

# The Birds: Crex Crex

written by Guest Contributor | July 20, 2021



This landscape is alive with wings. Two cuckoos are nesting in the hawthorn by our house. They spend their days sitting high on the telephone wires, waiting for unsuspecting starlings to leave their nests in the stone wall below unattended. A gulp of cormorants, wings outstretched to dry, loiter on the shoreline. I can watch them from the kitchen window, '*na cailleacha dubha*' they call them in Irish—the black witches. And they do look like a coven, I think as I watch them cackle at one another while they drip dry in the Atlantic wind. As I walk up the track towards home that evening I spot a hen pheasant sitting on the corner of a dry stone wall. Her profile is humbler than her male counterpart, outlined against the low light of a dusk sky. They love the long grass in this field, the tangle of the spruce forest higher up the slope. In winter, when the ground froze, my grandfather would stop halfway to his farm on the top of the mountain and throw some chicken feed to them. They would wait at the edge of the trees for the sound of his Volkswagen laboring up the hill, too bedraggled in the cold to live up to their collective noun—a bouquet. I don't know who feeds them now.

It is my grandfather, really, who loved birds. Not me. I was always looking down instead of up. I spent hours tracing the pre-historic tridactyl footprints of herons on a muddy riverbank, the soft salute of a Barnacle goose's webbed print in sand. Always more interested in the track than the thing it augured.

My grandfather's favorite bird was so elusive it left no traces for me to follow. Corncrakes are almost impossible to spot. In fact, they are, in almost all respects, unremarkable. In Irish mythology, the wren, *an dreolín*, is a symbol of wisdom, a featherweight trickster who outsmarted the Eagle to become king of the birds. The robin, *an spideog*, is a messenger from the dead. A swan flying over a house forbodes death. The goddess *Badhbh* takes the form of a crow. Irish storytellers were enamored with birds, their character, their magic. How could they not be? The *scéalaithe* were keepers of an oral tradition. A history passed mouth to mouth, conjuring images that lingered for a moment and then faded, like a sparrow's breath in the cold morning air.

The stories were snared in ink and Latin shapes over time, but none for the corncrake. Accounts of her are as prosaic as her appearance. Interviews with

farmers stored in the national archive state that her eggs are red, or blue, brown, or speckled. She lays four, or eleven, or eight of them. She is one of Ireland's seven 'sleepers'- the birds who go quiet in winter and return with Spring. But other accounts say she does not leave but goes inside and spends the winter hiding in barns and haysheds. She is 'about the size of a pigeon' or a waterhen, or 'a small turkey.' She is brown, or maybe grey or nearly black. She is a foolish bird because she lays her eggs on the ground. Or she is smart because she makes not one nest but three-two decoys, and the one where she keeps her chicks. She is all of these things and none of them. But everyone is sure of one thing-she is not an omen, no myth imbues her with any power.

She is unremarkable. In pictures, the corncrake has a rather thick neck- neither as long and delicate as a wader, nor as stocky as a gull. Her head is small, her beak an insipid pink, her eyes are beady black specks. Her body is short and squat, speckled grey and brown, and balanced on top of long legs which end in comically elongated feet. Compared with the sleek emerald and scarlet racing stripes of a cock pheasant, the pastel bursts of tits, the tidy monochromes of a gull, the red waistcoated robin, she is ungainly, plain.

I say this, and yet I have never seen one. If the corncrake is remarkable at all she is remarkable for how elusive she is. Most people in Ireland-in Europe-have never seen one. In the Irish national folklore archives, testimonies gathered in the 1930s list the corncrake as one of the most common birds in the country. But by 1978 it was estimated there were only 1500 in Ireland. As unproductive hedgerows and scrublands were reclaimed, tilled, farmed, Corncrake eggs and chicks were mown down by mechanized harvesters.

As corncrake numbers plummeted all over Europe. Farmers were given subsidies to cut their fields from the center outwards-giving the birds time to flee. Pieces of land were set aside for breeding. The public was asked to listen out for the bird's distinctive call during early Spring-and to report hearing it so populations could be protected and mapped. But the numbers remained steadfastly low. My grandfather was always listening. The corncrake call was the sound of the landscape he had grown up in.

He could imitate the call, a little, though now when I remember the first time I heard it, it is not his voice I hear. In the memory, I press a domed button under a display in an interpretative center in the far North-west of Ireland and for a moment think that the button is broken. It emits a mechanical sound, like the false start of an old car on a cold morning, or the gears of an engine grating, a crunch of metal on metal. In videos the corncrake's beak snaps open and shut, whiplashing her head back like a Pez dispenser as she barks out the call. *Crex Crex*. Her Latin name is an attempt to reduce the sound she makes to paper. It is in the summer of 1996 when I press that button. There are less than 600 breeding pairs of corncrakes in Western Europe that year. I listen every year for twenty-five years before I hear it again.

Of course, until the afternoon I hear it, I would have denied I was listening

for it at all. I would have told you I didn't know what to listen for. The tops of the mountains had been obscured by cloud all week and although it is midday and May, it had the feeling of dusk as I walked down the valley. The sky was rain-darkened, and it was so quiet as I walked along by the river that it was like being underwater. It made me think of the poem by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill "no bird sang, no stag spoke, no seal roared, no wave broke" ("*Níor cheol éan, níorbh labhair damh, níor bhéic tonn, níor lig rón sceamh*"). And then I heard it. Just twice, barked out into the quiet of the valley. *Crex crex*. And I knew immediately what it was. I stopped, listening, for another call, standing in the cold high grass beside the field where I was sure it came from – full of tall rushes and high grass laden down with raindrops.

In Irish, the corncrake is '*an gearra-ghuirt*,'—the corn dweller who comes in the first four weeks of March. Or sometimes, '*An traonach*'—the bird who sleeps all day and calls all night. Perhaps the dark day fooled her into calling out, into the twilight of a rain-sodden valley. She is just as rare as when I first heard her. In 2019 there are just 162 corncrakes recorded in Ireland.

Most of them are recorded in spots like this. Rural areas in the far West of Ireland. Areas that have developed a strange kinship with this bird. In the national folklore archive, one interviewee in his eighties says that her singing gladdens people's hearts because it reminds us that birds too have their own ways of expressing joy or sorrow just as we have in the Irish language. It is, maybe, a forced connection—made for the benefit of his English-speaking interviewer—but I wonder if it is a coincidence that the places where the corncrake is still heard are the same places where the Irish language is still spoken. Spaces that are hard to cultivate, isolated. Bird and language both fugitives in the long grass, undervalued things holding out against change. Beloved by those who know them. Their protection a waste of time and money to those who do not.

Like corncrakes, it is hard to say how many people are left who speak Irish fluently. Whose language has the instinctive authenticity of a corncrake's call, learned as a hatchling, conjured instinctively. Certainly, I do not. My Irish was learned in the captive spaces of school. Irish had begun disappearing from the landscape where my grandfather lived, where I live when the corncrake did. And yet. And yet there we both were, *ar lá bra'darnach, beo ar éigean*. On a rain-soaked day. Alive. Staring towards where the other might be hiding, through the haze of rain. With our endangered tongues. I stayed, listening for another call until the approaching rumble of a car broke the silence.

Days later I was walking through the valley again, when my dog stopped at a bend in the river, one paw raised as he looked across the water. I followed his gaze just in time to see a bird with long legs rush into the safety of the long grass. She had left no tell-tale tracks in the sand but when I go back to the city, to work, I find myself tracing her ghost—through story and history, from the West of Ireland to the Outer Hebrides, to Orkney, Africa. Searching for what in this mundane, unmelodic bird is so entrancing to us. For hope that her call and my language might be heard in this landscape

again. But the tracks are not enough for me now. Like my grandfather, I cannot lose sight of the form disappearing into the grass on the other side of the river. I walk the valley again and again. Listening. *Crex, crex.*

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*featured photo by Dr. Róisín Á Costello*