

Whinchat conservation in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany

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EVERS A, SOHLER J 2017: Whinchat conservation in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany. WhinCHAT 1, 53-54.

Since 2015, a project on Whinchats has been conducted by the conservation organisation NABU (BirdLife Germany) in Schleswig-Holstein (northern Germany). The 2600 ha study area is situated within an extensive river plain (Eider-Treene-Sorge-Niederung), which is a core distribution area of this species on a regional scale. In 2016, 67 territories of Whinchat were recorded in the study area. Compared to the results of a previous study in the same area, this is a decrease of more than a third (-36,8 %) of the local population since 2011. Reproduction was low in both study years, with just over a quarter (28 %) of pairs breeding successfully in 2016.

A study of habitat used by Whinchats during the breeding season showed that, in grassland areas, nests were almost exclusively situated along the

edges of meadows or pastures, where strips of vegetation were excluded from agricultural use. These strips normally remain along the sides of drainage ditches and cattle fences. They provide habitat structures preferred by Whinchats for feeding and breeding. However, they are generally rather narrow (ca. 1 m) and impacts through farming activities are more likely to occur and there is a higher risk of predation. As in other studies, Whinchats were abundant in small-scale vegetation mosaics and where there was a higher diversity of landscape structures as well as land-use. Independent of the intensity of agricultural use, the species was absent in those parts of the study area, which appeared to be uniform over a large area.

Based on these observed habitat preferences,



Fig. 1: Typical Whinchat nest site in an excluded strip of vegetation on the edge of a hay meadow. (Photo: © Anne EVERS).



Fig. 2: Colour-ringed male Whinchat. Birds were marked with a combination of five plastic rings (red, yellow, pale blue, black) and one aluminium ring (Vogelwarte Helgoland). (Photo: © Jan SOHLER).

from 2017 onwards, in collaboration with Stiftung Naturschutz Schleswig-Holstein (conservation foundation of the federal state), patches of unmown or ungrazed land will be established in the study area as a conservation measure for this species. Unmown or, as the case may be, ungrazed patches of land of at least 5 meters in width will be established along the edges of hay meadows/pastures. This will provide Whinchats with the structural diversity they require when they arrive at these sites in the following year. The patches of unmown/ungrazed land will be rotated on an annual basis. They will remain unused from the beginning of one year to the end of the breeding season in the following year (15th of July at least). When one patch is mown/grazed again, another patch of land in the same field will be excluded from use for the following season. The rest of the field will be used in a normal way. Currently, we plan to provide about 4000 meters of such patches in each breeding season, of which

the majority will be situated in hay meadows. Because of the preference of the species towards vegetation mosaics, the patches are, where possible, going to be situated on the border of pastures or more intensively used grassland.

Whinchats are colour-ringed in the study area in order to collect data on survival rates as well as information on immigration and emigration. This data will be used to develop a population model. In the first season 39 individuals were marked, of which 5 adults (4♂, 1♀) were observed in the following year, i.e. recapture rates of 25 % for adults and 0 % for juvenile birds. In 2016, an additional 59 individuals were marked.

For further information, recent study reports (in German) are available for download from:

<https://bergenhusen.nabu.de/forschung/braunkehlchen/index.html>

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