

Optimising conditions for breeding Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* in the Shannon Callows Special Protection Area

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Agricultural specialisation and intensification has negatively impacted many farmland species. For Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*, early and more frequent meadow mowing throughout their Irish breeding range has likely contributed to range contraction and population declines. Targeted conservation measures are required to secure existing breeding populations. Literature has indicated that 75.1% of Whinchat broods must survive the breeding season if populations are to remain stable. Over two breeding seasons (2014 & 2016), 34 broods were monitored until chicks fledged and, in 2016, ranging distance in 18 breeding territories were mapped. The study allowed the inception of targeted conservation options that would maintain

an unchanged population of Whinchats in the Shannon Callows. If 100% of broods are protected, 75.1% of these broods must produce fledglings before mowing commences, which, according to this study, is after 26th July. If 75.1% broods are protected, 100% of these broods must produce fledglings before mowing commences. Arguably, the most efficient method may be to balance mowing date with territory size (e.g. protect 86.7% of broods until 86.7% of these broods have produced fledglings). Nonetheless, the benefit-cost ratio must be investigated in order to suggest an appropriate option. Improving conditions for Whinchats should enhance farmland habitats and benefit associated biodiversity.

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