

Curlew Conservation Programme

The natural world is suffering greatly, and Ireland has declared a climate and biodiversity emergency.

The Curlew is a well-known and much-loved part of Ireland's natural and cultural heritage. The species has declined by 96% since the late 1980s - early 1990s. Unfortunately, threats and pressures are very much present and active, and the possibility of Curlew becoming extinct is one of the most significant conservation concerns in Ireland.

In recent decades, the afforestation of essential habitats and farmland, as well as the intensification of agriculture, have been among a host of factors that have contributed to the pressures faced by this vulnerable species and many others who share the same land, including Skylark, Cuckoo, Hen Harrier and Kestrel.



Photo Credit: Janice Mulligan

The Curlew Conservation Programme (CCP) is a pioneering project to support a species that urgently needs help. The CCP was introduced in 2017 and is coordinated by the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS), an integral part of the Department of Culture, Heritage & Gaeltacht, and a wide range of actors, proactively working together to help the Curlew cause. In 2020, the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine became partners in the project, in addition to their involvement in Green Low-carbon Agri-environmental Scheme (GLAS) measure for

Curlew and the Irish Breeding Curlew EIP-AGRI (European Innovation Partnership).

The CCP provides a wide-ranging and comprehensive framework that includes habitat enhancement, survey effort, research, nest protection, public and community engagement, and much more. The CCP incorporates a locally-led approach, whereby seven important locations for breeding Curlew in Ireland each have a locally-based team, working with the local people and adapting the

priorities and techniques that will work best within the locality.

The seven Curlew Action Teams are located at the Stack's Mountains, Lough Ree, North Roscommon/ East Mayo, Mid Leitrim, North Monaghan, Donegal, and Lough Corrib.



Image: NPWS.ie

The CCP is well received on the ground where the local teams liaise closely with landowners and local communities to search for and to protect the breeding Curlew by using innovative techniques and approaches.

Local communities, landowners, and other groups have been very much brought into the conservation movement under this Programme; the key to this achievement was ensuring they are part of the project, not apart from it. The Programme is widely supported and praised, both nationally and internationally, and most notably in the local areas where the Curlew is breeding.

The CCP sets out to halt and reverse the trend of decline in the Irish Curlew population.



Image: NPWS.ie

One of the most significant challenges facing the remaining Curlew population is that they are finding it next to impossible to rear their young. Ultimately this will mean the future of the Curlew is lost, as borne out already with significant losses in numbers and range.

To date, the Programme has seen promising indications that the work being done is having a positive impact on Curlew populations. Year two (2018) of the Programme noted that the number of chicks fledged per breeding attempt had increased to a threshold required to maintain a stable population. Year three (2019) showed the breeding productivity increased even further, so while there is a giant mountain to climb, initial steps have been taken.

The approach to the CCP, in general, is innovative. It involves various efforts, particularly at 'grass-roots.' The local Curlew Action teams are made up of predominately local experts with essential and diverse skillsets.



Photo caption: Five-day old Curlew chick

Image Credit: Joe Shannon/Curlew Conservation Programme

Through promoting a locally-led approach, the Programme uses a novel approach for nature conservation known as "SAOIRSE."

S = Support (both financially and advisory);

A = Appropriateness (measures are appropriate to site-specific requirements);
O = Ownership (locally-led and part of the landowners' and community's interest and agenda).

I = involvement (landowners in particular need to feel a real sense of involvement);

R = Results (ultimately, the reason to enter any project should be to deliver results for its target);

S = Satisfaction (in efforts undertaken); and

E = Encouragement (from peers, Government, and the general public).

Ireland is not a wilderness. It is a managed landscape, and the habitats and species found here are dependants on the land managers, policies, and markets. Habitats are under pressure because imperatives to manage the land have shifted from a time where biodiversity was facilitated to a time where biodiversity was removed from decision making. Trying to effect change and reverse this is one of the most significant challenges possible. Agri-environmental schemes and

championing farmers, not only as producers of food, but producers of environmental goods and services is critical to the success of the Programme.

The National Rural Network spoke to Dr. Barry O'Donoghue, a native of the Stack's Mountains in Co. Kerry, who is leading the Curlew Conservation Programme. Barry provided insights to the Curlew Conservation Project. "Ultimately, if we are successful in providing a template to save the Curlew from extinction, we (the people of Ireland, not just the Programme) will have been part of something momentous that will transcend generations. As it stands, a beautiful piece of our natural heritage, which has been a soundtrack to the summers of our grandparents' grandparents, will be lost in our generation. If we are successful in saving the bird, our grandchildren's' grandchildren will have us to thank for the fact they can experience its iconic bubbling call in the Irish summer countryside.

The fact that local people are part of this equation and solution gives good hope for changes to continue. Schemes will last as long as the money is available, but a truly sustainable future can only be realised if local and national hearts and minds are won."



Photo caption: Curlew Sunrise

Image Credit: Janice Mulligan

The NRN would like to thank Dr. Barry O'Donoghue for his contributions.

Resources:

National Parks and Wildlife Service:

www.npws.ie/farmers-and-landowners/schemes/curlew-conservation-programme