakes within the Republic of Ireland in 2024 with each primary location considered a breeding territory based on the survey methodology

3.2 Survey effort

Survey hours were generally recorded by fieldworkers. Where actual hours were not recorded, an estimate was calculated by allocating four hours of survey time per individual/team per night surveyed, i.e. a team of two people surveying an area for one night corresponds to eight hours of survey time (Table 1). A total of 254.6 hours (27 operational days) were spent on survey work in 2024 by fieldworkers with volunteer and co-ordinated surveys totalling 340.6 hours. The use of passive acoustic monitoring also contributes to the survey effort, particularly in outlier sites where a bird has been reported by the public.

Table 1: Total survey hours carried out during the census period in each region and by survey categories

Region	Fieldworkers	Volunteers	Co-ordinated surveys	Total hours
Co. Donegal	139.8	0	8	147.8
West Connacht (including Co. Kerry)	114.8	63	15	177.8
Shannon Callows	0	N/A	N/A	0
National Total	254.6	63	23	340.6

3.3 Survey weather conditions

Weather can impact census estimates as in cold, wet or windy conditions birds generally call less frequently and are also harder to detect. Meteorological conditions for the census period were obtained on www.met.ie using a singular location to represent weather at a regional level. A 'Census Data Survey' was created in 2018 as part of the corncrake survey data collector App, allowing more detailed and accurate weather data to be collected.

The number of nights in each wind force category (F=0 to F=6) throughout the survey season was evaluated by fieldworkers in West Connacht and Donegal (Fig. 2) as was rainfall (Fig. 3). This accounts for all nights from 20th May to 10th July, whether surveyed or not, and any additional nights surveyed outside of the census season.

The census period generally focuses on a period of seven weeks. Although a valuable and standardised approach, the standard methodology does not capture changes in the bird's behaviour such as early arrivals and territorial occupation and possibly earlier breeding. To ensure that all territories are recorded and protected, the CTCP utilises an adapted survey methodology to capture all territories where males call for ≥ 5 nights including territories recorded outside the general survey period and utilizes this adapted approach to ensure all territories are recorded and afforded protection.

The weather conditions coinciding with the spring arrival of corncrakes is crucial and plays a pivotal role in how the birds interact with the landscape in terms of females establishing nests and available food sources for the eventual rearing of the first brood. Ideal conditions would include mild temperatures which prompt typical spring growth to provide cover and increase invertebrate prey availability, and light winds and clear nights to accommodate good survey conditions.

In 2024, a wet spring was recorded across Western Europe and cold northerly winds that carried into the census period had a negative effect on vegetation growth. This in turn placed pressure on birds arriving and competing for limited cover, most notably nettle (*Utrica dioica*) plots in April. Weather also impacts detectability of birds and survey completeness. The majority of survey nights in 2024 were considered good or above good conditions (Figures 2-4).

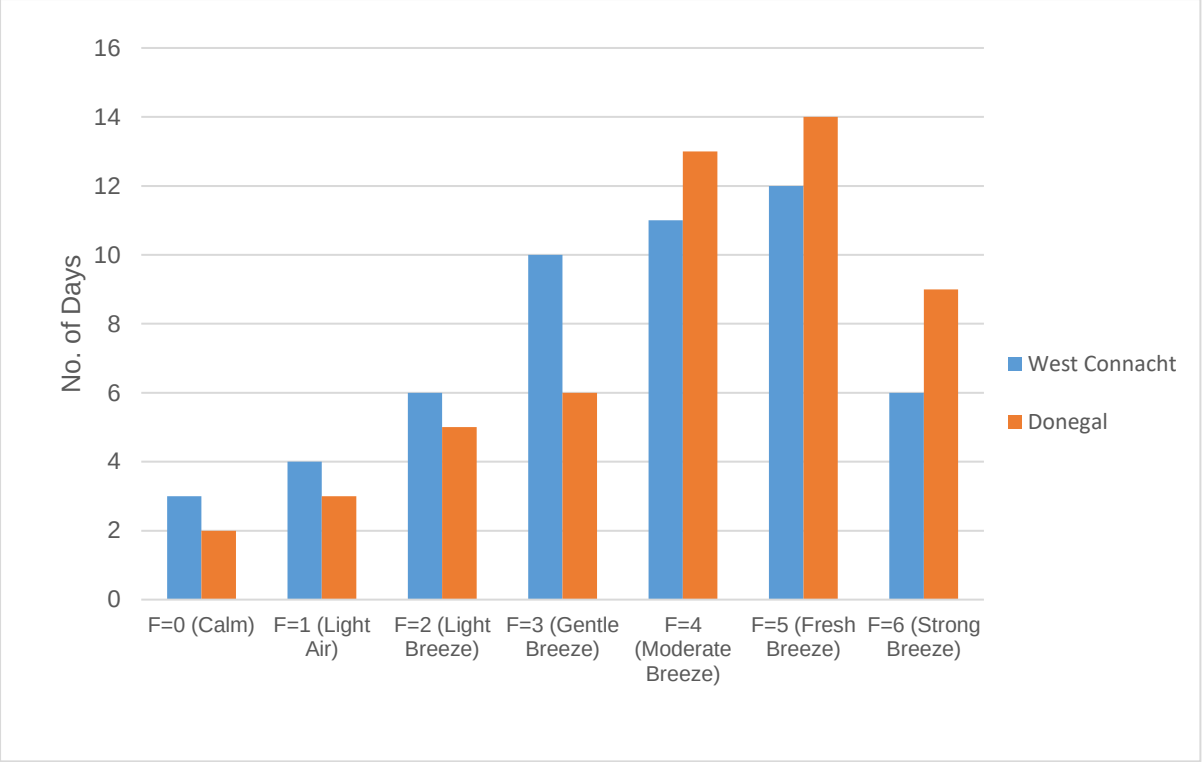


Figure 2: Wind force as recorded by census fieldworkers during the census period.

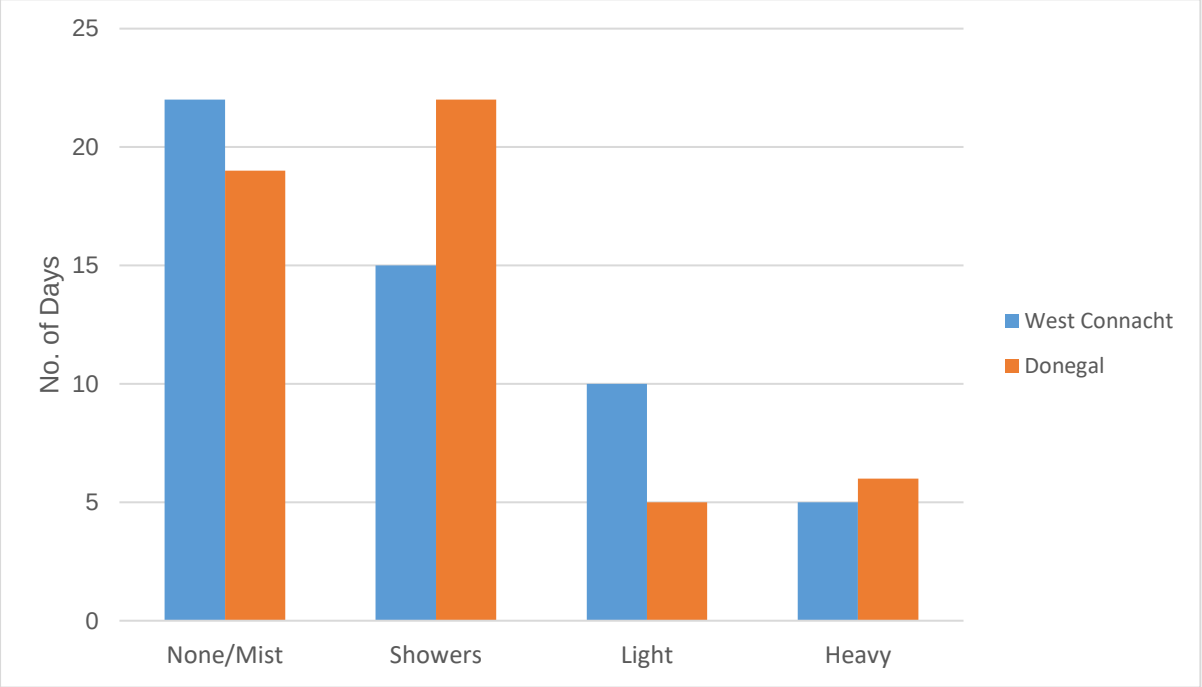


Figure 3: Number of nights per rainfall category throughout the census.

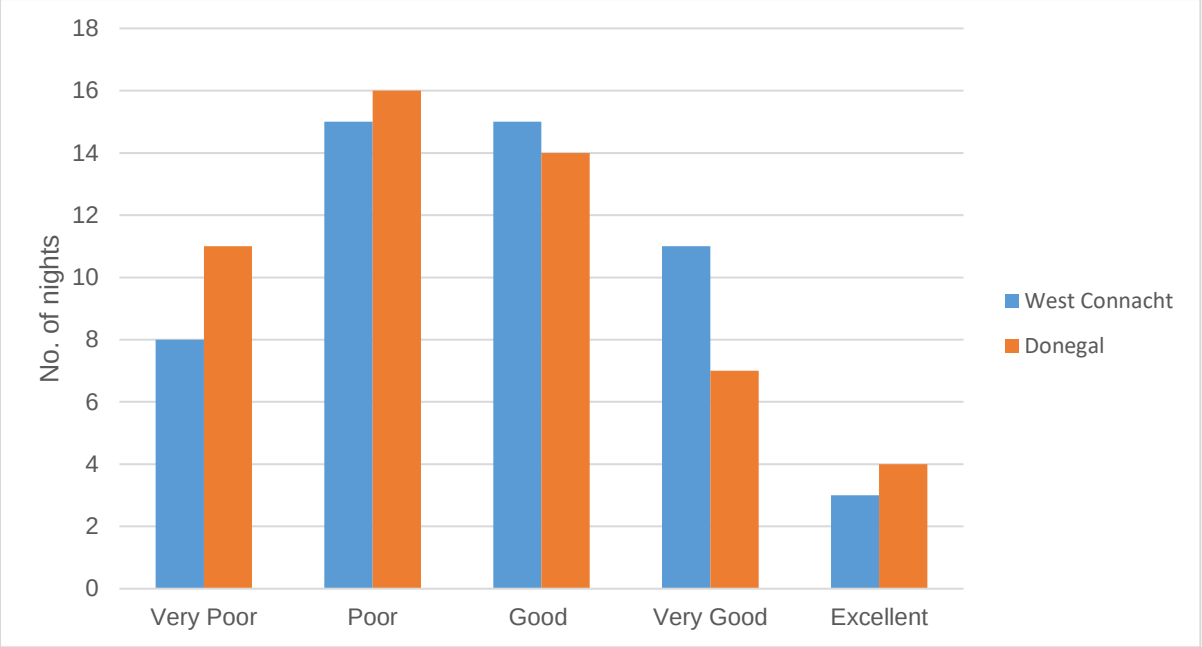


Figure 4: Number of census nights for each category of census accuracy, as estimated by fieldworkers during surveys.

4 National Census results

A total of 233 calling male territories were recorded in 2024 which is a 7% increase on 2023 and shows an overall continued increase in population nationally for the past five years (Table 2). West Connacht has increased considerably since 2020 with the population in Co. Donegal showing a level of stability. It should be noted that Co. Donegal numbers in 2020 were affected by an inability of the field team to fully monitor birds owing to Covid-19 travel restrictions to islands and are likely an underestimate of island populations.

Region	Area	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
DONEGAL MAINLAND	Inishowen peninsula	8	8	8	14	9
	Fanad peninsula	4	1	1	1	3
	Rosguill	0	0	2	5	4
	Carrigart to Bloody Foreland	13	15	18	15	11
	West Donegal	5	7	1	10	5
DONEGAL ISLANDS	Tory Island	21	24	15	24	9
	Inishtrahull	1	1	1	0	0
	Inishbofin & Inishdooey	46	32	32	27	16
	Western Donegal Islands	22	19	32	23	11
	Co. Donegal Total	***120***	***107***	***110***	***119***	***68***
CO. MAYO	Mullet Peninsula	80	66	51	40	44
	Mayo Mainland	2	6	5	1	2
	Mayo Islands	11	7	6	4	6
CONNEMARA	Connemara Islands	17	24	21	19	21
	Connemara Mainland	2	4	2	2	2
	Co. Sligo	0	3	1	0	0
	Co. Clare	0	0	0	0	1
	West Connaught Total	***112***	***110***	***86***	***66***	***76***
OTHER	Shannon Callows	0	0	0	0	0
	Co. Kerry	1	1	1	3	2
	National recorded population	**233**	**218**	**197**	**188**	**146**

Table 2: Confirmed calling male corncrake territories 2024

4.1 Special Protection Area (SPA) survey results

There are 10 Special Protection Areas designated within Ireland for the conservation of corncrakes. In the 2024 Survey, a total of 150 calling male territories (58.4% of the national population) were detected within 250m of the SPA network (Table 3). The 250m buffer zone is utilized as a standard measure for the typical breeding territory of a pair of corncrakes. This 250m zone has been previously used within core corncrake sites to assist with delineation of the SPA boundaries (with all suitable areas for corncrake conservation that fell within the 250m discs incorporated) and also with respect to the delivery of Agri-environmental measures/payments. It should be noted that young birds can range >500m from the calling male centre of territory depending on habitat suitability and quality.

These 2024 figures represent an 11.4% increase on 2023 and contribute to an overall positive trend within the SPA network since 2020 (note that 2020 surveys were more limited in coverage by Covid-19 travel restrictions). Baseline targets for the SPAs were established using 2003-2007 data and represent a minimum population for the SPAs to be considered as meeting their Site Specific Conservation Objectives (SSCOs). In 2024, five SPAs met or exceeded their baseline targets. The 5-year mean for five sites was also met or exceeded.

The distribution of corncrakes (spatial utilisation) within the SPAs, i.e. core areas broadly defined using records of calling males during the census, is estimated using the following parameters (Table 4):

(i) For SPAs where *Crex crex* is the only qualifying interest, all hectares within the SPA are considered potential habitat.

(ii) For SPAs where *Crex crex* is only one of the qualifying interests, the available utilisable area in hectares is determined by mapping undertaken by the Corncrake LIFE project and generally refers to areas (ha) of semi-natural grassland habitats, excluding rock, peatland and water.

To calculate the spatial utilisation across each SPA, the centre of each calling male territory is given a 250m buffer and intersected with either the total SPA area (i) or utilisable area (ii) to give an overall percentage of the SPA utilised by the site-level population. Spatial utilisation is a consideration at SPA site-level for the determination

of population resilience but does not account for habitat suitability. SPA utilisable area is not considered for the Middle Shannon Callows SPA at this time as the birds are extirpated from the site. Only the nine SPAs with active breeding populations in the past five years are reported.

Table 3: Total numbers of calling male territories within 250m of the NATURA 2000 network of Special Protection Areas for corncrakes

SPA site code	Site Name	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	5-year mean	Baseline target
4146	Malin Head	1	4	3	7	11	5	6
4148	Fanad Head	2	0	0	0	2	1	3
4149	Falcarragh to Meenlaragh	6	9	5	9	9	8	7
4073	Tory Island	21	24	15	24	9	19	25
4083	Inishbofin, Inishdooey & Inishbeg	46	32	32	27	16	31	13
4229	West Donegal Islands	16	8	10	8	5	9	13
4227	Mullet Peninsula	28	22	18	12	27	33 (21)	4
4093	Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA*	19	9	11	5	14	0 (12)	na
4231	Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island	11	17	12	11	15	13	9
4096	Middle Shannon Callows	0	0	0	0	0	0	19
Total	**Special Protection Areas**	136	125	**106**	103	108	**NA**	**99**

*Birds supported by Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA are recorded as utilizing the SPA but may also be considered as utilizing the Mullet Peninsula SPA owing to the contiguous nature of the sites. Therefore, the combined total for Mullet Peninsula and Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA is likely to be higher than actual calling male territories. *Crex crex* baseline numbers for Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA are not available. The number of birds in the combined Mullet Peninsula SPA and Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA in 2024 is 33 total (please refer to the figures in parentheses in the table above) and these territories are attributed to the Mullet Peninsula SPA in the five-year mean figures.

Table 4: Total land areas (hectares) considered utilisable by corncrakes within the SPA network based on original designated area

SPA site code	*SPA name*	Estimated utilisable SPA area (ha)
4146*	Malin Head*	279.56
4148*	Fanad Head*	135.45
4149*	Falcarragh to Meenlaragh*	313.41
4073	Tory Island	86.95
4083	Inishbofin, Inishdooey & Inishbeg	83.26
4229	West Donegal Islands	53.02
4227*	Mullet Peninsula*	323.37
4093	Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair	142.38
4231*	Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island*	182.60

**Crex crex* is the single qualifying interest of these SPAs and thus the entire SPA is considered 'utilizable' by the birds based on original site designation boundaries

In terms of spatial utilisation of SPAs in 2024, six of the nine SPAs with extant populations recorded levels of spatial use that contribute towards supporting population resilience for those sites. The estimated spatial utilisation for Malin Head SPA, Fanad Head SPA and Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA, based on recorded territories in 2024 and over the five-year period, is considered sub-optimal with regards to meeting spatial utilisation targets and overall population resilience (Table 5). Spatial utilization is a gross estimate and does not account for habitat quality.

Table 5: Estimated SPA network spatial use by breeding corncrakes as a percentage of utilizable area

		Percentage (%) of area utilised as breeding territory						
SPA site code	**SPA site name**	**2024**	**2023**	**2022**	**2021**	**2020**	**5-year mean**	**Baseline target % utilisation**
4146	Malin Head	6.11	20.16	13.31	29.70	19.47	17.75	25-40
4148	Fanad Head	8.36	0.00	0.00	0.00	12.52	4.18	25-40
4149	Falcarragh to Meenlaragh	16.40	19.57	9.99	15.27	19.26	16.10	25-40
4073	Tory Island	97.47	89.91	77.32	82.17	56.76	80.73	50-75
4083	Inishbofin, Inishdooey & Inishbeg	74.16	78.27	77.95	62.80	66.83	72.00	50-75
4229	West Donegal Islands	97.65	94.19	84.74	71.31	86.38	86.85	50-75
4227	Mullet Peninsula	51.99	47.39	36.60	27.42	57.24	44.13	25-40
4093	Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA	82.39	45.68	47.56	28.28	35.10	47.80	25-40
4231	Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island	47.10	59.92	45.38	49.08	57.09	51.71	30-50

Note: The target spatial utilization for the SPAs is based on a comparative analysis of bird locations over an eight year period (2016-2023).

5 National breeding range

In 2024, a total of 30 10km grid squares (hereafter ‘grid squares’) were populated by calling male corncrakes (Table 6). Gains were made across seven grid squares in 2024 but losses were made in six grid squares, giving a range increase across only one 10km grid square in 2024. Across all populated grid squares, 17 (or 57 %) held just 1 to 2 birds, reflecting the fragmented nature of the population in Ireland, which may contribute towards local and possible wider (i.e. regional/national) extirpation. The presence of birds in new 1km grid squares, such as in North Mayo and St John’s and Castlegoland in Donegal with one bird each, may reflect some expansion of the population via nomadic or isolated individuals or pairs. However, isolated birds may not successfully rear young and where multi-annual breeding is < 3 consecutive years, medium-term population viability is considered poor and the risk of range contraction remains.

The national range over the past five years has fluctuated but remains broadly stable between 26 and 30 grid squares occupied annually. The national grid in Ireland consists of circa 1019 10km grid squares in total. Thus, the national range of corncrakes without considering habitat suitability is currently 2.9%.

Table 6: National range with respect to occupancy of 10km grid squares.

No. of 10km grid squares occupied per county	**2024**	**2023**	**2022**	**2021**	**2020**
Donegal	18	13	11	16	13
Sligo	0	2	1	0	0
Mayo	8	9	10	7	8
Galway	3	4	3	4	4
Clare	0	0	0	0	1
Kerry	1	1	1	3	2
National total	**30**	**29**	**26**	**30**	**28**

5.1 Summary of breeding season 2024

A total of 233 corncrake breeding territories were confirmed in Ireland during the 2024 breeding season. This figure represents a 6.8% increase on the 218 individuals confirmed in 2023. Donegal supported 120 confirmed calling male territories (52% of the national total) and West Connacht, which comprises the western seaboards of counties Mayo and Galway, supported 112 male territories (48% of the total). County Kerry had one calling male, as per 2023, while no breeding activity was recorded in Sligo. There have been no corncrakes recorded in the Middle Shannon Callows SPA or wider Shannon catchment since 2014.

Offshore islands supported 51% of the national population. At a regional scale, islands accounted for 75% of the population in Donegal and 25% of that in West Connacht. The corncrake SPAs supported 64.6% of the national population, accounting for 77% and 39% of numbers in Donegal and West Connacht respectively. Compared to 2023, there was an overall 13% increase in numbers recorded within the corncrake SPAs.

The calling male territories in the corncrake SPAs have increased from 125 to 136 in 2024. All of the nine monitored SPA sites supported breeding birds in 2024. However, for some corncrake SPAs, numbers are below the minimum threshold considered to maintain a stable population based on original site designation breeding numbers. Total numbers of corncrakes may fluctuate each season, and 5-year mean numbers should be considered. SPA sites such as Fanad Head SPA and Malin Head SPA have consistently performed poorly in recent years despite conservation efforts through projects such as Corncrake LIFE and the CTCP. SPAs such as Tory Island (004073), Inishbofin, Inishdooey and Inishbeg (Donegal) (004083) and the Mullet Peninsula (004227) continue to support strong numbers each season with Inishbofin, Inishdooey and Inishbeg SPA (Donegal) recording a significant rise in numbers to 46 territories while the Mullet Peninsula SPA recorded 33, which is a very positive increase.

The Inishowen peninsula (Co. Donegal) recorded nine territories. This included a bird on Inishtrahul Island for the third consecutive year. Three of these territories were in Malin Head with only one male territory associated with the SPA. Nearby on the Isle of Doagh (outside the SPA network), three birds were recorded as utilising habitat

within the Corncrake LIFE Catchment. Clonmany (outside the SPA network) recorded two calling male territories, which received conservation action through the CTCP grant. In Fanad Head, four birds were recorded with two territories within the SPA network; this was a welcome return after a poor number of seasons. Dunfanaghy (outside the SPA network) recorded two males with Marble Hill (outside the SPA network) failing to record any activity. The Falcarragh to Meenlarragh SPA network supported six calling male territories, although down from 2023, the presence of 46 calling males on nearby Inis Bó finne finne (Inishbofin, Inishdooey and Inishbeg SPA [004083]) must be noted for a potential localised sink effect; having undergone extensive habitat restoration via the Corncrake LIFE project.

Outside of the Falcarragh to Meenlarragh SPA, Carrowcanon in Falcarragh held one breeding male within a CTCP site which was breeding within a crop cover plot created in 2023. Further south, the areas of Keadue, Annagry and Gortahork (within the SPA) each recorded one bird. The island of Arranmore (outside the SPA network) has reduced in numbers with 11 in 2021, down to three in 2024. The West Donegal Islands SPA of Gola and Inismeane recorded eight territories each and this might be attributed movement of birds from Arranmore to more favourable habitat 10km further north; with Inismeane having undergone significant habitat restoration via the Corncrake LIFE project. The West Donegal SPA had its highest number of calling male territories in a decade in 2024.

County Galway continues to support stable numbers of corncrakes with Inishbofin being the stronghold for the county in 2024, with 11 calling male territories recorded, and seven of these territories within 250m of the SPA. Although Inishshark is not within the Inishbofin, Omey Island and Turbot Island SPA (004231), it continues to support birds and in 2024 two birds were confirmed. Omey Island supported four territories, a decrease from eight in 2023 however this remains positive considering no birds were recorded in 2017.

In south Mayo, an area not within any corncrake SPA, numbers are stable, with Inishturk Island now consistently supporting birds and five territories were recorded there in 2024. Three birds were recorded on Clare Island in 2024. On the mainland, Louisburgh supported one breeding male in 2024 compared to three in 2023.

5.2 Fieldworker Observations

Fieldworkers recorded a significant number of corncrakes during the 2024 season and the population was the highest since systematic recording began in 1993. Of the 233 breeding sites confirmed, 118 were located on the offshore islands, while 115 were located on the mainland. All areas, including islands, were visited during the season despite large sea swells throughout the summer. Reports from the public were frequent and the majority were from members of communities that continue to undertake action to attract corncrakes each season. Farmers, and those within the CTCP and LIFE project, are an important source of information for the survey team. They provide input into the locations and activity of newly arrived or established birds. Without this positive engagement and input from the communities, finding new bird territories would be more difficult.

The poor weather conditions for much of the breeding season in 2024 often hindered detection of new arrivals. The weather from winter into spring was poor with heavy rainfall continuing well into April. Birds began to arrive in the first week of April with all core breeding areas populated by calling male corncrakes by the 21st of April. The weather improved in May with temperatures reaching 20℃ on the Mullet peninsula on the 20th of May; the beginning of the census period. Sunshine hours reached over 13 hours at Malin and 12 hours in Belmullet on May 20th (see: https://www.met.ie/climate/available-data/monthly-data). However, the following days and weeks experienced some of the coldest summer weather since 2015 with average temperatures of 14.5℃. All fieldworkers noted the blustery and cool north winds that were persistent through to July. Census nights were generally cool which may have affected the behaviour of calling male birds and potentially the overall productivity of the birds in 2024; but this remains to be seen in 2025. Fieldworkers confirmed 83 calling male territories prior to the 1st June in both West Connacht and Donegal while 63 calling male territories were confirmed in West Connacht during the census period (20th May – 10th July) with Donegal fieldworkers confirming 64 territories. Participation in the Corncrake Conservation Programme increased in Donegal and West Connacht from 2023. Fieldworkers ensured that those not involved with the Corncrake LIFE Project were approached for the grant scheme, which meant that conservation measures were well extended outside core LIFE Project areas.

6 Conservation Measures Summary

6.1 Early and late cover (ELC) creation

A total of three hectares of habitat was managed by the programme as Early and Late Cover (ELC) in 2024 with a total of 21 participants in the CTCP Land Agreement Scheme. The habitat management scheme generally operates outside of Corncrake LIFE areas and SPAs as a means of providing support for birds in the wider countryside.

The ELC management was accompanied by a total of 56 hectares of habitat consisting of 28 hectares of meadows (mown land) and 28 hectares of grazing pastures. Seventeen participants within the Connacht region managed a total of 48 hectares of habitat while Donegal had four participants with eight hectares of habitat managed.

In Mayo, areas such as Louisburgh and the nearby islands of Clare Island and Inishturk greatly benefit from this habitat creation. Aside from attracting and retaining birds to the area, the programme engages with the local community and brings corncrake conservation to areas somewhat on the margins of core corncrake conservation efforts (Fig. 5). The region of South Mayo and Connemara recorded six calling males utilising the CTCP ELC plots, while Donegal recorded one calling male using the CTCP ELC close to Falcarragh.

In east Donegal, three participants joined the CTCP plans and this contributed a total of 4.21 hectares of late managed meadows for the birds; with each participant creating natural ELCs. Birds have frequently arrived into areas close-by and the expectation is for birds to populate these sites when these ELCs mature. ELCs created within north Mayo are established outside of the LIFE catchment in areas where birds were confirmed as breeding in previous years. It may take time for these ELCs to attract Corncrakes, but the ELCs have been created and with maturation, they may begin to support birds with the help of enthusiastic farmers.

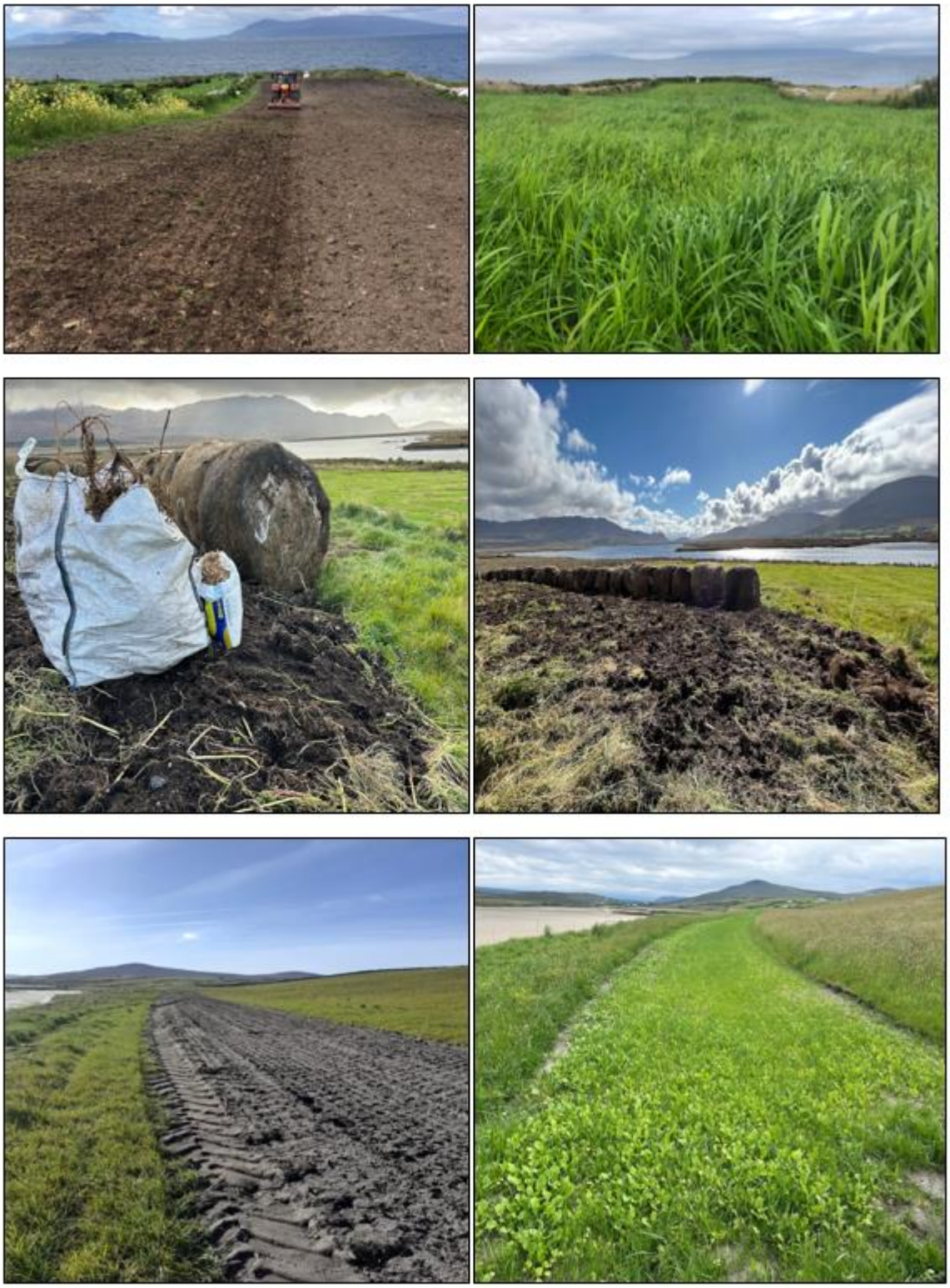


Figure 5: ELCs created in Clonmany, Donegal, Foxpoint and Ballycroy in North Mayo and Louisburgh, South Mayo in 2024 (starting at bottom left and moving clockwise)

6.2 Grant Scheme Summary

The Corncrake Grant Scheme is the Programmes primary mechanism for delivering conservation action in relation to meadow and grassland management. In 2024, a total of 120 hectares of land were entered into the CTCP Corncrake Grant Scheme (CGS) with 49 participants. A further 99 participants and 300 ha of land was involved in the Corncrake LIFE grant scheme which operates within the LIFE catchments which the CTCP co-ordinates as part of the LIFE project (Table 7).

A total of 87 participants were located in North Mayo, 30 in the South Mayo & Connemara region and 30 in Donegal. The majority of participants opted for delaying mowing to the 1st of September. Of the 421 hectares within the grant, 363 hectares were located in Connacht while Donegal accounted for 58 hectares. The 'Early' grant scheme, which invites participants proactively based on regular breeding locations, accounted for 54 hectares; 46 hectares of this were located in Connacht and eight hectares in Donegal.

A total of 107 hectares were signed up for Wildlife-Friendly Mowing (WFM) only with 26 participants, 94 hectares of this was in north Mayo. A total of 23 participants signed up for a 15th of August delay date with a total of 51 hectares, and the majority of participants opted for the mowing option. Participants who signed up for 1st September delay date totalled 11 farms, with 157 hectares in delayed mowing and 106 in delayed grazing. The majority of grant participants were in north Mayo with 152 hectares, south Mayo & Connemara, 71 in Donegal for the remaining 40 hectares (Table 7).

Table 7: The number of participants and area of land (hectares) managed as part of the grant schemes in 2024

Area	No. of Participants	Area (ha)	No. of Corncrakes
Co. Donegal	29	57.8	120
North Mayo	87	289.52	84
South Mayo & Connemara	30	71.62	28
Co. Kerry	2	1.61	1
National Total	**148**	**421**	**233**

Participation in the CTCP was good in 2024 and the uptake of 'WFM only' measures was well received by participants with the €150/ha serving as a strong incentive to participate in Corncrake protection, even when the delayed mowing measure is not considered an option by farmers. This WFM measure significantly mitigates risk to breeding birds where the option of delayed mowing is not feasible for farmers (Table 8). A large number of farmers in LIFE Catchments and SPAs have opted to join the Corncrake LIFE project. The CTCP operates to provide conservation measures in areas not participating in the LIFE project but also to capture landowners in the LIFE catchment who are not involved in the project's pilot Results-Based Agri-Environmental Payments Scheme (RBAPS). There is now greater flexibility for farmers that opt to mow lands prior to 1st of August, with 106.3 hectares of land undertaking WFM only. This provides a considerable mitigation for birds which may otherwise have been killed by standard mowing practices.

One of the objectives of the CTCP is to create a greater habitat range for breeding corncrake and to compliment the work of Corncrake LIFE through capacity building and the expansion of conservation measures. Outside of the LIFE catchments, the CTCP is the only protection mechanism for corncrakes and the grant scheme ensures that farmers have options to consider when corncrakes populate their lands. Areas such as Clonmany, Portnoo, and St. Johns in Donegal participated in the grant this season which gave the birds a chance to spread outside of the typical catchments and to have better protection afforded to them. Doohoma in north Mayo supported breeding birds for the first time since 2017 and without the protection available through the CTCP, these lands would all have been mown by mid-June with consequential negative impacts on the breeding birds and their nests.

Considering the Corncrake LIFE Project now oversees a large number of participants and area (hectares), the role of the grant scheme remains fundamental for corncrake conservation in terms of increasing the breeding population beyond the current range and building population resilience at the landscape level. As we move towards greater numbers of corncrake nationally, an increased participation in the grant scheme uptake is forecast; which will significantly contribute to corncrake conservation.

Table 8: Breakdown of the conservation measures delivered and overseen by the CTCP in 2024.The 15th August is the key date for breeding corncrakes and data is further divided into land that was grazed and mown.

Conservation Measures	Total (Ha.)	WFM Only	15th Aug Grazed	15th Aug Mown	1st Sept Grazed	1st Sept Mown	ELC (Ha.)
Donegal	57.8	12.4	1.24	4.3	15.47	24.4	0.2
Sligo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mayo (North)	289.5	94.2	3.4	42.3	41.1	109.4	1.1
Mayo (South)	47.1	0	0	0	30	16.6	1
Galway	24.6	0	0	0	18.3	6.2	0.1
Clare	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kerry	1.6	0	0	0	0.9	0.7	0
National total	**421**	**106.6**	**4.6**	**46.6**	**105.8**	**157.3**	**2.4**

7 Community Engagement and Outreach

7.1 Publicity and Community Engagement

The increasing popularity of the 'Corncrake Midnight Tour' continued on the Mullet Peninsula in Co. Mayo. Wild Nephin National Park and Belmullet Tidy Towns organised a Midnight Corncrake Tour as part of Biodiversity Week (Fig. 6). In 2024, a decision was made to incorporate another event later in the season. The events took place on the 24th May and 21st June at Áras Inis Gluaire, Belmullet. On the first night, 45 members of the public attended with great interest generated prior to the event. The second event attracted over 50 guests (Fig. 6). Liam Loftus, Ciaran Reaney, Patrick Lally and Dr. John Carey of the Corncrake/Traonach Conservation Project and Corncrake LIFE presented to the audience and provided a guided tour to the area of Barhauve, which recorded 13 calling males during the season. In east Donegal, fieldworkers attended the Clonmany Agricultural Show in Inishowen on the 6th August 2024. This annual event always provides great interaction between the farmers,

landowners and the local community, especially in this area, which does not benefit from inclusion in the Corncrake LIFE catchment.

In county Galway, members of the CTCP and Corncrake LIFE Project attended school presentations alongside field trips to help with the planting of ELC sites and to give the local students a better understanding of the benefits of Corncrake conservation for the local area (Figs. 7-8). The events took place on the 12th April at Claddaghduff National School, 20th May as part of the Talk & Walk event at the Dolphin Hotel, Inishbofin and a return on the 5th June to students in Claddaghduff for the planting of seeds on Omey Island.

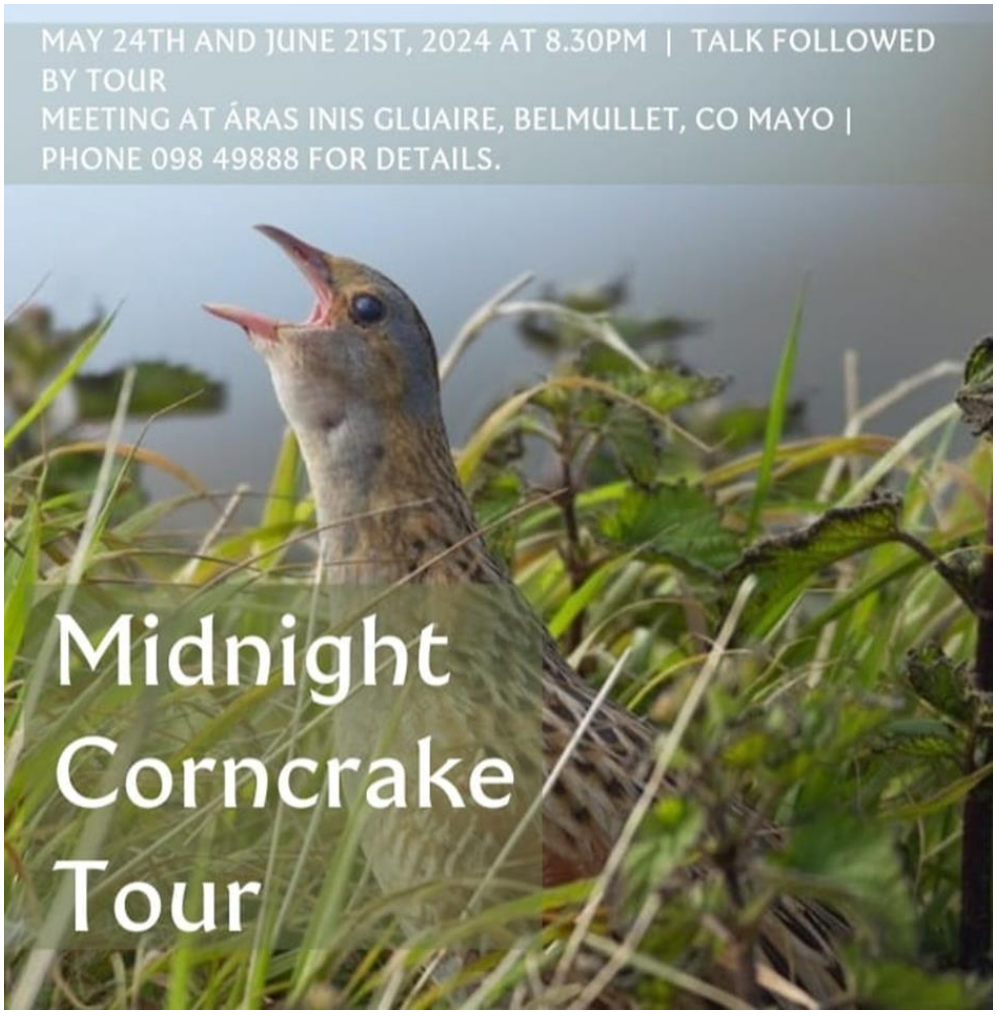


Figure 6: Poster advertising the Midnight Corncrake tour in Co. Mayo on 24th May & 21st June 2024.

Figure 7: Participants during the summer solstice midnight tour at Barhauve, Mullet peninsula (Co. Mayo) in June 2024

Figure 8: The CTCP and LIFE Project members presenting to pupils at Claddaghduff National School. Followed by pupils planting ELC on Omey Island, Galway. June 2024.

8 Summary

Despite the record numbers of birds recorded in Ireland in 2024, the corncrake remains a highly vulnerable species and has a very limited range distribution compared to its historical range. As can be seen from efforts across Ireland, and analogous efforts in Scotland, the birds require bespoke intervention in terms of both risk mitigation and habitat management. As resources have increased for monitoring and conservation measures for the birds, the population has responded quickly, but remains limited to core areas.

The conservation status of the species within the corncrake SPAs is improving with some SPAs now meeting their SSCOs while others still require restoration and on-going habitat management. Agricultural practices incompatible with the bird's breeding requirements and habitat loss remain the primary threats, but increasingly the impact of unpredictable and adverse weather must be considered. Low populations are also be vulnerable to predation pressure and isolated individuals make up the majority of range expansion. Predation risk management for corncrakes is in operation via the NPWS Nest Protection Pilot Programme, and the birds undoubtedly benefit from these these measures.

Offshore islands in West Donegal, West Connemara and the Mullet peninsula remain the core areas for the birds, with mainland birds persisting in much smaller numbers. It is crucial that measures continue in mainland sites to ensure wider population resilience at the landscape level and to buffer any potential adverse events within the SPA network. This is particularly relevant when factoring in stochastic variables which cannot be directly controlled, such as those that are climate-related.

The joint actions of the responsive Corncrake/Traonach Conservation Programme and the proactive Corncrake LIFE project has created a catchall approach to protecting the birds and allowing for some population growth; and both systems will need to be maintained to ensure population stability and continued recovery.

9 Acknowledgments

The CTCP team would like to acknowledge the continued support of the National Parks and Wildlife Service particularly the Nature Conservation Directorate who fund the CTCP, and all the Regional staff who support its work throughout the season.

The Corncrake LIFE Project staff for the work and support within the field and office.

The CTCP fieldworkers in all four regions for continued effort and providing high standard of work during the census.

The LIFE Project Nest Protection Officers for the invaluable work and records throughout the year.

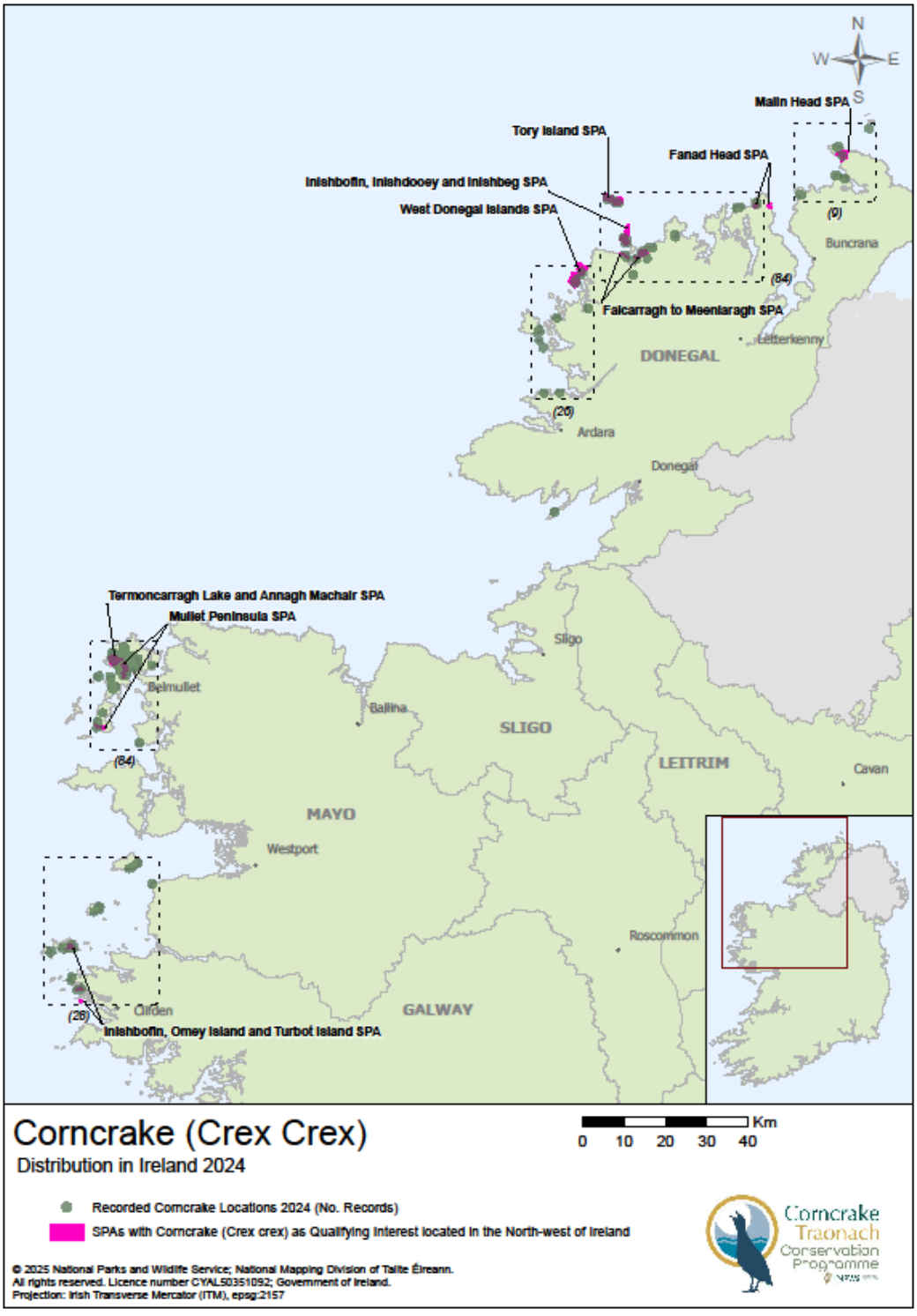
Thanks to Cliona O'Brien for editorial support and feedback.

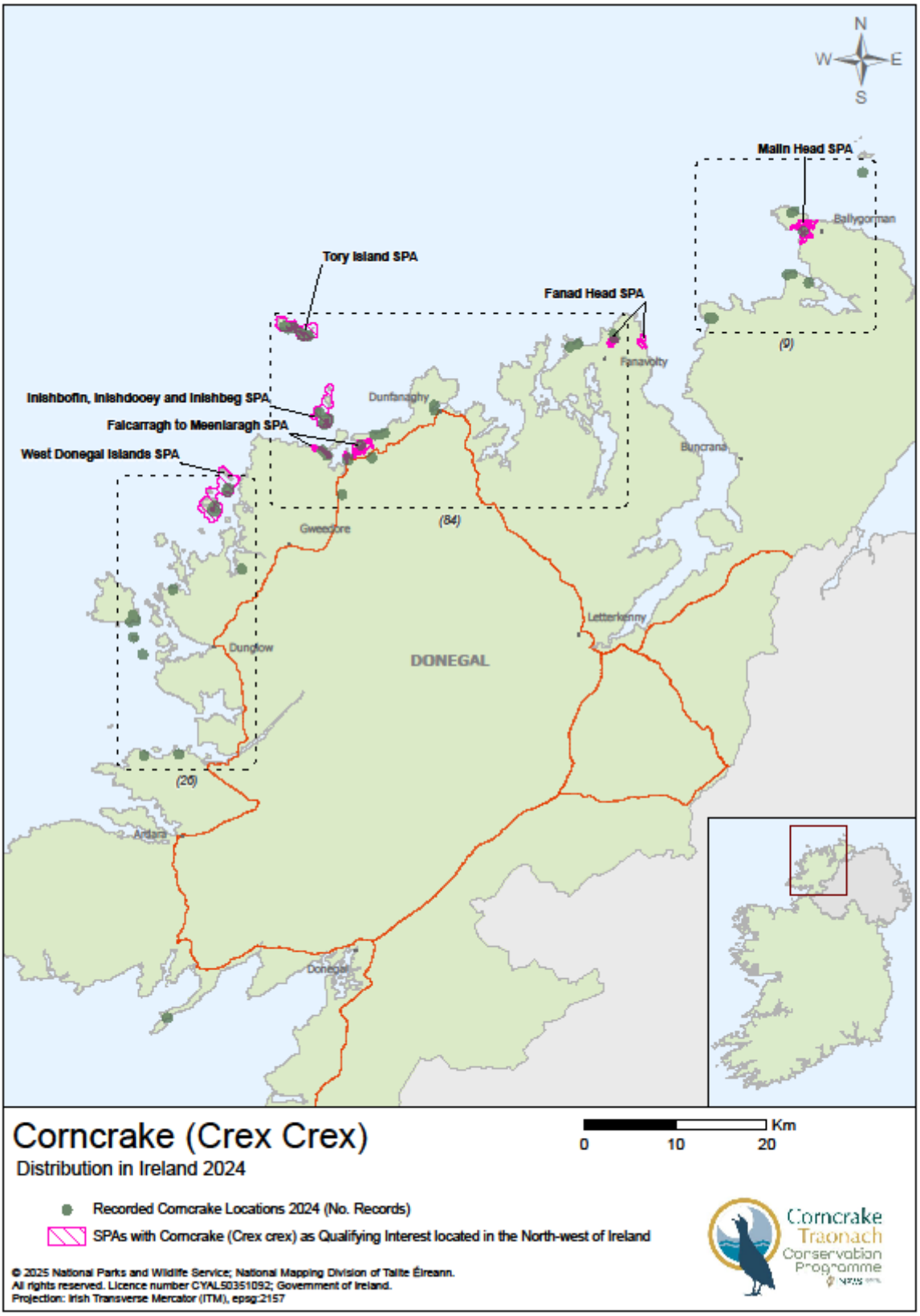
Thanks to the NPWS ecological data management team and Cristina Carrera Prada for GIS support.

Thanks to Ciaran Reaney, Dr. John Carey, Dr. Sinéad Cummins and Liam Loftus for developing and editing this report.

Significant gratitude to every farmer and landowner who provide habitat to these remarkable birds and ensure they have a place in the future of our landscape- as they deserve.

10 Appendix 1: Bird distributions within the SPAs





Corncrake (Crex Crex)

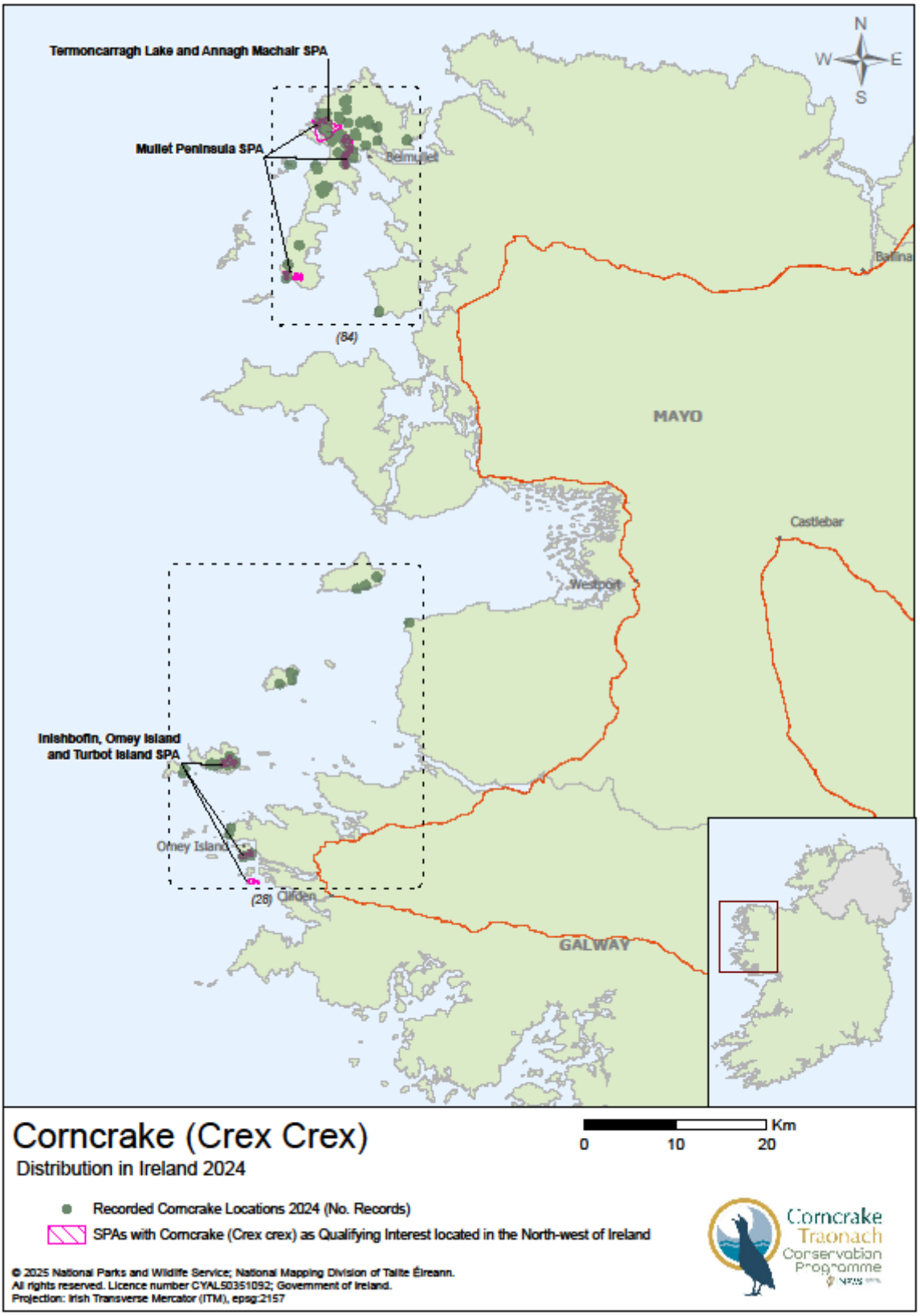
Distribution in Ireland 2024

Recorded Corncrake Locations 2024 (No. Records)

SPAs with Corncrake (Crex crex) as Qualifying Interest located in the North-west of Ireland

Projection: Irish Transverse Mercator (ITM), epsg:2157

Corncrake Traonach Conservation Programme


Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA
Mullet Peninsula SPA
Belmullet
(84)
Ballina
MAYO
Castlebar
Westport
Inishbofin, Omey Island and Turbot Island SPA
Omey Island
(28) Clifden
GALWAY
N
W
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S
Corncrake (Crex Crex)
Distribution in Ireland 2024
Km
0
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Recorded Corncrake Locations 2024 (No. Records)
SPAs with Corncrake (Crex crex) as Qualifying Interest located in the North-west of Ireland
Corncrake Traonach Conservation Programme
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Projection: Irish Transverse Mercator (ITM), epsg:2157

11 Appendix 2: Summary data for annual survey

National figures for the 2020-2024 per county; to note that 2020 numbers were likely an underestimate due to Covid-19 travel restrictions.

Calling male territories	**2024**	**2023**	**2022**	**2021**	**2020**
Donegal	120	107	110	119	68
Sligo	0	3	1	0	0
Mayo	93	79	62	45	52
Galway	19	28	23	21	23
Clare	0	0	0	0	1
Kerry	1	1	1	3	2
National total	**233**	**218**	**197**	**188**	**146**

12 Appendix 3: 5km inter-connected catchment range

Corncrakes typically maintain a high natal fidelity and studies have shown they generally return to within 5km of their natal site. As several SPAs are interconnected by < 5km, data is provided that allows consideration of the population dynamics and potential resilience at the 5km inter-connected catchment range. The West Donegal 5km interconnected catchment includes four SPAs all within a 5km connectivity range of one another:

- Tory Island (004073)
- Inishbofin, Inishdooey & Inishbeg (004083)
- West Donegal Islands (004230)
- Falcarragh to Meenlaragh (004149)

The Mullet Peninsula 5km interconnected catchment includes two SPAs within a 5km connectivity range of one another:

- Mullet Peninsula (004227)
- Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA (004093)

Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island SPA (004231) and Middle Shannon Callows SPA (004096) are not within a 5km range of any other SPA sites.

5km inter-connected catchment	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	5-year average	Consolidated SPA target numbers
Malin Head	1	4	3	7	11	6	6
Fanad Head	2	0	0	0	2	1	3
West Donegal	89	73	62	68	30	64	58
Mullet Peninsula	37	31	29	17	41	31	4
Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island	11	17	12	11	15	14	9
Middle Shannon Callows	0	0	0	0	0	0	19

13 Appendix 4: Bird territories associated with 2024 CTCP direct habitat management actions (within 250m) based on county.

Calling male territories per county	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Donegal	15	15	25	25	12
Sligo	0	3	1	0	0
Mayo	14	16	13	7	9
Galway	4	7	5	4	3
Clare	0	0	0	0	1
Kerry	1	1	1	3	2
National total	**34**	**42**	**45**	**39**	**27**

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