

## Notes on the occurrence of the Corncrake (*Crex crex*) in Asia and in the Pacific region

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### 1. Introduction

The Corncrake *Crex crex*, a globally threatened species classed as 'Vulnerable' (BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL 2001) is a widely distributed breeding species over much of northern and central Europe between about 41°N and at least 62°N, extending into Asia in Siberia as far as 120°E. More than half of the world population may breed in Asia (CROCKFORD *et al.* 1996), with very large numbers recorded from the West Siberian Plain (RAVKIN 1999). Distribution in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is described in some detail by GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM *et al.* (1973), POTAPOV & FLINT (1989) and these Proceedings and is not considered here further. The population in Turkey was recently estimated at 25-100 pairs (EKEN *et al.* 1999). Although the Corncrake is reported to be a scarce but certainly under-recorded passage migrant in the Middle East (e.g. ANDREWS 1995, GALLAGHER & WOODCOCK 1980, RICHARDSON 1990), it appears that the autumn passage of most of the world population is concentrated through this region and north-east Africa, especially Egypt (CROCKFORD *et al.* 1996).

This paper intends to give miscellaneous information, some of it unpublished or difficult to access, on the occurrence of the Corncrake in Asia and in the Pacific region.

### 2. Country accounts

Note: Most coordinates and site names given in square brackets are not part of the original publications or communications, but were taken from 'The Times' Atlas of the World - comprehensive ed., 9th ed., London, 1998, from Zhongguo Diminglu [Gazetteer of China], Beijing, 1997, and from Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Dituji [Atlas of the People's Republic of China], Beijing,

1994 (in Chinese). Coordinates from the sites listed by MA MING & WANG QISHAN (2002) are taken from that publication.

**Iran:** Passage migrant, breeding status uncertain. Listed as breeding by COLLAR *et al.* (1994). SCOTT (1984) regards the species as a passage migrant that may breed, i.e. there is no proof, although SCOTT *et al.* (1975) state that it is a fairly common summer visitor. This, apparently, refers to migrants (G. Kirwan in litt. 1999). Although GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM (1973) claimed, without giving details, that the Corncrake is reliably recorded breeding in Khorasan, north-east Iran, there seem to be no adequately documented records.

**Afghanistan:** Passage migrant, breeding status uncertain. Listed as breeding by COLLAR *et al.* (1994), probably based on VAURIE (1965), who states that it breeds in Afghanistan, but this has not been corroborated. It is not included as a breeding species by LEES-SMITH (undated) and PALUDAN (1959) lists it as a possible summer visitor to the country. However, S. Madge and G. Kirwan (G. Kirwan in litt. 1999) do not regard it as a breeding species in Afghanistan.

**Mongolia:** Status uncertain. The Corncrake has been recorded in two locations: north-western part of the Uvs Nuur basin (Uvs lake, 50°02'N, 92°45'E, D. Batdelger in litt. to BirdLife International), Uvs province (north-western Mongolia) and Zelter river basin (50°24'N, 105°03'E, D. Batdelger in litt. to BirdLife International), Selenge province (northern Mongolia) without giving any further details (FOMIN & BOLD 1991). Since this information is rather rudimentary it is not possible to determine the status of the Corncrake in Mongolia. The Uvs Nuur lies adjacent

to Tuva, Russia, which is listed as a breeding area by POTAPOV & FLINT (1989). The site in the Selenge province lies well to the south (more than 200 km) of the Corncrake's distribution boundary in the Baikal region, which is shown on a map by POTAPOV & FLINT (1989) to run parallel to the north-western edge of Lake Baikal.

**China:** Summer visitor and passage migrant in the west of the country. The Corncrake breeds in the western part of the Tian Shan Mountains<sup>1</sup>, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region [Sinkiang] (CHENG HSO-TSIN 1987, YUAN GUOYING 1991), arriving late April and departing in October (WANG QISHAN undated). MA MING & WANG QISHAN 2000) cite the literature as stating that the Corncrake is only found in northwest China, i.e. in Kashgar/Taxkorgan, Kizilsu Autonomous Prefecture (Akto) (migrant), Ili (western Tian Shan and Tekes) and Ngari area in Tibet (Bangong lake). According to MEYER DE SCHAUNSEE (1984) it breeds in the Tekes river valley [Tekes town: 43°10'N, 81°44'E] and probably elsewhere in western Xinjiang.

LUDLOW & KINNEAR (1934) found four specimens near the Tekes river in the Ili area, western Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan) between 18 and 27 May 1930 and on 6 June he found a nest with three eggs at Kokterak [42°58'N, 81°36'E]. Ludlow described how "the thick scrub of the upper reaches of the Tekkes [Tekes] give place to forests of birch and poplar with an undergrowth of hawthorn, honeysuckle, and barberry. Flanking this riverain forest are rolling downs knee deep in grass. Quail (*Coturnix c. coturnix*) had now arrived in force, and the calls of the Golden Oriole (*Oriolus o. oriolus*), Cuckoo (*Cuculus c. canorus*), and Land-Rail [sic] (*Crex crex*) were heard throughout the livelong day." (p.252). He added: "I can find no record of this bird from the Turkestan plains. It is very common in the Tekkes, where the great

undulating plain, knee-deep in grass in summer, is admirably suited to its habits. It arrived about the middle of May. During the succeeding three weeks wherever my camp was pitched its characteristic call was always to be heard. It ascended the grassy mountain-slopes to 8000 feet. A nest with three fresh eggs was taken at Kök Terak on 6 June. I did not come across it in the Upper Köksu, but when I returned to the Tekkes plain in early September it was still common. Sherriff's Pamir specimen was picked up dead, and was probably a migrant. [Landsell obtained a bird at Kashgar on 15 Sept. 1888.]" (p.109).

After a period of 75 years without any Corncrake record from China the occurrence of the species in this region was recently confirmed by J. Hornskov (in litt. 1999) and by a Kingfisher Tours group (Lewthwaite in litt. 1999) through the following records: Ten birds calling at Darban [near Arxang, which is at 43°06'N, 84°40'E] from 8-12 June 1995 (J. Hornskov) and 30-35 birds calling at Darban and west to Xinyuan [also called Künes, 43°28'N, 82°45'E] in the Kunes river [Künes He] valley from 17-19 June 1998. The distance between Darban and Xinyuan is c. 150 km. The birds were recorded here at a maximum altitude of 2,700 m and the habitat varied from dense grass/herbage on slopes to valley bottom crops (J. Hornskov and B. F. King). Further records involve a minimum of eight birds, of which six were heard calling and three seen in flax fields at 750-1,200 m in the lower reaches of the Kunes river valley just east of Ili [Yining, also called Gulja: 44°00'N, 81°32'E] on 18 June 1998 (LEWTHWAITE et al. 1998). On 11 June 1999 another two males were heard calling, again east of Ili (CY Lam in litt. to R. Lewthwaite).

Additional breeding season records were reported from the Altay Shan (Altay Mountains): One bird calling at Haba He (Habahe, also cal-

<sup>1</sup> In the adjacent parts of the Tian Shan in Kyrgyzstan (to the north) the Corncrake is a widespread and fairly common breeding visitor which can be found in almost all valleys and gorges with rivers and brooks. It occurs in Kotschkor, Naryn, Dshumgal, Issyk-Kul, Susamyr and presumably in the Chu valley at altitudes ranging from c 1,600 to 2,800 m. During migration it has been recorded from the Son Kol (3,000 m) and in Arpa (3,300-3,400 m). There is no data on population size but presumably the population density has been stable over the last decade (V. Toropova pers. comm. 2002, translated by M. Brombacher).

led Kaba: 47°52'N, 86°09'E), close to the Chinese border with Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia, on 28 June 1995 (J. Hornskov in litt. 1999). Another observation involves three singing males, which were heard at 1,000 m at Terek at the edge of the Altay Shan on 23 June 1998 (LEWTHWAITE et al. 1998). Terek [48°40'N, 86°40'E] is a village at 1,000 m, between the lake Kanas Hu [Kanas Köl, Hanas Lake] and Haba He. These observations would seem to constitute the first records from the Chinese part of the Altay as well as the first indication of breeding Corncrakes in China away from the Tian Shan.

New records from north-western China come from MA MING & WANG QISHAN (2000, 2002) who conducted a survey of the Corncrake in Xinjiang in May-June 1998, June-July 1999 and June-July 2000. They reported new records from Gongliu [= Tokkuztara, 43°20'N, 82°15'E], Zhaosu [= Mongolkue, 43°08'N, 81°06'E], Xinyuan [= Kunes, 43°25'N, 84°00'E] and Huocheng [= Korgas, 44°00'N, 80°50'E] counties in Ili district, Tian Shan, from Habahe county [Kaba, 48°20'N, 86°30'E] and from Kanas Lake [49°00'N, 87°00'E, Burqin county] (on migration) in Altay district, and from the eastern Altay from the suburbs of Ürümqi [43°52'N, 87°34'E] and Fukang city [Fukang county, 44°06'N, 88°03'E]. They note that Fukang is the easternmost known Corncrake site in China, about 700-1,000 km east of its former known range. On 24 June 2000 they obtained a male specimen from a small marsh in inner suburbs of the capital Ürümqi at an elevation of 640 m. On 7 July 2000 they recorded an unspecified number calling at the desert control station in Korgas [Huocheng] county. They suggest that the species may have previously been overlooked, probably because most observers lacked experience of its distinctive call. Alternatively these new records might show that the species has extended its range to the east. According to these authors the Corncrake is found in Xinjiang in pre-montane oases, river valleys and sub-alpine steppe at 600-3,700 m, with habitats including flax, sesame, alfalfa, wheat, barley and weed fields, and grasslands not far from water. During harvest (June-July) the birds also take refuge in orchards and bushes in fields.

Based on their 1998-2000 field surveys MA MING & WANG QISHAN (2000, 2002) state that suitable Corncrake habitat in Xinjiang covers a wide area (east-west 1,500 km, north-south 1,000 km), in a region of fairly low human pressure. Line surveys resulted in average sightings of 2-4 birds per km<sup>2</sup>, and in the Ili river valley (Xinyuan) of 6-8 birds per km<sup>2</sup>. Their preliminary estimates suggest that the China (Xinjiang) population consists of 1,500-3,000 birds (presumably this refers to calling males).

Outside Xinjiang, *Crex crex* is recorded as a rare migrant from Bangong Co (Bangong lake, also known as Pangong Co or Como Nganglharibo) in Xizang Autonomous Region (Tibet) (CHENG TSO-HSIN 1987). VAURIE (1972) mentions one collected by Zugmayer on 18 September 1906 in the outer plateau of Ladakh, at or near the Kisu La, which is situated near Lake Pangong. He gives the co-ordinates of Kisu La as 34°06'N, 78°45'E. This is on the border between Ladakh and the area disputed by China and India that is currently controlled by China; perhaps this record should be referred to as China/India.

WANG QISHAN (undated) mentions the Corncrake as occurring in the Pamir, without giving any further details. This is clearly based on Sherriff's specimen cited by Ludlow, obtained on 17 September 1931 at Subashi (12,800 feet; not found on the maps available to us), which may have been on migration (LUDLOW 1934).

An additional record comes from the westernmost part of Yunnan province: one heard near the bridge at Ruili [24°01'N, 97°52'E], in a panhandle of Chinese territory stretching into Myanmar in the evening of 10 March 1999 (Jesper Hornskov in litt. 2002). This is the second record for South-East Asia (cf. record in Vietnam). Date and site strongly suggest that the bird was on migration

**Pakistan:** Vagrant. One female was collected in a maize field in Gilgit main valley [Gilgit town: 35°54'N, 74°20'E], northern Pakistan, by J. S. Scully on 8 October 1881 (ROBERTS 1991). Based on the original source (SCULLY 1881, *Stray Feathers* 10: 143) the specimen must have been

collected either 1879 or 1880 and not in 1881 (T. Inskipp in litt. 1999).

**India:** Vagrant. ALI & RIPLEY'S statement (1987) "one reported to Blyth as having been shot in the 1870s" is apparently based on HUME (1878, *Stray Feathers* 7: 464): "Blyth says: "The *Crax pratensis* is stated by the well-known Indian sporting writer "Purdy" to have been once shot by him in Oudh [in north-central Uttar Pradesh]". This report lacks clear substantiation to be accepted as the first national record. WILLIAMS & DELANY (1985) mention an observation of a migrant in Ladakh. The bird was seen at the Indus river near Tikse [34°01'N, 77°44'E] by D. Garbutt in September 1981 (S. Delany in litt. 1999). For another record from Ladakh, see above under "China".

**Sri Lanka:** Vagrant. Two records, both from Bambalapitiya, Colombo [6°55'N, 79°52'E]: One immature female was collected in a garden on 9 October 1970 and another immature female was found in an exhausted condition on 18 September 1972 (KARUNARATNE 1972, PHILLIPS 1978). Both skins are deposited in the Colombo Museum Bird Collection (KARUNARATNE 1972). There are no further records of *Crax* mentioned in subsequently published editions of the Ceylon Bird Club News (G. Lamsfuss in litt. 1999). Another record mentioned by ALI & RIPLEY (1987): "More recently, in the 1950s (?), on reported flying on board ship near Ceylon, presumably also on migration (Even-den in litt.)" may not have been that close to Sri Lanka and presumably no further details are available.

**Vietnam:** Vagrant. The discovery of one bird, which was for sale in a snake market in the small town of Phung Hiep [9°50'N, 105°48'E] in the Mekong delta, Soc Trang province on 14 January 1996 constitutes the sole record for South-East Asia at the time of observation (MEEK 1996; cf. Yunnan record above).

**Australia:** Vagrant. Two records: A specimen was taken at Randwick, Sydney [33°55'S,

151°15'E] New South Wales on 14 June 1893 and a further specimen was taken on board a ship off Jurien Bay [Jurien: 30°18'S, 115°02'E], Western Australia (previous port of call was Melbourne) on 9 December 1944 (MARCHANT & HIGGINS 1990).

**New Zealand:** Deleted from the New Zealand list. A sole report from c. 1865 (BULLER, W. L. 1865: *Trans. NZ Inst.* 18: 1, cited in MARCHANT & HIGGINS 1990), is not accepted by the Ornithological Society of New Zealand as a valid record (MARCHANT & HIGGINS 1990).

### 3. Discussion

The records from Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, China (Tian Shan, Altay Shan) and Mongolia refer to birds that occur at the edge of their currently known global range. The Corncrake's status, population size and ecology in all these regions is far from well understood and further research is much needed. For example, it would be interesting to investigate the recently confirmed rather large population in western China (see above), which has not previously been studied (WANG QISHAN undated).

As far as is currently known, the whole breeding population of the Corncrake, including the birds occurring in central Siberia, seem to winter in sub-Saharan Africa from Uganda and Kenya to South Africa (COLLAR et al. 1994), with occasional winter records from the Mediterranean region east to southern Iran (GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM et al. 1973). The "rare wintering" (latest record 23 December) in the Pamir-Alai, Tajikistan (POTAPOV & FLINT 1989) might refer to late migrants or can be regarded as exceptional, as are winter records from Europe (GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM et al. 1973).

It is quite likely that the central and eastern Siberian Corncrake populations, as well as the populations occurring in the Altay and Tian Shan, migrate on a more easterly route than birds from western Siberia and Europe. This route would take them through central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran and the Arabian peninsula to Africa, thus avoiding large

detours. In this light, records from Ladakh, Pakistan, Tibet and Yunnan are not unexpected, while the records from Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Australia would refer to "true" vagrants. KARUNARATNE'S (1972) supposition that the Corncrake is quite probably a regular visitor in small numbers to Sri Lanka because of the occurrence of two birds at the same locality within a short period can only be regarded as pure speculation. However, the scarcity of records from areas east of the regular migration routes can be accounted for by the low numbers of birdwatchers in Asia and the secretive haunts of the Corncrake, which makes it very likely that the odd vagrant will almost certainly be overlooked or, if it is caught, end up in the pot.

For ornithologists and birders it's worth checking local animal markets, which are common in many parts of Asia, for unusual records of any bird species. The Corncrake record from Vietnam came from a snake market (sic!), where it was found among more than 400 other rails of seven species (MEEK 1996). All records should be made available to the public, e.g. by reporting them to the Oriental Bird Club, P.O. Box 324, Bedford, MK42 0WG, United Kingdom; E-mail: mail@orientalbirdclub.org; website: www.orientalbirdclub.org

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