

## The Whinchat in Luxembourg – if you build it, they will come

MIKIS BASTIAN (Kockelscheuer, Luxembourg)

BASTIAN M 2017: The Whinchat in Luxembourg – if you build it, they will come. Whinchat 1, 78-81.

Das Braunkehlchen in Luxemburg – die Hoffnung stirbt zuletzt...

### The Whinchat in Luxembourg – if you build it, they will come...

...might have been the motto of the EU-co-funded Life+ project “Life Éislek” in Luxembourg. In other words, while the Whinchat has been extinct in Luxembourg for almost a decade now, the project specifically aimed at restoring favourable habitats for Whinchats and other endangered wetland species. In the long term, these conservation measures are meant to encourage the recolonisation of the species’ former strongholds in the North of the country. In the short term, these conservation measures guarantee that Whinchats will find suitable conditions while on migration. For the time being all observations of Whinchats are limited to spring and autumn migration.

### Das Braunkehlchen in Luxemburg – die Hoffnung stirbt zuletzt...

Das Braunkehlchen ist in Luxemburg seit nunmehr fast zehn Jahren als Brutvogel ausgestorben. Die letzten Bruten fanden vermutlich um das Jahr 2010 im Norden des Landes statt. Lediglich während der Frühlings- und Herbstmigration lassen sich die Vögel für eine kurze Zeit auf dem Durchzug beobachten. Trotzdem werden auch weiterhin zielgerichtete Maßnahmen durchgeführt, die eine Wiederkehr der Art längerfristig ermöglichen sollen. Kurzfristig werden durch solche Maßnahmen zumindest wertvolle Rasthabitate geschaffen, welche als Migrations-Zwischenstopps genutzt werden.



Fig. 1: At the “Leresmühle” site, in the North of Luxembourg, the “Trëtterbaach” was restored along a section of 380m. The stream was taken out of its artificial bed – an old mill channel - and returned into the natural floodplain. - Flussrenaturierung an der “Trëtterbaach”. An der “Leresmühle”, im Norden Luxemburgs, wurde die “Trëtterbaach” auf einer Länge von 380m renaturiert. Dabei wurde der Bach aus dem künstlichen Mühlenkanal herausgenommen und in sein natürliches Flussbett zurückgeführt (Photo: © natur&ëmwelt).



Fig. 2: The restoration of the floodplain, combined with appropriate agricultural use, will allow to recreate ideal living conditions for Whinchats and numerous other wetland species. - Durch die Renaturierung der Talaue und ein angepasstes Management wird großflächig ein optimales Braunkehlchen-Habitat wiederhergestellt (Photo: © natur&ëmwelt).

Over the duration of the project (2012-2017), many habitats were restored or improved over a large scale (by Luxembourgish standards, anyway). Among these were some of the last known breeding sites in the country. Many of these continue to be heavily used as stop-over sites during migration.

So konnten in den letzten Jahren durch ein europäisches Life+ Projekt im Norden Luxemburgs – dem ehemaligen Verbreitungsschwerpunkt des Braunkehlchens – großflächig Habitate restauriert bzw. optimiert werden. Viele dieser Flächen gehören zu den letzten bekannten Brutplätzen der Art und werden auch heute noch als bevorzugte Habitate während der Migration angefliegen.



Fig. 3: The blocking of approximately 590m of drainage ditches near “Kirchermillen” allowed to re-wet several hectares of wet meadows. These measures proved very successful with a local couple of Great Grey Shrikes, which occupied the newly created habitat within a year. - Durch den Verschluss von insgesamt 590m Entwässerungsgräben, konnten auf der “Kirchermillen” mehrere Hektar Grünland wiedervernässt werden. Erste Erfolge deuteten sich gleich im ersten Jahr nach der Umsetzung an, als sich ein Raubwürger einstellte (Photo: © natur&ëmwelt).



Fig. 4: Restoration mowing of fallow surfaces specifically for Whinchats and other wetland species. The project managed to restore approx. 45 ha of fallow land using specialised machinery, adapted for working in wetlands. - Erstpflegemahd auf jahrelang verbrachten Flächen. Auf insgesamt 45 Hektar Fläche konnten während des Projektes, mit Hilfe von spezialisierten landwirtschaftlichen Maschinen, verbuschte oder verbrachte Flächen gezielt für das Braunkehlchen restauriert werden (Photo: © natur&emwelt).

The “Life Éislek” project focused on two of the main threats for the Whinchat in Luxembourg, namely a much too intensive agriculture (with inappropriate management of wet meadows) on one hand, and the abandonment of other areas, on the other. Especially very inaccessible (and thus often very biodiverse areas) suffered from a lack of management and subsequent succession or encroachment by a few dominant plant species, making them unsuitable for Whinchats and many other species.

Throughout the project the course of the “Trëtterbaach” stream was restored along 300 meters back into its natural state (Fig.1-2) while a total of 590 meters of drainage ditches were blocked, leading to a re-wetting of the floodplain and surrounding wet meadows (Fig.3). In addition to these large-scale measures, numerous smaller, accompanying measures were implemented, including the fencing of water courses, the extensification of grasslands, the creation of fallow land and riparian vegetation, all of which added up to create ideal habitats specifically for Whinchats.

Das Life Éislek Projekt zielte darauf ab, die beiden wichtigsten Ursachen für den Rückgang des Braunkehlchens in Luxemburg zu reduzieren, nämlich die nicht angepasste, da viel zu intensive Landwirtschaft, aber auch die zunehmende Habitatverschlechterung durch Nutzungsaufgabe.

Auf diese Weise konnte der Bachlauf der “Trëtterbaach” auf einer Länge von etwa 300 Metern komplett renaturiert werden (Fig.1-2), während an anderer Stelle auf 590 Metern Länge Entwässerungsgräben geschlossen wurden, was zu einer Wiedervernässung der Talau und der umgebenden Wiesen führte (Fig.3). Zahlreiche begleitende Maßnahmen, wie etwa die Auszäunung von Bachläufen, Extensivierung von Grünlandflächen, Schaffung von Brachen und Hochstaudenfluren entlang von Gewässerläufen, vervollständigen diese Aktionen und helfen dabei ein optimales Braunkehlchen-Habitat zu schaffen.



Fig. 5: Restored surfaces “Am Dall” near Hachiville one year after restoration mowing. Targeted management and adapted agricultural use will guarantee the long term maintenance of these surfaces for the whinchat. - Restaurierte Flächen “Am Dall” bei Hachiville ein Jahr nach den Pflegemaßnahmen. Ein zielgerichtetes Managementkonzept und eine entsprechende landwirtschaftliche Nutzung sollen diese Flächen auch in Zukunft für das Braunkehlchen erhalten. (Photo: © natur&ëmwelt).

At the same time, habitats which had been known to be former breeding sites – but had been abandoned due to lack of appropriate management (i.e. lack of agricultural use) - were restored. These measures usually consisted of shrub clearance and/or restoration mowing, using specifically modified machinery, adapted to wetland conditions (Fig.4). Once cleared, these areas will be subjected to an adapted, albeit very extensive agricultural use (Fig.5).

Even with the conclusion of the “Life Éislek” project (autumn 2017), these newly created habitats will continue to be managed specifically for whinchats, thus guaranteeing the long term maintenance of these potentially suitable conditions.

For more information regarding the “Life Éislek” project, please visit: [www.life-eislek.eu](http://www.life-eislek.eu)

Zeitgleich wurden auf mehreren brach ge-fallenen Flächen, auf denen das Braunkehlchen ehemals brütete, Entbuschungen und/oder Erstpflegemahden durchgeführt (Fig.4). Durch jahrelange Stilllegung dieser Flächen waren die hier vorkommenden Braunkehlchen-Habitate derart verbuscht, dass sie als Bruthabitat nicht länger in Frage kamen. Ziel ist es hier, diese Flächen wieder in eine wirtschaftliche, wengleich sehr extensive Nutzung zu bekommen (Fig.5).

Auch nach Ablauf des Life Éislek Projektes (Ende 2017) werden die neu geschaffenen Habitate weiterhin mit auf das Braunkehlchen angepassten Methoden bewirtschaftet, so dass ein langfristiger Erhalt von potenziell geeigneten Lebensräumen gesichert ist.

Weitere Informationen zu Life Éislek Projekt finden Sie unter: [www.life-eislek.eu](http://www.life-eislek.eu)

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## Whinchat in the abandoned fields of the „Russky Sever“ national park

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SHITIKOV D, VAYTINA T, SAMSONOV S 2017: Whinchat in the abandoned fields of the „Russky Sever“ national park. WhinCHAT 1, 82-83.

We study Whinchat breeding ecology in the abandoned fields in the southern part of the “Russky Sever” national park (59°46’N, 38°22’E), Vologda region, Russia (SHITIKOV et al. 2015). Despite the serious decline in Whinchat numbers in western and central Europe, population of the northern Russia remains high and stable. Breeding Whinchat numbers slightly increased at our study plot since 2011.

Tab. 1: Breeding Whinchat numbers at survey plot (abandoned field, 104.2 ha).

Year	Breeding pairs
2011	54
2012	40
2013	64
2014	65
2015	74
2016	65



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Fig. 1: Magpie with Whinchat's egg (Photo: © D. SHITIKOV).

During 2015-2016 we ringed 72 adult Whinchats and 324 nestlings, observed the fate of 120 nests. Breeding success was low (30-40%) and predators were the main reason of nests losses. Since 2016 we started a project to identify predators at meadow birds' nests with Trophy Cams. In 2016 cameras were deployed near 20 Whinchat's nests; 8 nests were partially or fully predated. Nests were predated by Common Adder *Vipera berus*, Magpie *Pica pica*, Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus* and

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*. Magpie, Common Adder and Hedgehog were main predators at the nests of other ground-nesting passerine species (Booted Warbler *Iduna caligata* and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*). The study was funded by Russian Foundation for Basic Research (grant number 16-04-01383).

#### Literature

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## Whinchats on Ljubljansko barje (Slovenia) – update to report from 2015

National Institute of Biology

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TOME D 2017: Whinchats on Ljubljansko barje (Slovenia) - update to report from 2015. WhinCHAT 1, 84-86.

On National institute of Biology we are performing a population study on Whinchats since year 2000. Our study site is 1km<sup>2</sup> of grasslands on the west side of Ljubljansko barje, Slovenia, and several important breeding parameters are collected on a yearly basis; breeding density, clutch size, brood size, number of successful nests, etc. Main findings of the study were presented on a 1st European Whinchat Symposium in Helmbrechts, Germany (TOME 2015). Here I present short update for 2016.

In 2016 number of breeding pairs was about

the same as in 2014 and 2015, that is about 30 breeding pairs. In spite of the fact, that population decline seems to stop (at least on a temporally basis), this is not considered as a very good news. Population of Whinchats is still less than half as strong as it used to be in 2000.

The research area for Whinchats represent less than 1% of the whole Ljubljansko barje area. Back in 2000 it was selected as a research site since it was one of the best places for Whinchats. There alone and only there over 80 breeding pairs per 1 km<sup>2</sup> were nes-



Fig. 1: Barje oslad / Ljubljansko barje in Slovenia (Photo: © D. TOME).



Fig. 2: Feeding Whinchat pair in Ljubljansko barje / Slovenia (Photo: © D. TOME).

ting. Our fear is, that on the whole Ljubljansko barje, where there used to be about 2000 breeding pairs (TOME et al. 2005) population declined for even greater proportion as on our study site. This is enhanced with a findings, that on Ljubljansko barje population of two ecologically similar bird species, the Corncrake (*Crex crex*) and the Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) shrunk considerably too. In last 20 years population of Corncrake decreased for more than 50% (Božič, 2005, DOPPS 2016) and population of Quail for about 80% respectively (TOME et al. 2016). Bad times for grassland birds on Ljubljansko barje, which is, by the way, Natura 2000 site!

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Fig. 3: Whinchat in Ljubljansko barje / Slovenia (Photo: © D. TOME).



Fig. 4: Whinchat in Ljubljansko barje / Slovenia (Photo: © D. TOME).

## Whinchat on the Long Mynd, Shropshire, and in Shropshire

LEO SMITH (Shropshire, United Kingdom)

SMITH L 2017: Whinchat on the Long Mynd, Shropshire, and in Shropshire. WhinCHAT 1, 87-88.

The County of Shropshire is in the English West Midlands, adjacent to Wales. The Long Mynd is largely a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) owned by the National Trust. It is a heather moorland plateau, largely over 400m, with a high point of 516m. Streams have cut several steep sided valleys into the plateau. The vegetation is a mixture of varying proportions of heather and bracken, or bracken with bracken litter understorey. The total area is about 24 km<sup>2</sup>, with the plateau occupying almost half that.

The Long Mynd Breeding Bird Project carried out a full survey between 1994 and 1998, and estimated a population of 110 – 130 breeding pairs of the whinchat (SMITH 2003). A repeat survey in 2006-08 found 59 – 65, and estimated a population of around 70 breeding pairs, a decline of about 40% (SMITH in prep.). All pairs on both surveys were found in the upper reaches of the steep sided valleys, with no territories on the flat open moorland, although some pairs did take fledged young up onto the moor to feed.

The BTO organise a national Breeding Bird Survey. It involves walking two 1 kilometre transects, twice in each breeding season. A transect in Callow Hollow, one of the steep sided valleys on Long Mynd, is the only BBS to regularly record Whinchat in Shropshire. Counts from 1994 onwards through to the late 2000s were fairly consistent, suggesting a population of around 7 pairs, but this fell to 6 in 2010 – 12, 5 in 2013 and only 4 in 2014 and subsequently. This decline has occurred in prime habitat, which does not appear to have changed during 23 years.

During the 1994-98 project, the habitat occupied by Whinchats was recorded. A total of

254 observations were made over the five years, and bracken was present in every single recorded habitat. Correlation with the distribution of the main habitats, comprising 16 different vegetation mixes, showed that 38% of territories were in bracken with bracken litter understorey. However, this was the most widespread habitat, and the breeding density was higher where heath, rather than bracken, was the understorey, and the highest densities, twice that in bracken with bracken litter understorey, were reached where the heath understorey is less thick, and is interspersed with grass, or where heath is dominant, but it is interspersed with bracken. As the territories are all in the upper reaches of steep sided valleys, all were close to streams, and many were adjacent to flushes where springs emerge. Although the results have not yet been quantified, all territories in 2006-08 also contained bracken and wet areas.

Bracken is usually perceived as an alien invasive nuisance, and habitat management plans often attempt to eradicate it through expensive spraying. However, Whinchats are clearly wholly dependent on bracken on the Long Mynd. This is not a dependence on bracken per se, but bracken is the only tall herbaceous vegetation available.

SHROPSHIRE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY (1992) carried out a tetrad level Breeding Bird Atlas project in 1985-90. It was repeated to coincide with the BTO Atlas 2007-11, using the same methodology, again at the tetrad level, and again taking six years (2008-13) to cover all 870 tetrads in the County.

Tetrads with evidence of breeding declined by 65%, from 75 to 26. The County population was estimated at 110-275 breeding pairs in



Fig. 1: The upper reaches of Ashes Hollow, Long Mynd. Prime Whinchat habitat. Photo taken in early May, before the new bracken growth has obscured last year's dead bracken (Photo: © L. SMITH).

1990, but that was increased to around 300 pairs in the light of the 1998 estimate of the Long Mynd population. The 1985-90 Atlas listed many sites where Whinchat bred at that time, but most of them were not occupied during the 2008-13 Atlas period. Some sites where Whinchat was recorded during the Atlas period were not occupied in the later years, indicating that the population continued to decline over that period. It appears that Long Mynd is now the only site in Shropshire where Whinchat still breed regularly, with occasional records from the nearby Stiperstones (including one instance of probable breeding in 2014).

The population estimate in 2008 was around 75 breeding pairs, only one-quarter of the earlier figure. The BBS results suggest that the population has continued to decline since then.

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RSPB has initiated a national long term study on the causes of Whinchat decline, which will include the Long Mynd, and the local population monitoring project will be repeated, starting in 2017.

Thanks to the National Trust for funding the 2006-08 Long Mynd survey.

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## Whinchats at RSPB Geltsdale in 2016, Cumbria, UK

STEPHEN WESTERBERG, AMANDA PROUD & MARTIN KETCHER (Brampton, United Kingdom)

WESTERBERG S, PROUD A, KETCHER M 2017: Whinchats at RSPB Geltsdale in 2016, Cumbria, UK. WhinCHAT 1, 89-90.

RSPB Geltsdale is situated in the North Pennines in northern England and is 5500ha in size. The site is between 200m and 620m asl. All the Whinchats in 2016 nested between 259m and 414m asl (mean 330 m asl).

A Retrap Adult Survival (RAS) project organised by the British Trust for Ornithology has been running on the site since 2011. At present this is the only Whinchat RAS in the UK (unless one started in 2016 that I don't know about).

### Summary for 2016

No. of territories	75
No. of nests monitored	50

BTO nest record cards completed and additional habitat information recorded. 85% of nests found were successful (best year in 5 years).

Number of nestlings colour-ringed	199
No. of adults colour-ringed	14
Percent return of 1st years (n=18)	17%
Percent return of 2+ years (n=26)	46%
No. of resightings in 2016	576

(of 56 adults and 105 juveniles). Second best year in 5 years study for post fledging survival, 52% of nestlings seen as juveniles.

19 geolocators fitted to 18 males and 1 female by Malcolm Burgess of RSPB Conservation Science. 16 of the whinchats fitted with geolocators were of known age as 8 were ringed as nestlings in previous years and 8 were new ringed first year birds. Known 3 year old birds were avoided.



Fig. 1: 3 year old female post breeding, ringed as nestling in 2016 (Photo: © Adam MOAN).

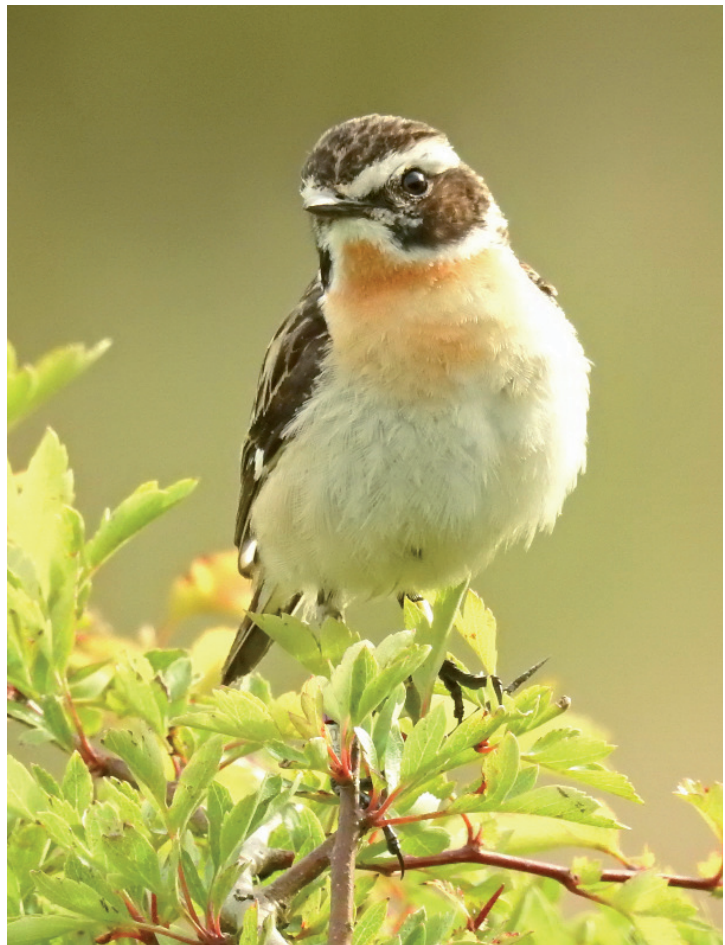


Fig. 2: Geolocator on Whinchat at RSPB Geltsdale attached in June 2016 (left side). Male on same territory as previous year (right side; Photos: © Stephen WESTERBERG (left)/Adam MOAN).

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Fig. 3: Juvenile 53 days after fledging and 1500m from nest, offspring of female in Fig.1 (Photo: © ADAM MOAN).