Whinchat in Teuschnitzaue / Germany (Photo: © Jürgen FEULNER)

Regionales Milchprodukt in Konflikt mit Braunkehlchen-population?

Katharina Bergmüller (Steinach, Austria)

Can a regional, sustainable dairy product endanger a whinchat population?
In Austria, a new regional dairy product (milk and yoghurt) has recently been placed on the market. It is distinctive in that all food for the cattle has to be obtained from the farm's own fields and thus nutrient cycles are closed. Even though this is a very positive initiative from a conservation perspective, there are certain pitfalls to be considered: the area contains one of Austria's largest whinchat populations, with conservation measures being taken for about a decade. To compensate for mash, which can no longer be purchased from other areas, meadows are likely to be mown even earlier in the region, in order to have high protein (and thus milk) yields. This could affect the remaining whinchat territories. On the other hand, some extensification/late mown meadows are also expected (ca. 20%), and by careful planning could benefit the whinchats. It is a challenge to ensure, that a product propagating sustainability and biodiversity will not end up leading to the extinction of the whinchat population.

Derzeit kommt in Österreich eine regionale Milch auf den Markt, die in Zusammenarbeit mit einem Biosphärenpark, dem WWF und einem bäuerlichen Verein, der zu diesem Zweck gegründet wurde, von einer großen Molkerei initiiert wurde. Die Region, aus der die Milch kommt, ist eine der letzten Braunkehlchenpopulationen Österreichs (derzeit ca. 30-40 BP). Seit ca. 10 Jahren finden dort gezielte Schutzbemühungen (hauptsächlich mit Brachestreifen und Sitzwarten) von BirdLife statt.

Grundsätzlich ist die Idee der Milch sehr begrüßenswert: sämtliche Futtermittel der teilnehmenden Betriebe müssen aus der Region kommen, d.h. es wird kein Kraftfutter oder Heu zugekauft, und die Nährstoffkreisläufe bleiben geschlossen. Folgende Auswirkungen in der Region sind zu erwarten:

Möglicherweise entstehen neue Getreidefelder, die der Nährstoffversorgung der Milchkühe dienen. Einige Wiesen werden früher

gemäht werden, da der höhere Proteingehalt den Wegfall von Kraftfutter teilweise kompensieren kann. Andererseits ist auch gewisser Anteil „Spätmähwiesen“ (entspricht zweimähdigen Wiesen) zur Versorgung mit Rohfasern erforderlich, dieser Anteil wird mit ca. 20% der Flächen eingeschätzt.

Im Vorfeld war die Kommunikation zwischen Naturschutz, Landwirten und Molkerei kaum vorhanden. Die Befürchtungen sind, dass durch die noch frühere Mahd weitere Braunkehlchenflächen verloren gehen, und möglicherweise Betriebe, die bisher durch Vertragsnaturschutz die Braunkehlchen erhalten haben, nun durch die finanziellen Anreize der regionalen Milch liefern und die Verträge auflassen. Andererseits könnte auch durch optimale Platzierung der „Spätmahdflächen“ die Situation für die Braunkehlchen verbessert werden. Der Biosphärenpark bekennt sich zwar zum Braunkehlchen als wichtiges Schutzgut, sieht es aber nicht zumutbar für die Landwirte, verbindliche Schnittzeitpunkte für die Betriebe vorzugeben. Außerdem sei die generelle Intensivierung der Landwirtschaft die Ursache für den Rückgang der Braunkehlchen, dieses regionale Milchprodukt soll nicht als Sündenbock dienen.

Die Milch ist seit Oktober auf dem Markt, im November gab es eine Krisensitzung in der sich die verschiedenen stakeholder angenähert haben. Es wurde noch keine von allen positiv beurteilte Lösung gefunden, aber einige Ansätze (intensive Beratung der Betriebe, Monitoring der Mahd und Braunkehlchen) wurden entwickelt.

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How I got hooked on Whinchats?

Davorin Tome (Ljubljana, Slovenia)

As a researcher, ornithologist usually investigate a single species or a single problem. He/she try to squeeze as much of the information from the study object and reveal it through a publication process to others. What can also be interesting, but nobody write about, is how the researcher decide which species he/she will work with? This can sometimes be very subjective process – the species is chosen because he/she is emotionally attached to it by knowing it from his/her youth, or since it lives near his/her home, or since it was very nicely presented in some book or in a film. Sometimes species is selected according to available funding. When I was in a process of selecting a species I'm working with, my decision was motivated by a problem. To work on one of the greatest threats to farmland birds – a grassland management.

Living on the outskirts of Ljubljansko barje – a Natura 2000 site designated predominantly due to preserved extensive grasslands, I have a possibility to select between different grassland bird species. Already in the early stage of the decision making process I eliminated those, that start to nest early in the season, like Lapwing, Eurasian Curlew and Eurasian Skylark. Early breeding reduce conflict with mowing to a certain degree, so their conservation problem is not exactly what I was looking for. With the process of elimination, I decided against Grasshopper Warbler and Stonechat, both being only modestly numerous on our grasslands. Common Whitethroat and Tree Pipit, although a grassland species, usually include wooden plants in their habitat, what was a factor I was not keen to include into my investigations. Sedge and Marsh Warbler, according to my observations from the area, breed in extremely extensive grasslands, where conflict with farming is less pronounced. At the end I was left with three species to choose from: the Corncrake, the Quail and the Whinchat. All three with rather similar breeding habits and with population size on Ljubljansko barje estimated at that time to about 300, 400 and 2000 breeding pairs respectively.

Corncrake was, at that time, very tempting species to start a research with. It was still regarded as very endangered on European level, there were quite some results of similar investigations from around the Europe already published, we had results of monitoring from Slovenia available. All in all, investigations of Corncrake would not be a completely fresh start, what I considered as a plus. Quail, on the other hand,

Whinchat in Ljubljansko barje / Slovenia (Photo: © Davorin Tome))

was a species, we, in Slovenia, know almost nothing about, with only a few publications available also from other parts of the Europe. And there was a Whinchat, which, according to my knowledge, was somewhere in between in this respect.

When searching for a study species it is probably not completely off, if you consider also how difficult it is in terms of data collection. Can you imagine working with a species, which is practically invisible more or less all of the time? Almost the whole process of data collection must be planned around birds that are first caught and tagged with transmitters, what itself is rather time consuming, not to say expensive. The Corncrake and Quail are typical birds of this kind. The Whinchat, on the other hand is quite different. It chooses the most exposed parts of the grassland and with a simple field scope you can watch it all day long, making notes about what it is doing, where it is doing, with whom it is doing, where it delivers its prey (this helps you to locate the nest), etc. Having considered this, my selection of study bird was a no-brainer.

Please, do not understand me wrong. I do not want to advocate, that most easily studied birds should always be selected as a study object. Not at all! Even the birds that are notoriously difficult to study are part of biodiversity and we have to know as much as possible about them too. Still, when your goal is to study a problem, in particular, when this is a serious nature conservation problem, there is some logic in selecting a species which allow you to collect a lot of data in relatively short period, so that your conclusions and solutions can be delivered timely. And for the problem of birds on grassland, well, Whinchat seems just the best selection, at least from my point of view.

PS: spell checker helped me a lot, but it is not a magic tool.

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Why it´s impossible not to like Whinchats...

Will Cresswell (St. Andrews, United Kingdom)

I was in Africa for two weeks this November. Following the migrants to the middle of Nigeria. Catching nightingales, whitethroats, yellow wagtails and whinchats to put colour-rings and tags on to find out what they need during the winter and whether the changes in Africa will mean some will still come back again each spring. On 23th November 2017 I took an adult male whinchat out of a net that was already ringed. MOBB (Metal Orange Blue Blue). We first caught this one as a young male on the 10th November 2012, so it was born sometime in May or June that year.

This male whinchat was first caught on the 10th November 2012. About 100 meters away from where it was originally caught, but separated by 5 years of time and over 66,000 kilometres of travel in between it was recaptured in Africa on 23th November 2017 (Photos: © Will Cresswell).

Probably in Eastern Europe or in Russia: most of the whinchats we have tagged have gone there to breed, although they range from Serbia to Finland to the Ural Mountains – about one quarter of Europe. And here it was again, about 100 meters away from where it was originally caught, but separated by 5 years of time and over 66,000 kilometres of travel in between. Not bad for a bird the size of a robin. It's impossible not to like whinchats.

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Running for Whinchats

Jennifer Border (Thetford, United Kingdom)

This autumn I undertook the challenge of running a marathon and 45 miles in a weekend (including another marathon) to raise money for whinchats. After 3 months of training I travelled up to Inverness for my first marathon - the Loch Ness marathon. The day of the marathon dawned – heavy rain! I sat through an hour bus ride deep into the Scottish hills hoping the weather would change. This picture is from the wait at the start line. Luckily I had bought some old jumpers from a charity shop to keep warm but I definitely did have slight reservations at this point!

However as soon as the race started and we dropped down from the hills the weather brightened up. The course was absolutely stunning and I meet some really interesting and friendly people on the route. This is what I like about marathons, I don't think there are many other events where you can make friends and swap stories on route. In the end I finished the marathon 40 minutes faster then my previous best in 3hours 45 minutes and loved every minute of it- even the long hill at mile 18!

So just the 45 miles to go…..The day after Loch Ness I found I could hardly walk due to stiff legs and started having reservation about the next challenge of running 20 miles the day after a marathon! I had about a month to prepare. Luckily I found a local ultra-running group to train with, with their support I ran 200 miles that month including several back to back long runs.

Arriving at the start of the Norfolk costal marathon the weather and scenery were very different to Loch Ness, it was sunny but cold with incredibly strong winds. This marathon was much smaller than Loch Ness with only 100 runners instead of 2000. It also was based almost entirely off road going through shingle, woodland paths, sand dunes and board walks. This marathon was really hard going, mainly due to the wind. There were lots of very exposed sections and as the route followed the coast west the entire way we were fighting against the wind the whole way! The course was also a mile longer at 27.2 miles and I'd run an extra 1.6 miles at the start from my B and B in Blakeney to the course start line. By the time I reached the finish line at 4 hours and 45 minutes, and hour slower than my Loch Ness time, I was telling my husband that this was it for ultra-running- no more after this weekend (this resolution didn't last long- I did a 50K ultra 2 weeks later…).

I got up the next day ready to do my final miles to finish the coastal path and make it up to 45 miles in a weekend. There was still a really strong wind this morning but this time I was running east to finish off the coastal path so I had the wind behind me. Despite the marathon the day before my legs felt fine and I actually really enjoyed the run far more than I'd enjoyed the marathon the day before. The path took me through shingle beaches, salt marshes and small coastal villages. By the time I arrived in Cromer- my final destination I didn't want to stop! So I did a few more loops of the village and ended up running 50 miles in the weekend rather than 45.

Overall I really enjoyed my autumn running challenge. **I got to see some beautiful areas of the country and raised £913.62 for whinchats!** This money is going to pay for some geolocators to go on a Scottish whinchat population so we can understand more about the pathways whinchats use for migration and fill some of our current knowledge gaps. It was also great to meet Grégoire Schau from Switzerland who did his bachelor degree on whinchats and by a bizarre coincidence was also running the Loch Ness marathon, it just goes to show- whinchats are awesome!

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