

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: The Cornwall Chough Project



Region/County: Lizard and Penwith peninsulas South Cornwall

Key objectives: To encourage the natural colonisation of choughs by consolidating conservation work and good habitat management.



Cornish legend has it that when King Arthur was killed in battle, his spirit lived on in the chough, the red beak and legs signifying his bloody demise. Choughs died out as a resident species in England when the last one died in Cornwall in 1973. Choughs lost their foothold in England for several reasons.

They were persecuted in the Victorian era as glass case trophies. The waning fortunes of tin mining in the late 1870's led to a decrease in cliff-top grazing, with the result that the tightly-grazed habitats so favoured by choughs became overgrown. This effect was amplified with the introduction of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), as farmers increasingly concentrated their efforts on the more productive inland areas.

UK chough experts decided to introduce conservation measures to help choughs re-colonise Cornwall following a conference in West Penwith in 1996. The experts agreed that the Penwith coastline had areas of suitable habitat which could be improved further by the introduction of cattle grazing. A winter stubbles Tier was added to the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) suite of options to provide a winter food source that included weed seeds and insect pupae, which also favoured a range of other farmland birds.

The project's aim

The main aim of the project was already taking place around the coastal fringe. Good habitat management was essential to its success. Grazing of the cliffs and slopes ensured that the bird has access to different habitats and soil for their food source and it was important that there were pastures and cliff slopes with short grass available to them.

In 2001 three choughs, two males and one female, arrived on a Countryside Stewardship farm on the Lizard, South Cornwall. Realising the importance of their arrival, the Cornwall Chough Project (CCP) was set up with the same founding organisations as at the first conference, the RSPB, the National Trust and Natural England (previously English Nature and the Rural Development Service).

Existing Countryside Stewardship Schemes were targeted by the CCP partners as new evidence of the location of chough nesting sites came to light. Working closely with the farmers and local communities in the region, agreements were modified by introducing cattle to ensure that the cliff top fields were grazed at the right level using the low input grassland option and also adding rotational arable options, notably overwintered stubbles.

The use of bird friendly options was expanded along the coast when the Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme was introduced in 2005. Each year, four or five new HLS agreements were set up with options that favoured the choughs.

What has been achieved?

In May 2002 a pair of choughs set up a nest in a cave at Southerly Point and produced their first eggs, the first in Cornwall in more than fifty years and they have been doing so each year since their return. Nine successfully fledged broods of chicks (56 in total) have fledged from Cornish chough's nests. Unfortunately, the 2010 fledglings did not survive. This could be due in some part to two hard winters, and there was some evidence of predation.

There are now eight pairs around the coasts of the Lizard and Penwith peninsulas. And recently, one young pair has been searching for a territory around the coastal headlands of Newquay near where the last chough flew in 1973.

Peter Bowden, a Natural England member of the project is very pleased with the project's progress so far, "In conservation terms and as a species recovery programme, this success has been significant. We will continue to target suitable coastal areas for choughs and offer ES agreements where these can provide the right habitat for choughs to feed and breed".

A key to the project's success was the farmers' involvement. When they could see tangible results – choughs breeding on their farms, they soon understood the benefits from introducing winter stubbles and cliff top grazing. Linked to this was strong partnership working. The RSPB provided their expertise and volunteers who gave 24 hour protection of the nests and kept Natural England staff up-to-date on the choughs movements so that they were able to identify the correct areas to target the options. The National Trust encouraged their farm tenants to apply chough friendly options to their agreements and also volunteered help for the nest surveillance work.

Due to the Environmental Stewardship scheme, chough numbers are steadily increasing and are found in several family groups. Their range extends for around seventy miles of the Cornish coast from the Lizard Point, around Lands End and up the North Cornwall coast to Newquay.

It is evident from these results that Environment Stewardship benefits from having a focussed and project based, pro-active approach, where co-ordinated involvement from farmers and partners alike provides the key element to success in projects such as these. Ten years on, the founding project partners continue to work together with farmers around the coast for the benefit of choughs.

Where can I find out more?

Please follow this [link](#) for the latest information on Environmental Stewardship.