

# Skomer Island Chough Factsheet

## Characteristics

The Chough (pronounced 'chuff' as in 'rough') is the rarest British breeding crow, and also the most dramatic in both its call and its appearance. Its glossy black plumage contrasts sharply with the bright red bill and legs, and its high pitched 'chee-ow' call is instantly recognisable. The name Chough was probably originally onomatopoeic, and pronounced 'chow' as in 'bough'; indeed, an earlier spelling of the name was 'chowe'. They are extremely acrobatic fliers, and can easily be seen swooping along the clifftops calling to each other as they move between feeding and nesting sites. Between one and three pairs of Choughs regularly breed on Skomer. Here they are likely to be seen anywhere around the coast, especially on the more exposed western and southern sides of the island. Occasionally they move to the centre to forage on the rock outcrops or in the fields. Choughs are probably most conspicuous in late summer when noisy family parties may be encountered.



## Populations

In Great Britain the Chough is now very much a bird of the Celtic fringe. In Pembrokeshire about 72 pairs occur along the exposed coastlines, the Castlemartin Peninsula and Ramsey Island being its particular strongholds while a pair has nested on Skokholm since 1992. Elsewhere in Wales it occurs along parts of the Ceredigion coast, with three pairs inland in the north of the county. Inland breeding is more common in North Wales, mostly in quarries and mine shafts. Elsewhere a pair has nested, though not always successfully, on the Gower Coast since 1990 after an absence of almost a century. Choughs breed in the Isle of Man (60 pairs) Scotland (about 70 pairs in Kintyre, Islay, Jura and Colonsay) and in Ireland (about 700 pairs) from Antrim in the north by way of Donegal and the west and south coasts to Wexford, with some inland in western counties.

However, Choughs were formerly more widespread than they are now, and occurred well inland, in England including Yorkshire, and southern counties to Kent, and Scotland. They were once so common in Cornwall that they became known as Cornish Chough. The Chough became extinct as a breeding bird in Cornwall in 1948, but has recently recolonised, with the first pair nesting for over half a century in 2002. They are associated with many legends in Cornwall, the most well known being that King Arthur did not die, but was turned into a Chough to haunt the coast. Having apparently switched his allegiance from Tintagel across the Bristol Channel to Pembrokeshire, he now appears to have returned home!

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## Threats

The main period of decline of the Chough took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reasons for the decline are not fully understood, but changes in land use patterns probably played an important role. As grazing practices changed, often resulting in the spread of Bracken and scrub over previously close cropped swards, so the feeding areas available for the Chough declined and the breeding range diminished.

A number of other factors such as human persecution and climate changes may also be involved in the Chough's decline. However, the Chough is clearly a good indicator of semi-natural, pastoral areas which contain many features of high conservation value. Research is underway both in Wales and in the Chough's main Scottish stronghold, the Inner Hebridean island of Islay, to identify the habitat requirements of Choughs with a view to safeguarding, and if possible increasing, its distribution and abundance.

## Management

Choughs rely on short turf for feeding, and thus coastal strips of maritime heath and short grazed pasture are extremely important to them. Low intensity pastoral agricultural systems which characteristically have small patches of cultivation, arable stubbles, long pasture rotations and zones of uncultivated land, provide the best mix of potential feeding areas. The move to high intensity agriculture, with regular re-seeding of pasture and large increases in arable land may have made areas unsuitable. Stock management policies are also very important. Reduced stocking regimes and subsequent growth of long, rank vegetation reduces available feeding areas, and the wintering of cattle indoors in many areas means that the insects associated with cow pats are no longer available to the Choughs during this period



## Food

The birds probe for food using their long, slightly downcurved bills. Beetles, fly larvae and ants are important, as are the invertebrates found in animal dung, especially that of cattle and sheep, these being particularly important to young birds. In winter grain may be eaten in stubble fields, while in some areas Choughs during hard weather seek invertebrates amongst storm washed seaweed on the strand line. Frozen soil makes it difficult for Choughs to feed, and casualties can occur during periods of especially hard weather.

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## Breeding

Choughs generally do not breed until they are three or four years old, though the pairs can form in the first or second year. Nest building begins in late March or early April when a substantial but neat nest of heather, twigs, sticks and gorse with a lining of wool, hair, fine grasses and feathers is constructed. In Pembrokeshire this is usually deep inside an inaccessible sea cave or cliff crevice, but despite this some are still robbed by egg collectors. Up to six eggs, pale yellowish-white, mottled brown are laid, and incubated for some 18 days, mostly by the female who is fed at the nest by her mate. Both of the pair bring food to the young,



Young Chough begging for food from adult

which fledge when between five and six weeks of age. In Wales the average number per nest is between two and three. These remain with their parents for several weeks afterwards, and are quite conspicuous, having pale-salmon pink bills and legs rather than the coral red of the adults.

Choughs are very sedentary birds, and movements of over 12 miles (20km) are unusual. One of the longest recorded is that of a bird ringed on Bardsey Island (Caernarvonshire) and reported in the Llangrannog area on the Ceredigion coast, a journey of some 45 miles (70km). The movements of birds in Pembrokeshire (and elsewhere) can be tracked more easily now that colour rings are attached to nestlings each year, mainly at mainland sites and on Ramsey Island, to the north of Skomer. They are not ringed on Skomer itself due to the inaccessibility of nest sites, so any coloured-ringed Chough you see on the island will have come from elsewhere.

Pictures by Dave Boyle