



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Corncrakes are creeping back to Rathlin Island thanks to a huge nettle-planting effort.



“This year we’ve been working hard for our most endangered species as well as showcasing the issues they face through TV documentaries and our campaigning activity.

The NI Assembly returned after three years, so we redoubled our efforts to improve the laws that will impact on nature when the UK leaves the EU, working in coalition with other organisations and volunteers, members and supporters.”

Joanne Sherwood
Director, RSPB Northern Ireland

Rathlin’s a *Love Island* for corncrakes

Corncrakes are one of Northern Ireland’s rarest and most secretive birds, and are a red-listed species of high conservation concern. Rathlin is the only place in Northern Ireland that probable breeding has been confirmed and a male has been heard calling in one location there since 2016. In 2019, RSPB NI employees recorded two breeding males at two separate sites.

Corncrakes like to settle in tall vegetation like nettles, so on one of the sites – Church Bay – where the land is managed by RSPB NI, nettles were planted to encourage the birds. These birds are summer migrants from western Africa and are rarely spotted, but the male bird corncrake at Church Bay has been heard and occasionally spotted.

RSPB Rathlin Island Warden Liam McFaul has a theory about why the “Love Island” bird was so vocal and has been seen. “He has been calling out in two or three different locations and then he’s moving across the road to the other side and is calling quite a lot, all night long and quite often during the day. This could indicate that there could be more than one female in that area and he’s tending to two areas at once.”

RSPB NI has been creating areas of early cover for the corncrakes to shelter under and feed in over the last 15 years. This has involved teams of volunteers working across NI in winter to dig up nettle rhizomes (the underground stems). Planting them early encourages the birds to come in. On Rathlin Island volunteers play a hugely valuable role for the RSPB and the community and we’d like to thank them all.

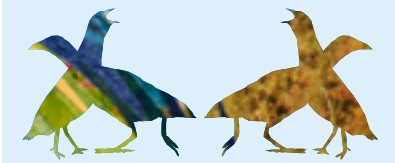
A “rosy” future for rare terns

In 2019, the restoration of Blue Circle Island, which is part of the RSPB’s Larne Lough reserve in County Antrim, was completed. The island’s sea defences had collapsed, and up to a third of it had eroded through flooding. RSPB-led works shored up the island and extended the nesting area, making it a prime potential site for roseate terns.

Roseate terns are the rarest breeding seabirds in Europe and are critically endangered. The entire UK and Ireland population was found at three colonies: Rockabill Island and Lady Island Lake in the Republic of Ireland, and Coquet Island in Northumberland. The terns spend the winter on the West African coast and return to these colonies in May.

In the 1980s there were up to 35 breeding pairs of roseate terns in Larne Lough, but just one pair has been recorded in recent years. However, we’re delighted that two roseate tern chicks hatched in July 2019. Tern conservation officer Monika Wojcieszek said: “This is fantastic news... we’re hopeful we can see their numbers increase year on year”.

Project costs were partially covered by the EU-funded Roseate Tern LIFE Recovery Project, with match funding from Tarmac and the RSPB.



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male singing corncrakes on Rathlin Island.



2

roseate

tern chicks hatched at Larne Lough.