

# Chough

## *Pyrrhocorax* *pyrrhocorax*

### Status

Amber listed: BL, SPEC 3 (V)  
Schedule 1 of WCA 1981  
Annex I of EC Wild Birds Directive

### National monitoring

National surveys: 1992 (RSPB/JNCC/IWC/Manx Chough Study Group), 2002.

### Population and distribution

Breeding chough are found off the west coasts of Britain and Ireland with concentrations on Islay, the Isle of Man, Pembrokeshire and Caernarvonshire (88–91 *Atlas*). The breeding population in Britain is estimated at about 315 pairs, and there are about 830 pairs in Ireland (88–91 *Atlas*).

### Ecology

Choughs require a mix of suitable nest-sites on cliffs, caves or old buildings, and feeding areas on pasture and low-intensity cattle-grazed land (Monaghan et al 1989). They begin nest-building in March, and incubate mainly from the beginning of April to the beginning of May; incubation takes about 21 days and most eggs hatch from the last week in April to the first week of May; young are fed in the nest mainly from the beginning of May to mid-June. Young leave the nest from the first week of June onwards but are dependent on their parents for 6–8 weeks after this.

## Breeding season survey – population

### Information required

- numbers of confirmed, probable and possible breeding pairs
- map of the survey boundary, sites, registrations and route walked.

### Number and timing of visits

At least two visits (more if two visits are insufficient to classify the breeding attempt as probable or confirmed). First visit: end of first week in April to the end of first week of May. Second visit: end of first week of May to mid-June.

### Time of day

Any time of the day.

### Weather constraints

Avoid adverse weather: strong winds, persistent rain or poor visibility.

### Sites/areas to visit

Anywhere with a suitable mix of nesting and feeding habitat (see Ecology, above).

### Equipment

- 1:25,000 OS and field maps
- Schedule 1 licence.

### Safety reminders

On extended coastal or mountain walks tell someone where you are going and when you intend to return. Do not attempt to climb cliffs or enter caves or crevices. Take extra care around quarries and mine shafts, and always heed the owner's advice on which areas are safe to visit.

### Disturbance

No visits to nest-sites are necessary; observe from a distance. Do not disturb any easily accessible nest-sites. Breeding should be confirmed without visiting nest-sites.

### Methods

Map the boundary of the survey area. Identify all potential breeding habitat from an OS map. If potential breeding habitat is scattered (eg quarries, buildings, discontinuous cliffs, rocky outcrops, etc) then treat each as a separate site. On each survey visit, spend at least an hour in the vicinity of each site. Increase this to 1.5–2 hours for those that may hold several pairs. In coastal or mountainous habitat which is more continuous, follow a route which goes past all potential and/or known sites. Walk the route at a slow pace, stopping regularly for periods of 10–15 minutes to scan cliffs and listen for choughs. Follow the same route on all visits.

If any feeding choughs are encountered (away from nest-sites) watch these for about an hour or until they visit a likely nest-site. If feeding bird(s) head to a cliff/quarry, etc, and the nest-site is not located, then sit and watch the site for a further hour until the bird(s) return.

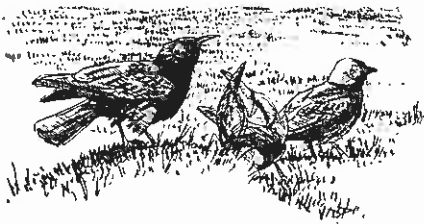


Figure 1 shows a recording form used in previous chough surveys. The form is designed to be used in conjunction with a field map of the survey area. Complete a new recording form for each visit to a site, even if no choughs are found. For each visit, record the start and finishing points of the survey by entering names of sites and their six-figure grid reference. Enter on the form the start and finish time of each 1-km square surveyed and the total duration of time spent in each.

Mark all chough registrations on the map. To help you determine the category of proof of breeding, record one of the two-letter codes given below alongside each registration, both on the form and on the map. Use only one code per registration.

<i>Confirmed</i>	NE	Nest with eggs.
	NY	Nest with young.
	FE	Adults seen leaving nest with faecal sac or eggshell.
	NH	Nestlings heard begging.
	FY	Brood of dependent young seen with parent(s).
<i>Probable</i>	CM	Adults carrying nest material.
	PV	Pair visiting likely nest-site.
<i>Possible</i>	SV	Single bird visiting likely nest-site.
	SF	Single bird feeding in suitable habitat.
	PF	Pair feeding in suitable habitat.

**2nd. International Chough Survey**

DATE: 6 4 92 COUNTRY: IRE OBSERVER: R. MACKIE  
 ADDRESS: IWC COUNTY: Donegal TEL NO: C 63  
 SURVEY ROUTE: FROM: MULLIN TO: GREENCASTLE GRID REF: FROM: 600 375 TO: 640 400  
 AMOUNT OF TIME SPENT IN SQUARE (MINS): 20  
 START TIME / FINISH TIME (BST):  
 Km. SQUARE NO: 608-439  
 PAIRS (DEFINITE) (PROBABLE) (POSSIBLE)  
 FLOCK: ADS. JUVS.  
 ROOST: ADS. JUVS.  
 TOTAL: ADS. JUVS.  
 NOTES: GOOD VISCOSITY - HABITAT FOR FEEDING PAIR, BUT FEW OTHERS SEEN AT SITES AND MODERATE DISTURBANCE  
 HABITAT CODES: Ar - Arable (Root), Ac - Arable (Cereal), B - Beach, C - Clit, D - Dune, F - Flying, H - Heather, I - Improved Grass, L - Livestock Grazed Area, M - Machair, O - Other-please specify, R - Rough Grass, T - Maritime Turf

**Figure 1**  
**Recording form used for the Second International Chough Survey (RSPB 1992).**

If you are unable to categorise records into probable or confirmed breeding, make further visits to upgrade all possible breeding records. Confirmation of breeding is relatively easy after incubation and when young leave the nest. Young choughs spend a lot of time begging for food from their parents, calling and ‘shimmering’ their wings vigorously. By the end of July, the situation can become somewhat confused as parents, young and non-breeding birds combine into flocks.

Note any flocks of choughs seen as you pass through each 1-km square. A single bird can constitute a flock if you believe that it is not a member of a breeding pair.

On the first visit, most records are likely to be of adults, but this will not be the case on the second visit. Wherever possible, try to distinguish between adults and juveniles – young choughs have yellow-orange legs and bill and shrill cries. If this is not possible, indicate this in the ‘notes’ section of the recording form and bracket the two age-categories together. It is unlikely that you will come across roost-sites, but, if you do, record the numbers of adults and juveniles seen. At the end of each visit, record the total numbers of birds seen.

Report the numbers of confirmed, probable and possible breeding pairs of choughs estimated over all visits.

**References**

Monaghan, P, Bignal, E, Bignal, S, Easterbee, N and McKay, C R(1989) The distribution and status of the chough in Scotland in 1986. *Scottish Birds* 15: 114–118.  
 RSPB (1992) *Second International Chough Survey: instructions and recording forms*. RSPB unpubl.