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The decline of the Cirl Bunting in Britain, 1968-80

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In recent years, there have been widespread reports of a decline in the population of the Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* in Britain. The purpose of this paper is to assess the change that has taken place on the basis of data published in county bird reports. These data (summarised in table 1 and fig. 1) show that in practically every county there has been a substantial decline.

Observers familiar with the status of this species in a particular county may well feel that the figures in table 1 are optimistic. There are, however, at least five reasons for supposing that the Cirl Bunting is under-recorded in the county reports. First, the species is not well known to the majority of observers and has an insignificant song, which is easily confused with other species (such as Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*). Secondly, it occurs in areas which are often otherwise ornithologically uninteresting. Thirdly, territories can be extremely large, with the result that, even if Cirl Buntings are present, they can be very hard to find. Fourthly, individual pairs are prone to move about from year to year, so that those which have apparently disappeared may have only moved one or two kilometres. Fifthly, observer coverage is casual and patchy. The last three factors probably lie behind the many instances in the reports where the species has been recorded from a particular locality on a number of occasions over several years but with many intervening years without any records. In such cases, it is often reasonable to assume that Cirl Buntings have been in the vicinity all the

time. Thus, an analysis of county report data in relation to this species requires a certain amount of interpretation. The figures contained in table 1 are, therefore, my best estimate of the population in the light of the factors involved.

Table 1. Estimated number of pairs of Cirl Buntings *Emberiza cirlus* in each county during 1968-80, based on county bird report data

	1968-72	1973-76	1977-80	1980 only				
Norfolk	}	}	}	}				
Kent								
Essex					2-4	0	0-1	0
Gwent								
Hertfordshire								
East Sussex	16-20	10-15	4-8	1-3				
West Sussex	8-10	3-5	1-2	0-1				
Surrey	2-6	1-3	2-3	2-3				
Cambridgeshire	0	0	1	0				
Buckinghamshire	6-12	6-12	3-4	1-2				
Berkshire	2-3	2-3	0	0				
Oxfordshire	2-4	2-4	2-3	0-1				
West Midlands	2-5	1	1	0				
Avon	2-3	2-3	1-2	0-1				
Hampshire	7-14	3-6	3-4	3-4				
Wiltshire	1-2	1-2	2-3	0-1				
Somerset	30-40	18-23	16-21	10-14				
Dorset	8-12	2-3	2-3	1-2				
Cornwall	20-30	15-18	8-10	6-8				
	108-165	66-98	46-66	24-40				
Devon	?	140-150	?	?				
	206-248							

The figures show that, outside Devon, the last decade has seen the population reduced by about 60%, with significant numbers remaining only in Cornwall and Somerset. The chances for the survival of the remnant population in other counties must now be regarded as very low indeed.

The current situation in Devon is less clear than that for other counties. The Cirl Bunting population is so relatively large and widespread in Devon that a special survey is necessary to obtain an accurate figure. The most recent such survey (Sitters 1975) located 106 pairs in 1973 and 136 pairs in 1974. It is not possible to make a direct comparison between the state of the population in Devon in 1973-74 and in more recent years because no such detailed survey has been repeated. The number of breeding-season records submitted for the *Devon Bird Report* has, however, not declined (there were 44 in 1980), and experienced observers consider that the population has remained fairly stable. On the assumption that this is correct, the total British population in 1980 is unlikely to have been more than 200 pairs, and may well have been as low as 130 pairs. With such small numbers, there is real concern for the future. For this reason, the Rare Breeding Birds Panel has recently added Cirl Bunting to the list of species it considers, and the BTO has launched a census during summer 1982 (see page 139).

In the course of the fieldwork for *The Atlas* during 1968-72, Cirl Buntings were found in 174 10-km squares (Sharrock 1976). This, however, is the

cumulative total of five years of fieldwork, and there are many instances of *Atlas* registrations which clearly relate to birds which appeared in only one or two years. Sharrock suggested that the total British population during 1968-72 was in the range of 350-700 pairs. In view of the figures mentioned above, I consider that this was optimistic and that, at the time, the population was more likely to have been about 250-300 pairs.

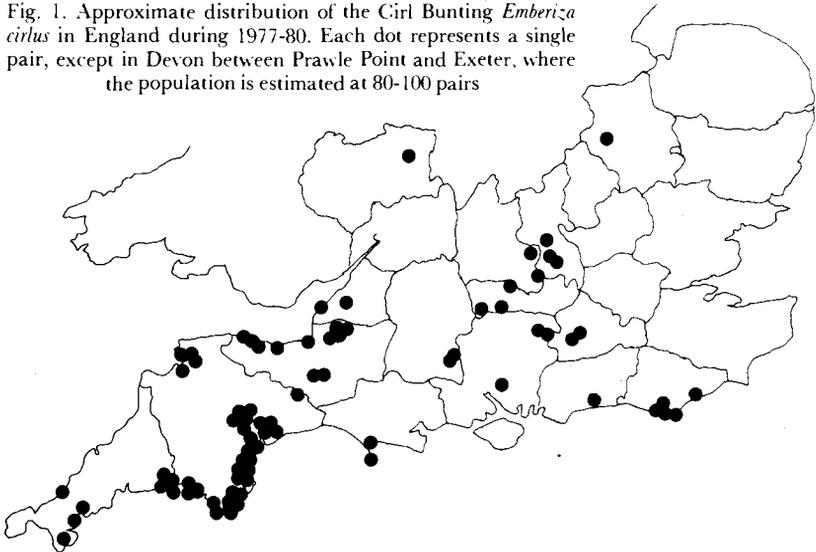
The Cirl Bunting may not have colonised southern England until the end of the 18th century: it is not mentioned in the literature before Montagu found the species around Kingsbridge in 1800. During the 19th and early part of the present century, the range extended north to the Midlands and Wales, with occasional breeding records as far as Yorkshire and Cumberland. Since the 1920s, the breeding range has contracted southwards, and in the last 20-30 years there has also been a considerable reduction in the Cirl Bunting population of many southern counties. A southwards shift of the population has also been noted in France and Belgium since 1930 (Yeatman 1976).

The Cirl Bunting is principally a Mediterranean species and is sometimes regarded as the Mediterranean replacement of the Yellowhammer *E. citrinella*. There are occasional references in the literature to interaction between the two species, which may amount to competition. There is, however, no evidence that, in Britain, the presence of Yellowhammers is in any way detrimental to Cirl Buntings.

The Cirl Bunting reaches the northern limit of its distribution in southern England, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the main reason for its fluctuation over the past two centuries is climatic.

The major proportion of the British population, perhaps 100 pairs, is now concentrated along the coastal strip between Prawle Point and Exeter (fig. 1). It is surely significant that this is generally an area of warm

Fig. 1. Approximate distribution of the Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirius* in England during 1977-80. Each dot represents a single pair, except in Devon between Prawle Point and Exeter, where the population is estimated at 80-100 pairs



summers and mild winters, and is also sheltered from prevailing winds. Perhaps these are some of the climatic factors which are important for this species.

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Summary

Estimates based on information published in the relevant county bird reports show a decline in the population of Cirl Buntings *Emberiza cirlus* in Britain outside Devon from 108-165 pairs in 1968-72 to 66-98 in 1973-76 and 46-66 in 1977-80. The Devon population, censused in 1973 and 1974, has probably remained fairly static, at 140-150 pairs, or perhaps declined slightly. By 1980, there were probably only 160-200 pairs in the whole of Britain, and perhaps as few as 130 pairs.

References

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