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

Corncrake/Traonach Conservation Programme

Bird survey and habitat management report

2025

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 2025. It presents the results of the 2025 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 281 corncrake breeding territories were confirmed in Ireland during the 2025 breeding season. This figure represents a 20.6% increase on the 233 territories confirmed in 2024. County Donegal supported 134 confirmed calling male territories (47.7% of the national total) and West Connacht, which comprises the western seaboards of counties Mayo and Galway, supported 143 male territories (50.9% of the total). County Kerry had two calling males, and for the first time in recent years, Co. Waterford recorded a calling male in Kilmacthomas with one calling male also recorded in Mizen, Co. Cork. No breeding activity was recorded in Co. Sligo. There have been no confirmed records of corncrakes in the Shannon Callows since 2014.

Offshore islands supported 51.6% of the national population with 48.4% found on mainland sites. At a regional scale, islands accounted for 76.7% of the population in Co. Donegal and 29.8% of the population in West Connacht. The corncrake Special Protection Areas (SPA) supported 56.9% of the national population, accounting for 76.6% of territories in Co. Donegal and 40.2% of territories in West Connacht. Compared to the 2024 census, there was an overall 17.6% increase in territories recorded within the corncrake SPAs.

There were 165 participants within the CTCP in 2025 and 539.13 hectares of land was subject to conservation measures during the season. Coupled with the Corncrake LIFE project, over 1500 hectares of land was under management for corncrakes in 2025. Conservation measures applied in 2025 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 or regions, 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 2014 and this SPA does not have a dedicated fieldworker. Fieldworkers also have capacity to implement measures for corncrakes 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 is 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 the location 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. the 15th August or 1st September delay date. Farmers may also chose a WFM-only option in areas where delayed mowing is not feasible.

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 for that measure has been adhered to and livestock can be re-entered into the field.

3 2025 Corncrake core area census and wider monitoring programme

3.1 Survey coverage and methodology

Contracted fieldworkers undertook the majority of census survey efforts in 2025, assisted by the NPWS and Corncrake LIFE project on coordinated surveys and offshore islands. Four fieldworkers, including a lead census coordinator, were contracted in 2025. These fieldworkers were located in Mayo, Donegal (2) and Galway. A basic level of census was carried out on the Shannon Callows in 2025 in conjunction with the Breeding Waders EIP. Passive Acoustic Monitors (PAMs) were distributed and monitored across the Shannon Callows with a focus on areas close to former breeding locations. Any reports from these areas 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

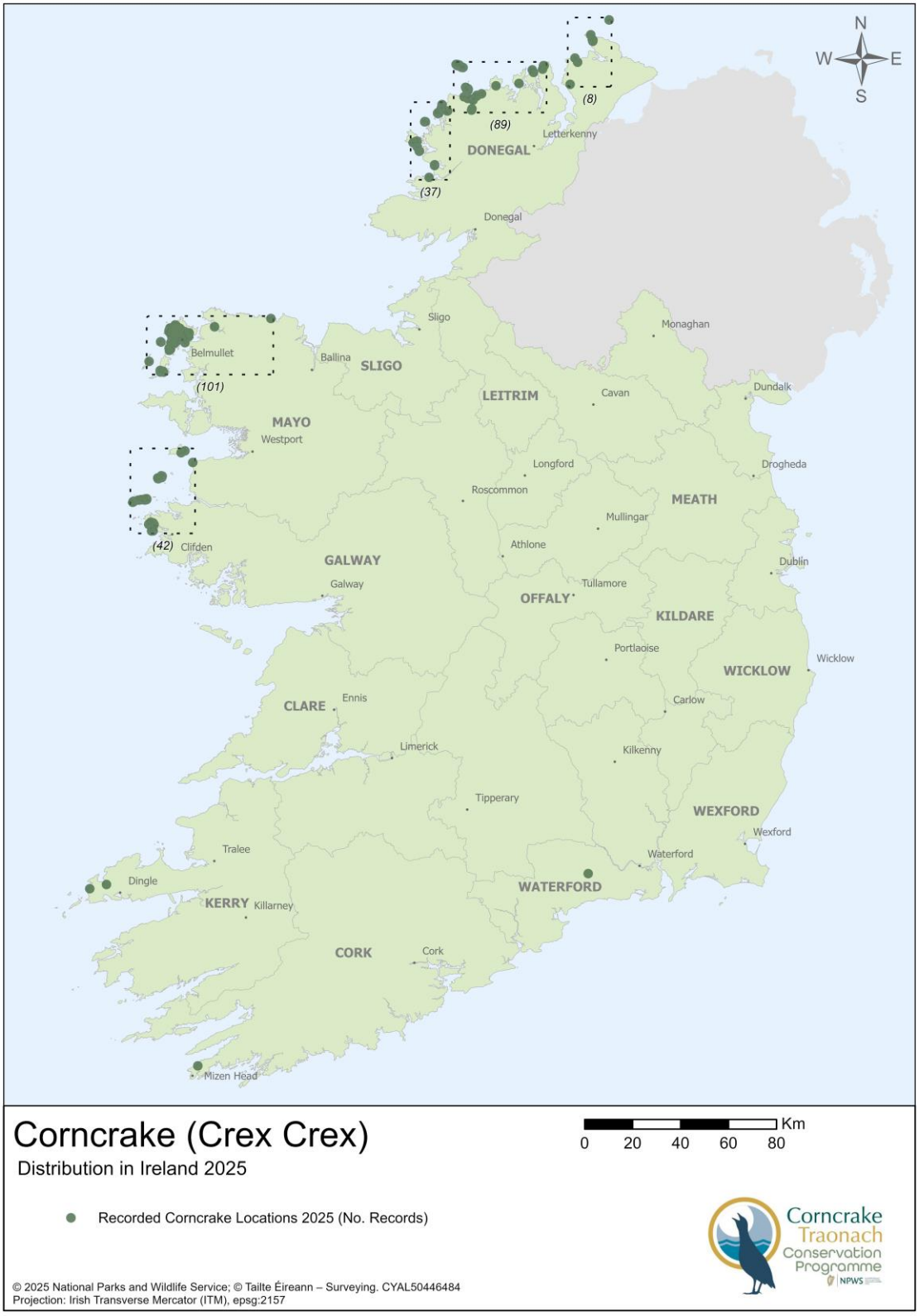

Figure 1: The distribution of Corncrakes within the Republic of Ireland in 2025 with each primary location considered a breeding territory based on the survey methodology

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 320 hours (27 operational days) were spent on survey work in 2025 by fieldworkers with volunteer and co-ordinated surveys totalling 345.50 hours. The use of passive acoustic monitoring[1] 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	162.0	0	12.0	174.0
West Connacht (including Co. Kerry)	158.5	0	13.0	171.5
Shannon Callows	0	N/A	N/A	0
National Total	320.50	0	25.0	345.5

[1] passive acoustic monitoring uses equipment that can be programmed to remotely capture long-term acoustic/audio data from a fixed location over weeks or months.

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 NPWS 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), and similarly rainfall (Fig. 3). This evaluation 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 core 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 prior to 20th of May and territorial occupation and possibly earlier and later 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 utilises 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. This is especially relevant in terms of females establishing nests and available food sources for the eventual rearing of the first brood. Ideal conditions would include mild temperatures that prompt typical spring growth to provide cover and increase invertebrate prey availability, and light winds and clear nights to accommodate good survey conditions. In 2025, the core areas experienced persistent high pressure that was circulating north of Ireland and Scotland and brought about high temperatures in March through to late April. This period of warm weather likely enabled corncrakes to arrive early in the season with first reports on the 7th April on Inismeain (Co. Donegal) and the Mullet peninsula. The majority of survey nights in 2025 were considered good or above good conditions for surveying (Figures 2-4).

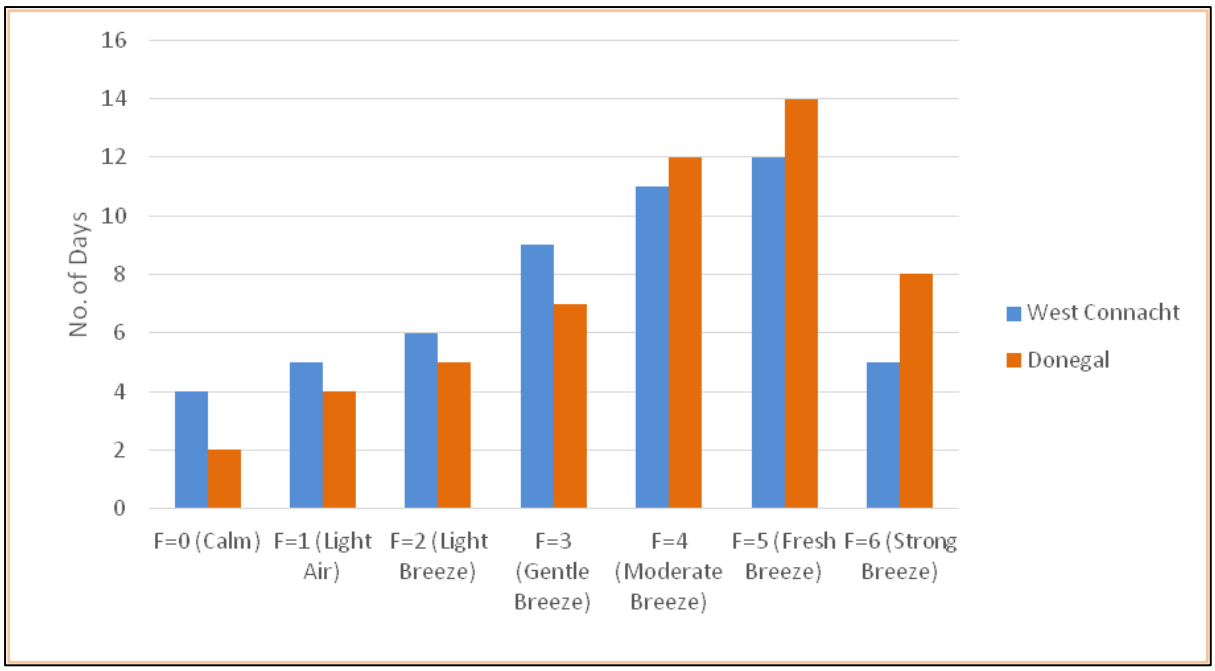

Figure 2: Wind force as recorded by census fieldworkers during the census period.

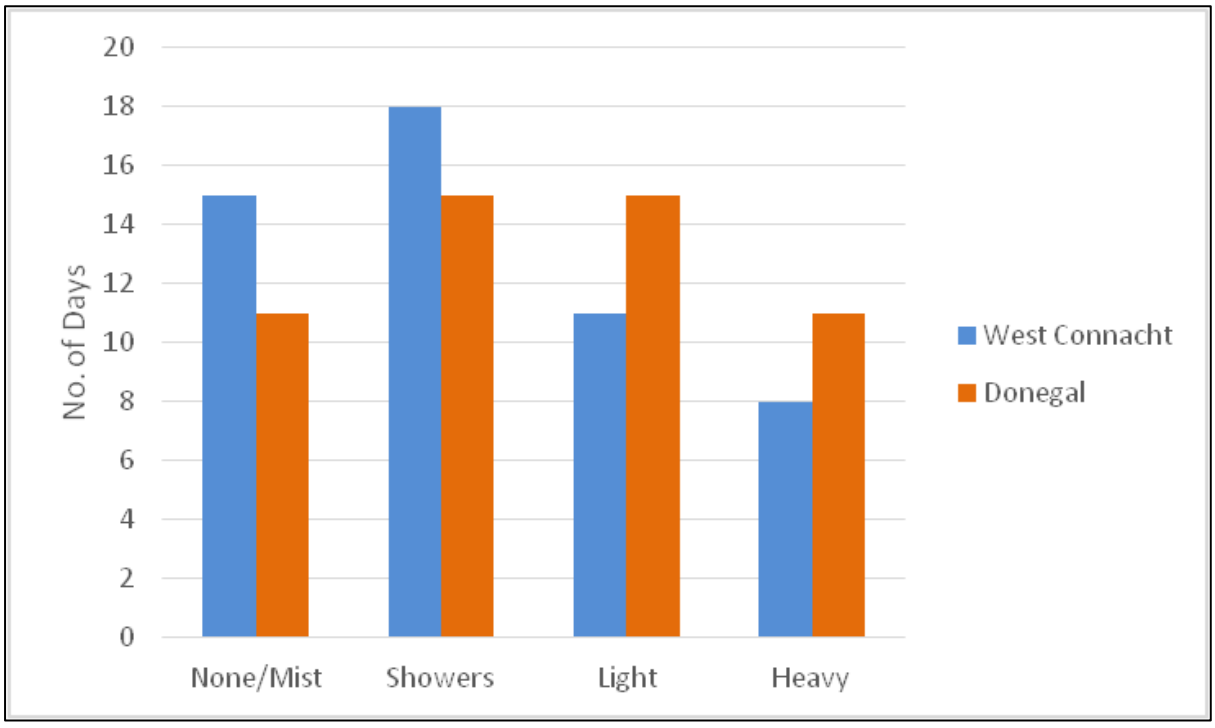

Figure 3: Number of days per rainfall category throughout the census.

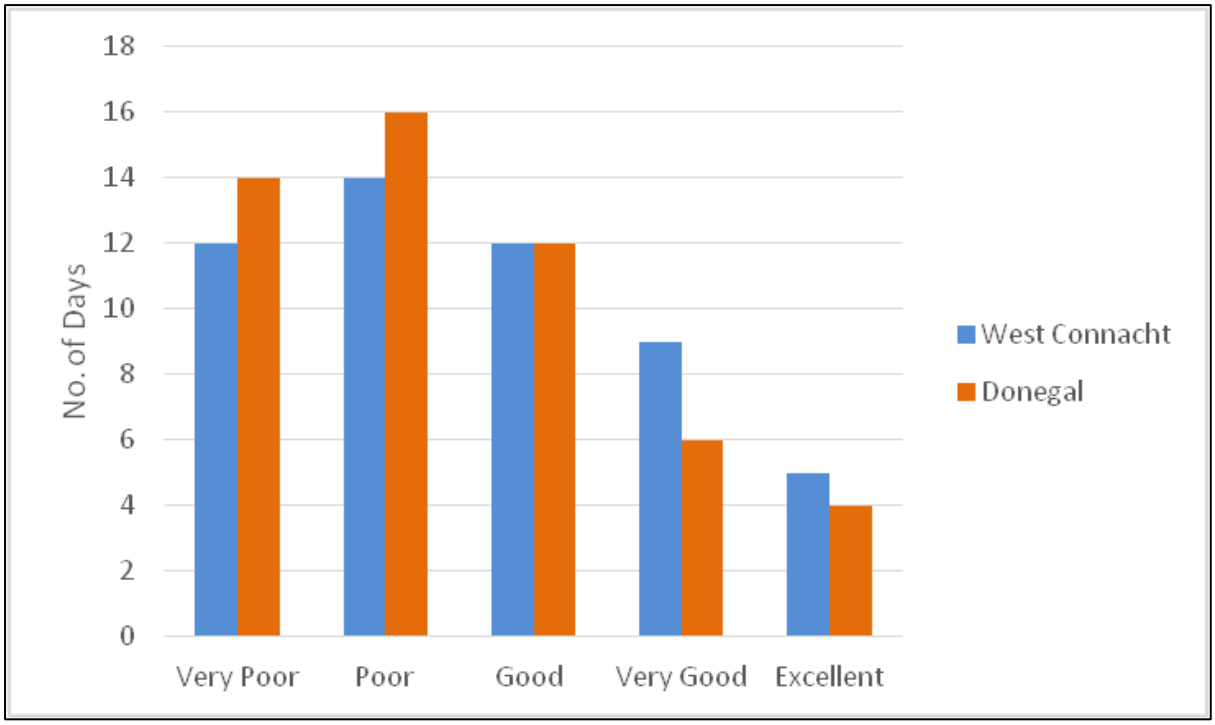

Figure 4: Census accuracy in days, as estimated by fieldworkers during surveys.

4 National Census results

A total of 281 calling male territories were recorded in 2025 which is a 20.6% increase on 2024 and shows an overall continued increase in the breeding population nationally for the past five years (Table 2). The West Connacht population has increased considerably since 2021, with the population in Co. Donegal showing a level of stability. It should be noted that estimated male territory totals for Co. Donegal in 2020 were affected by the ability of the field team at that time to fully monitor sites owing to Covid-19 travel restrictions to islands. Thus, 2020 estimates are likely an underestimate due to the coverage of island populations. The 2020 figures are not included nor discussed in this report as they fall outside the 5-year reporting period.

Region	Area	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
DONEGAL MAINLAND	Inishowen peninsula	7	8	8	8	14
	Fanad peninsula	5	4	1	1	1
	Rosguill	1	0	0	2	5
	Carrigart to Bloody Foreland	14	13	15	18	15
	West Donegal	4	5	7	1	10
DONEGAL ISLANDS	Tory Island	40	21	24	15	24
	Inishtrahull	1	1	1	1	0
	Inishbofin & Inishdooey	28	46	32	32	27
	Western Donegal Islands	33	22	19	32	23
	Co. Donegal Total	***133***	***120***	***107***	***110***	***119***
CO. MAYO	Mullet Peninsula	96	80	66	51	40
	Mayo Mainland	3	2	6	5	1
	Mayo Islands	14	11	7	6	4
CONNEMARA/ CONNACHT	Connemara Islands	29	17	24	21	19
	Connemara Mainland	2	2	4	2	2
	Co. Sligo	0	0	3	1	0
	West Connacht Total	***144***	***112***	***110***	***86***	***66***
OTHER	Shannon Callows	0	0	0	0	0
	Co. Kerry	2	1	1	1	3
	Co. Cork	1	0	0	0	0
	Co. Waterford	1	0	0	0	0
	National recorded population	**281**	**233**	**218**	**197**	**188**

Table 2: Confirmed calling male corncrake territories 2021-2025

4.1 Special Protection Area (SPA) survey results

There are 10 Special Protection Areas designated within Ireland for the conservation of corncrakes. In the 2025 Survey, a total of 159 calling male territories (56.6% of the national population) were detected within 250m of the SPA network (Table 3). The 250m buffer zone is utilised as a standard measure for the typical breeding territory of a pair of corncrakes. This 250m buffer has been previously applied within core corncrake sites to assist with delineation of the SPA boundaries (with all suitable areas for corncrake conservation that fell within the 250m buffers 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 2025 figures represent an 17.3% increase on 2024 and contributes 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). For Corncrake SPAs, the Site Specific Conservation Objectives (SSCOs) set out baseline targets for the attribute population size, derived using 2003-2007 calling males territory data. SSCOs aim to define favourable conservation condition for the species at each site. For population size, this target represents a minimum population for the site to be considered as meeting favourable conservation condition. In 2025, seven of the 10 Corncrake SPAs met or exceeded their baseline targets for population size. The 5-year mean for seven sites for this attribute was also met or exceeded.

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	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	5-year mean	Baseline target
4146	Malin Head	3	1	4	3	7	4	6
4148	Fanad Head	1	2	0	0	0	1	3
4149	Falcarragh to Meenlaragh	10	6	9	5	9	8	7
4073	Tory Island	40	21	24	15	24	25	20
4083	Inishbofin, Inishdooey & Inishbeg	28	46	32	32	27	33	13
4229	West Donegal Islands	20	16	8	10	8	12	13
4227	Mullet Peninsula	34	34	32	25	14	28	4
4093	Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA*	(8)	(12)	(8)	(8)	(4)	na	na
4231	Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island	23	11	17	12	11	15	9
4096	Middle Shannon Callows	0	0	0	0	0	0	19
Total	**Special Protection Areas**	**159**	**136**	**125**	**106**	**103**	**na**	**99**

*Owing to contiguous boundaries of Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA and the Mullet Peninsula SPA, corncrake numbers in these locations are considered as one population and attributed to the Mullet Peninsula SPA. The *Crex crex* target baseline numbers for Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA are not available for comparison. The number of birds exclusively within the boundary of Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA is given in parentheses but these birds may have also utilised the Mullet Peninsula SPA and should only be considered indicative of the site having birds present.

n.a. Not Applicable

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 of semi-natural grassland habitats, excluding rock, peatland and water.

To calculate the spatial utilisation of the birds across each SPA, the centre of each calling male territory is given a 250m buffer and intersected with the following parameters, either (i) the total SPA area or (ii) utilisable area 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 site-level 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 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	99.25
4231*	Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island*	182.60

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

For seven of the nine SPAs with extant populations, levels of spatial use in 2025 would likely contribute towards supporting population resilience for the population in those sites in the survey year. The estimated spatial utilisation for Malin Head SPA and Fanad Head SPA, based on recorded territories in 2025 and over the five-year period,

is considered sub-optimal with regards to meeting spatial utilisation targets as set out in the SSCOs and overall population resilience (Table 5). Spatial utilisation is a proxy estimate of the site usage by Corncrake which does not account for local variation in habitat quality.

Table 5: Estimated SPA network spatial use by breeding corncrakes as a percentage of utilisable area over the 5-year reporting period (2021-2025)

		Percentage (%) of area utilised as breeding territory						
SPA site code	**SPA site name**	**2025**	**2024**	**2023**	**2022**	**2021**	**5-year mean**	**Target % utilisation**
4146	Malin Head	14.72	6.11	20.16	13.31	29.70	16.80	25-40
4148	Fanad Head	9.98	8.36	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.67	25-40
4149	Falcarragh to Meenlaragh	26.81	16.40	19.57	9.99	15.27	17.61	25-40
4073	Tory Island	95.78	97.47	89.91	77.32	82.17	88.53	50-75
4083	Inishbofin, Inishdooey & Inishbeg	70.81	74.16	78.27	77.95	62.80	72.80	50-75
4229	West Donegal Islands	98.57	97.65	94.19	84.74	71.31	89.29	50-75
4227	Mullet Peninsula	51.12	51.99	47.39	36.60	27.42	42.90	25-40
4093	Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA	81.60	82.39	45.68	47.56	28.28	57.10	25-40
4231	Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island	60.61	47.10	59.92	45.38	49.08	52.42	30-50

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

5 National breeding range

In 2025, a total of 34 10km grid squares (hereafter 'grid squares') were populated by calling male corncrakes (Table 6). Gains were made across 12 grid squares in 2025 but losses were made in seven grid squares, giving a range increase across five 10km grid squares in 2025. Across all populated grid squares, 19 (or 56%) 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 Luinnigh 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 with approx. 30 10km 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 3.4%.

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

No. of 10km grid squares occupied per county	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
Donegal	18	18	13	11	16
Sligo	0	0	2	1	0
Mayo	10	8	9	10	7
Galway	3	3	4	3	4
Clare	0	0	0	0	0
Kerry	1	1	1	1	3
Cork	1	0	0	0	0
Waterford	1	0	0	0	0
National total	**34**	**30**	**29**	**26**	**30**

5.1 Summary of breeding season 2025

A total of 281 corncrake breeding territories were confirmed in Ireland during the 2025 breeding season. This figure represents a 20.6% increase on the 233 individuals confirmed in 2024. Donegal supported 133 confirmed calling male territories (47.3% of the national total) and West Connacht, which comprises the western seaboards of counties Mayo and Galway, supported 144 male territories (51.2% of the total). County Kerry had two calling males, and for the first time in recent years, Co. Waterford recorded a calling male in Kilmacthomas with one calling male also recorded in Mizen, Co. Cork. No breeding activity was recorded in Co. Sligo. There have been no confirmed records of corncrakes in the Shannon Callows since 2014. Offshore islands supported 51.6% of the national population with 48.4% found on mainland sites. At a regional scale, islands accounted for 76.7% of the population in Co. Donegal and 29.8% of the population in West Connacht. The corncrake Special Protection Areas (SPA) supported 56.9% of the national population, accounting for 76.6% of territories in Co. Donegal and 40.2% of territories in West Connacht. Compared to 2024, there was an overall 17.6% increase in territories recorded within the corncrake SPAs.

The calling male territories in the corncrake SPAs have increased from 136 to 155 in 2025. All of the nine monitored SPA sites supported breeding birds in 2025. However, for some corncrake SPAs, numbers of breeding birds are below the minimum threshold considered to maintain a stable population, and lower than breeding numbers at the baseline time-period prior to site designation. Total numbers of corncrakes may fluctuate each season, and 5-year mean numbers should be considered as an indication of population stability. SPA sites such as Fanad Head SPA and Malin Head SPA have shown declines in recent years despite conservation efforts through projects such as Corncrake LIFE and the CTCP. SPAs such as Inishbofin, Inishdooey and Inishbeg (004083) and the Mullet Peninsula (004227) continue to support strong numbers each season with Tory Island (004073) recording a significant rise in numbers to 40 territories while the Mullet Peninsula SPA recorded 34 in 2025 (*see table 3 and note).

The Inishowen peninsula (Co. Donegal) recorded eight territories. This included a bird on Inishtrahul Island for the fourth consecutive year. Four of these territories were in Malin Head with three males associated with the SPA. No birds were recorded on the Isle of Doagh (outside the SPA network). Clonmany (outside the SPA network) recorded two calling male territories, which received conservation action through the CTCP grant. In Fanad Head, five birds were recorded with one territory within the Fanad Head SPA (004148); this was a welcome return after a poor number of seasons. Dunfanaghy (outside the SPA network) recorded one male with Downings (outside the SPA network) recording one male. The Falcarragh to Meenlarragh SPA (004149) supported ten calling male territories, the presence of 28 calling males on nearby Inis Bó finne (Inishbofin, Inishdooey and Inishbeg SPA (004083)) remains very positive despite a decline since 2024 which may have been due to birds moving between Inis Bó finne and Tory Island. Outside of the Falcarragh to Meenlarragh SPA, the areas of Beltony recorded two birds while Luinnigh recorded one bird; a first in a number of years. The island of Arranmore (outside the SPA network) has increased in numbers from three in 2024, to six in 2025. The West Donegal Islands SPA (004230) of Gola and Inismeane recorded seven and 12 territories respectively and this might be attributed to 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 Islands SPA had its highest number of calling male territories in a decade in 2025.

County Galway continues to support stable numbers of corncrakes with Inishbofin being the stronghold for the county in 2025, having 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 2025, six birds were confirmed. Omey Island supported nine territories; a remarkable improvement considering no birds were recorded in 2017. Turbot Island recorded three territories - the first records in four years. In south Mayo, an area without any corncrake SPAs, numbers are stable, with Inishturk Island now consistently supporting birds with nine territories recorded there in 2025. Two birds were recorded on Clare Island in 2025. On the mainland, Louisburgh supported one breeding male in 2025, the same total as in 2024.

5.2 Fieldworker Observations

Fieldworkers recorded a significant number of corncrakes during the 2025 season and the population was the highest since systematic recording began in 1993. Of the 281 breeding sites confirmed, 145 were located on the offshore islands, while 136 were located on the mainland. All areas, including islands, were visited during the season despite large sea swells at times 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, providing input into the locations and activity of newly arrived or established birds. Without this positive engagement from the communities, finding new bird territories each year would be more difficult.

The excellent weather early in the season was very welcome, as in previous years a dominance of cool north winds and wet early starts to the year made conditions poor for growing and corncrake habitat. In 2025, birds began to arrive in the first week of April with all core breeding areas populated by calling male corncrakes by the 22nd of April. The good weather continued into May with temperatures reaching 20℃ on the Mullet peninsula on the 9th of April; the same week as first arrivals. Sunshine hours reached 15 hours in both Malin and Belmullet on May 20th (see: https://www.met.ie/climate/available-data/monthly-data). The reporting year (2025) was a positive in terms of the seasonal weather patterns, with warm summer air notable throughout the season. Census nights were generally warm, which likely contributed towards increased productivity of the birds in 2025. Fieldworkers confirmed 194 calling male territories prior to the 1st June in both West Connacht and Donegal. A total of 46 calling male territories were confirmed in West Connacht during the census period (20th May – 10th July), with Donegal fieldworkers confirming 28 territories. Participation in the Corncrake Conservation Programme increased in Donegal and West Connacht since 2024. 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 2025 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 Corncrake LIFE project manages considerably more ELC and grassland habitat under its auspices; approx. 60 ha of ELC and 1,000 ha of grassland.

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 seven calling males utilising the CTCP ELC plots, while Donegal recorded one calling male using the CTCP ELC close to Clonmany.

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 project catchment in areas where birds were confirmed as breeding in previous years. A male was recorded in close proximity to the Early CGS plot in Logmore, close to Belmullet. It may take time for these ELCs to attract more 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 Clare Island in South Mayo and Foxpoint and Ballycroy, North Mayo in 2025 (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 2025, a total of 539.19 hectares of land were entered into the CTCP Corncrake Grant Scheme (CGS) with 165 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 103 participants were located in North Mayo, 29 in the South Mayo & Connemara region and 32 in Donegal. The majority of participants opted for delaying mowing to the 1st of September. Of the 539.13 hectares within the grant, 452.17 hectares were located in Connacht while Donegal accounted for 86.29 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 133.08 hectares were signed up for Wildlife-Friendly Mowing (WFM) with 37 participants, 124.40 hectares of which was in north Mayo. A total of 20 participants signed up for a 15th of August delay date with a total of 71.75 hectares, and the majority of participants opted for the mowing option. Participants who signed up for 1st September delay date totalled 123, with 155.54 hectares in delayed mowing and 185.91 in delayed grazing. The majority of grant participants were in north Mayo with 374.81 hectares, 77.36 in south Mayo & Connemara, and 82.29 in Donegal (Table 7).

Table 7: The number of participants and area of land (hectares) managed as part of the grant schemes in 2025

Area	No. of Participants	Area (ha)	No. of Corncrakes
Co. Donegal	31	86.29	133
North Mayo	103	374.81	101
South Mayo & Connemara	29	77.36	43
Co. Kerry	1	0.67	2
Co. Cork	0	0	1
Co.Waterford	0	0	1
National Total	**165**	**539.13**	**281**

Participation in the CTCP was good in 2025 and the uptake of the 'WFM only' measure 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 133.08 hectares of land undertaking WFM only.

One of the objectives of the CTCP is to create a greater habitat range for breeding corncrake and to complement 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 expand 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 has overseen 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 2025.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	86.29	9.68	2.49	21.93	24.85	27.34	0.20
Mayo (North)	374.81	123.40	4.5	33.45	101.36	118.57	1.20
Mayo (South)	55.17	0	0	0	40.72	4.62	1
Galway	20.44	0	0	0	17.00	5.01	0.10
Kerry	0.67	0	0	0	0.67	0	0
National total	**539.13**	**133.08**	**6.99**	**55.38**	**184.60**	**155.54**	**2.50**

7 Community Engagement and Outreach

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 9th May and 30thth May at Áras Inis Gluaire, Belmullet. On the first night, 40 members of the public attended with great interest generated prior to the event. The second event attracted over 55 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 24 calling males during the season. In east Donegal, fieldworkers attended the Clonmany Agricultural Show in Inishowen on the 5th August 2025. 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 in April, May and June at Inishbofin National School, while members also attended the annual Night Talk & Walk event at the Dolphin Hotel, Inishbofin on 20th May and a heritage Walk and Talk on the 3rd August on Omey Island

Figure 6: Poster advertising the Midnight Corncrake tour in Co. Mayo on 9th May & 30th May 2025.

Figure 7: Participants during the midnight tour at Barhauve, Mullet peninsula (Co. Mayo) in May 2025

Figure 8: The CTCP and LIFE Project members ahead of the Omey Island Heritage Walk and Talk event. August, 2025.

8 Summary

Despite the record numbers of birds recorded in Ireland in 2025, the corncrake remains a highly vulnerable species and has a very limited 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 requirements set out under SSCOs, while others still require further 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 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 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 NPWS Regional staff who support its work throughout the season.

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

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

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

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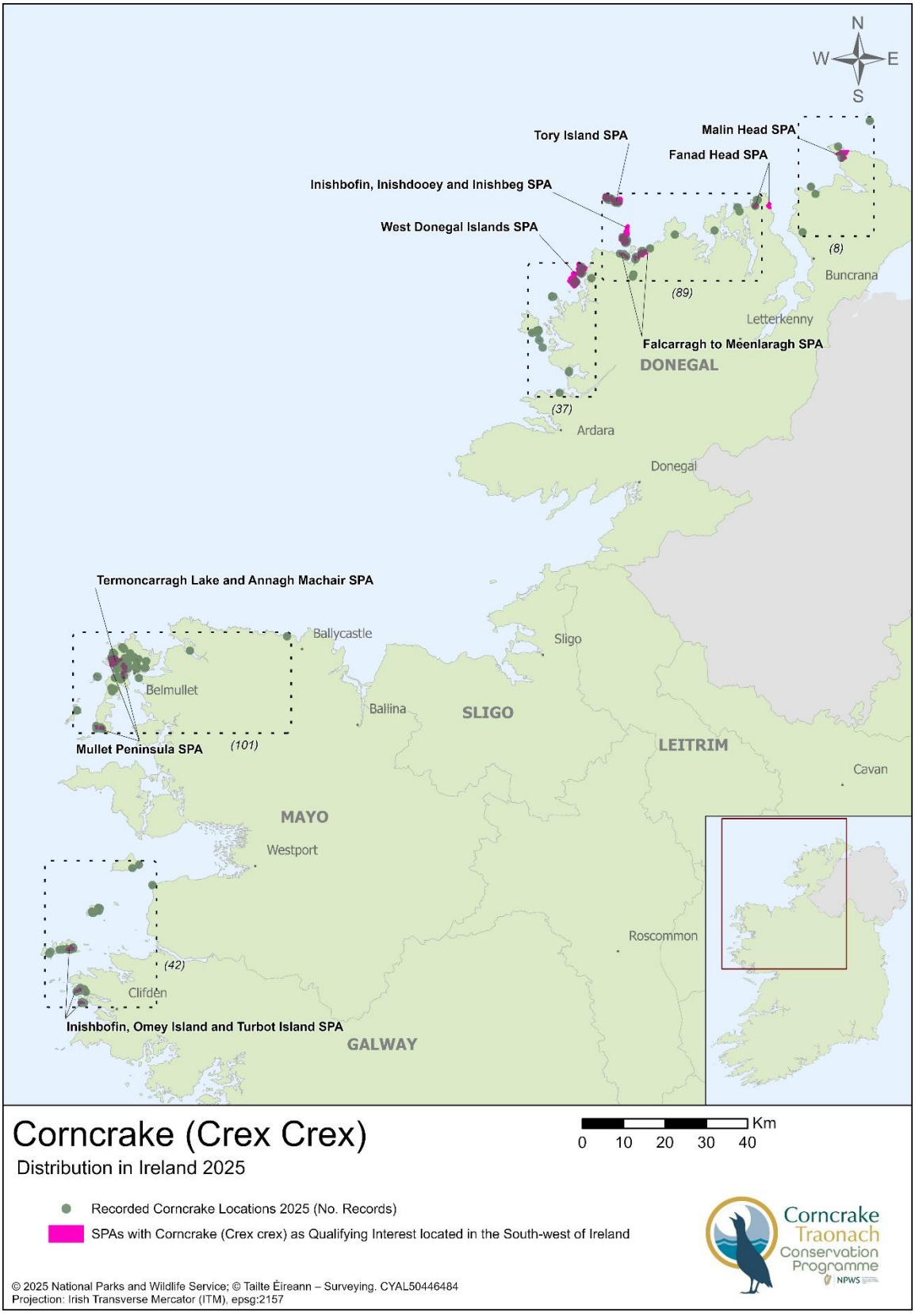
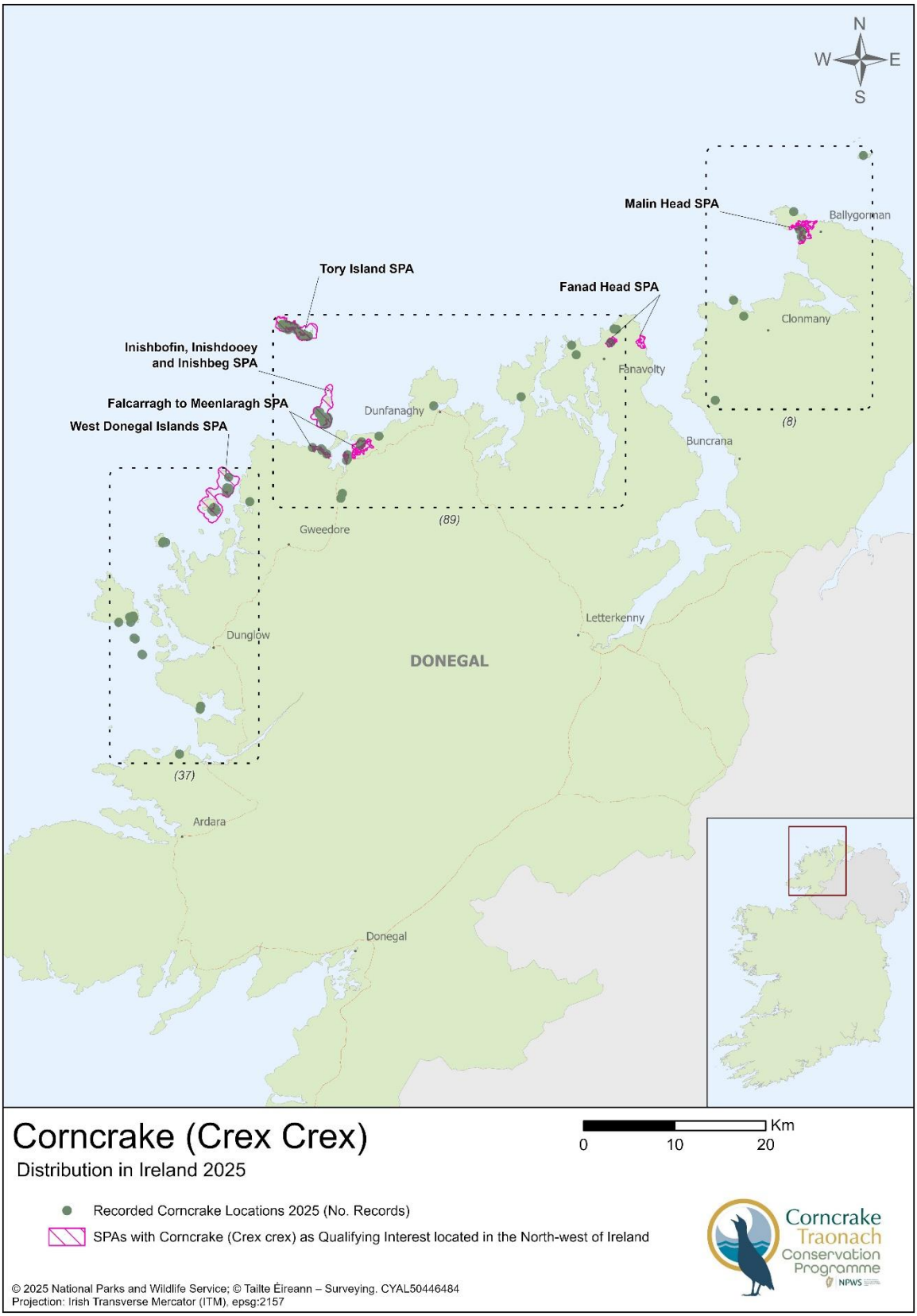
Thanks to Ciaran Reaney, Dr. John Carey, Dr. Sinéad Cummins and Liam Loftus for developing and editing this report.

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.

Appendix 1: Bird distributions within the SPAs




N
W
E
S
Malin Head SPA
Ballygorman
Tory Island SPA
Fanad Head SPA
Clonmany
Inishbofin, Inishdooey
and Inishbeg SPA
Fanavolty
Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA
West Donegal Islands SPA
Dunfanaghy
(8)
Buncrana
(89)
Gweedore
Letterkenny
Dunglow
DONEGAL
(37)
Ardara
Donegal
Corncrake (Crex Crex)
Distribution in Ireland 2025
Km
0
10
20
Recorded Corncrake Locations 2025 (No. Records)
SPAs with Corncrake (Crex crex) as Qualifying Interest located in the North-west of Ireland
Corncrake
Traonach
Conservation
Programme
NPWS
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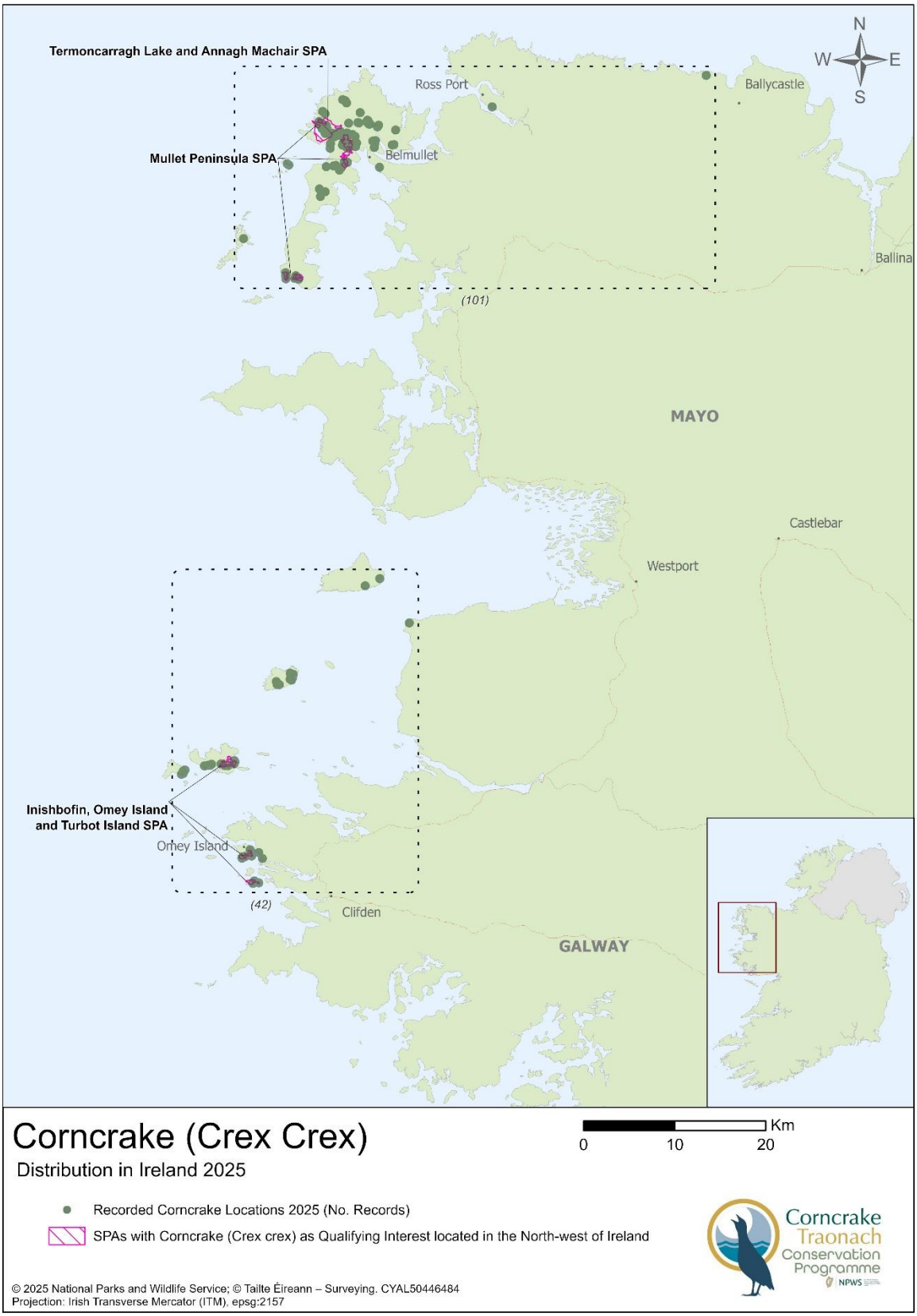
Projection: Irish Transverse Mercator (ITM). epsg:2157


Termoncarragh Lake and Annagh Machair SPA
Mullet Peninsula SPA
Ross Port
Belmullet
Ballycastle
Ballina
(101)
MAYO
Castlebar
Westport
Inishbofin, Omey Island and Turbot Island SPA
Omey Island
(42)
Clifden
GALWAY
N
W
E
S
Corncrake (Crex Crex)
Distribution in Ireland 2025
Km
0
10
20
Recorded Corncrake Locations 2025 (No. Records)
SPAs with Corncrake (Crex crex) as Qualifying Interest located in the North-west of Ireland
Corncrake Traonach Conservation Programme
NPWS
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Projection: Irish Transverse Mercator (ITM), epsg:2157

Appendix 2: Summary data for annual survey

National figures for the 2020-2024 per county

Calling male territories	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
Donegal	133	120	107	110	119
Sligo	0	0	3	1	0
Mayo	113	93	79	62	45
Galway	31	19	28	23	21
Kerry	2	1	1	1	3
Cork	1	0	0	0	0
Waterford	1	0	0	0	0
National total	**281**	**233**	**218**	**197**	**188**

Appendix 3: Inter-connected catchment range

Corncrakes typically maintain a high philopatry and studies have shown they generally return to within 5-10km of their natal site. As several SPAs are interconnected by 5-10 km, 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 landscape connectivity range of one another which may allow for corncrake population exchanges:

- 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)

The remaining SPAs are not within a 5-10km range of any other SPA sites.

5km inter-connected catchment	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	5-year average	Consolidated SPA target numbers
Malin Head	3	1	4	3	7	4	6
Fanad Head	1	2	0	0	0	1	3
West Donegal	98	89	73	62	68	78	58
Mullet Peninsula	38	37	31	29	17	30	4
Inishbofin, Omey & Turbot Island	20	11	17	12	11	14	9
Middle Shannon Callows	0	0	0	0	0	0	19

The National Parks and Wildlife Service