

FACTSHEET 1

RED-BILLED CHOUGH *Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax*



Name: The name Chough (pronounced 'chuff' as in 'ruff') may be the result of a corruption over time and perhaps it should be pronounced *chow* in which case it probably refers to the bird's distinct call. *Pyrrhonorax* comes from the Greek *purhos* (flame coloured) and *korax* (the raven) linking the bright red bill and legs to its obvious crow-like appearance.

Local names: *Chauvette* in Jèrriais; *crave a bec rouge* in French.

Size: Adults have a body length of 39–40 cm; a wing-span of 73–90 cm and weigh around 350g.

Identification: Medium-sized, active and graceful crow, with long, thin, decurved red bill (duller in young birds). Plumage is a brilliantly glossy black. Flight most is most aerobic of all the crows.

Calls: Voice is very distinctive, typically a clear, high-pitched, and drawn-out 'kjaa' or 'kyeow'.

Close relatives: The chough is a member of the crow family Corvidae with crows, rooks, jackdaws, magpies, jays etc. There are two species of chough, the red-billed and the yellow-billed or Alpine chough *P. graculus*. The white-winged chough *Corcorax melanorhamphos* from Australia is not related at all and is not even a crow.



Distribution: There are eight subspecies of red-billed chough (ours, *P. pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax* is the smallest) and the population stretches from NW Europe to the Pacific coast of Asia including North Africa, Ethiopia and Central Asia. The local subspecies is only found in Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, Ireland Isle of Man and Scotland. Another subspecies, *P. pyrrhonorax erythrorhamphus*, is found in Southern Europe. The red-billed chough's main



habitat is high mountains (2,000-5,000m) and it has been recorded at 7,950m on Everest (Alpine chough may reach up to 8,500m). The NW European population breeds on coastal cliffs and was once much more widespread but has suffered from a great loss of its specialised habitat.

Population: The red-billed chough is considered a common bird in many parts of its range; however, the NW European population is only very small and there may be less than 500 pairs in the UK, 2,400 birds in Ireland and less than 50 pairs in Brittany. In early 2012 there were an estimated 6-10 pairs in Cornwall, 11 years after recolonisation.

Main feeding habitat: Maritime grassland throughout the breeding season and dune grassland between summer and winter. Choughs will also feed in winter stubbles, improved grassland and arable lands. Maritime grassland is maintained by wind exposure, salt deposition and grazing by sheep, cattle and other animals while the grass sward should be less than 5cm in height.

Sociability: Very sociable. Throughout year, typically in small or (often temporary) large flocks, often also in pairs and, rarely, singly. Many flocking birds appear to be paired at all times of year and pairs commonly join and leave flocks.



Nesting habitat: Sea cliffs and caves in a crevice or on a ledge. Choughs will occasionally nest in old buildings and can use nest-boxes. Nests may be 400-700m apart but are rarely at this density as choughs do not need to be colonial.

Roost site: Choughs roost on the cliffs in rock holes and sheltered ledges or on equivalent sites on old buildings.



Diet: Typically beetles, ants and invertebrates on the ground or in the soil especially *Tipulid* (cranefly) larvae.

Other crows in Jersey: There are five other crow species found today in Jersey: the carrion crow *Corvus corone*; raven *C. corax*; jackdaw *C. monedula*; magpie *Pica pica*; jay *Garrulus glandarius*. The rook *C. frugilegus* used to nest in Jersey but is now only rarely seen here and the hooded crow *C. cornix* has been recorded occasionally.

Nesting season: In Britain and Ireland the first eggs are usually laid in April-mid May or, rarely, in late March. Pairs in Cornwall lay eggs from April and those in Brittany lay in mid April.

Nest: Nests are large, untidy structures of twigs, roots and moss often with a base of heather *Calluna* stems, occasionally bound with mud, and lined with wool. Building is by both sexes.



Eggs: Choughs lay 3-5 eggs approximately 39 x 28mm in size and 15.7g in weight.

Incubation: 17-18 days by female alone.

Fledging: The young fledge in about 41 days; however, some chicks may leave the nest a few days before this and stay in the nest cavity.

Age at first breeding: Can be 1-3 years old but this may vary with location and 3 might be more common.

Longevity: Can live to 16 in the wild and one bird was known to live until 20.

Home range sizes: Choughs typically feed c300m from nest site in good quality habitat or up to 2 miles in less productive areas. Feeding ranges cover 0.36-6.7ha in Ile Ouessant (1,600ha) in Brittany.

Migration: Choughs do not really migrate and dispersal of ringed birds is typically less than 10km. There have been some records of birds in unusual places that must have moved longer distances: the ones that returned to Cornwall in 2001 appear to have come from Ireland and not from Wales (the Gower population is closest to Cornwall). We don't expect the Brittany population to naturally recolonise Jersey; however, there was a record of a bird in Jersey from an unknown source in 1987.



Minimum population size in Jersey: Populations vary between sites e.g. recolonisation in Cornwall was started by one pair. Ideally Jersey should have a population of 20 pairs ten years after the first releases. Ile Ouessant in Brittany has c. 13 pairs.

Suitable habitat required in Jersey: Twenty pairs require a minimum of 5ha of suitable cliff top habitat per pair or the equivalent of 100ha of suitable and restored habitat (Jersey = 11,800ha).



Threats in Jersey: Ferrets *Mustela putorius furo* and rats *Rattus norvegicus* (and cats *Felis catus*) may be a threat but the most likely predators would be raven *Corvus corax*, peregrine *Falco peregrinus* or great black-backed gull *Larus marinus* which are all native to Jersey and live everywhere that wild choughs live in NW Europe so they should be used to them. Released birds may be a little naïve but will hopefully not need peregrine-avoidance training. Carrion crows *C. corone* might be an aggressive competitor and jackdaws *C. monedula* (rare in Jersey but present where choughs will live) may compete for food and nest sites but the two species typically live alongside each other throughout the chough's range in NW Europe.

People may be a threat through unintentional disturbance such as dog-walking on grassy areas the birds may want to feed on or through direct persecution. The birds may face difficulties in finding enough food and water and in farmland they may risk drowning if they try to drink from water troughs. The sight of the other Channel Islands or the nearby French coast might prove too big a draw for them!

H Glyn Young August 2012

All photographs are by Andrew Kelly www.akellyphoto.com