Tackling conservation challenges from the ground up: delayed mowing for the Whinchat

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Agricultural intensification is comparable to deforestation and anthropogenic climate change as one of the greatest threats to biodiversity across the globe. The twin challenges of food provision for a growing human population and the sustainable use of biological resources continue to plague decision makers. Agriculture and the environment have a complex relationship that is bound by agriculture's simultaneous exploitation and creation of ecosystem services. Similarly, agriculture systems are essential for the survival of many species for food, shelter, water and breeding yet they are also hugely culpable in their demise.

For the ground nesting Whinchat, early and more frequent grassland mowing throughout their breeding range has likely contributed to range contraction and population declines. The first European Whinchat Symposium 2015 concluded that the species has experienced a 50-90% decline over the last 20 years. Implementing locally led agri-environmental schemes in Whinchat stronghold areas across Europe could aid the recovery of

Fig. 1: A Whinchat located on Tower Callow, a wet grassland meadow site next to the River Shannon in Banagher, Co. Offaly, Ireland (Photo: © Alex Copland).

this bird of conservation concern.

The Whinchat is poorly understood in Ireland with this research only being the second of it's kind. The Shannon Callows is the Whinchats breeding population stronghold in Ireland and therefore an appropriate location for conservation action (Fig. 1). As in Europe, delayed mowing is urgently required to halt the decline of this vulnerable species.

According to current literature, 75.1% of Whinchat fledglings must survive the breeding season if populations are to remain unchanged. Delaying mowing is an expensive incovenience for the farming community; therefore research into a Whinchat territory size is crucial to target conservation. If mowing can be delayed across a territory this will presumably result in population recruitment and can avoid a call for delayed mowing over entire farms creating an environmentally and economically viable conservation option. This work seeks to aid Whinchat population recovery in Ireland, improve food availability for insectivores and serve as an example of a species targeted conservation plan.

With the International Whinchat Working Group, cross-border collaboration is probable. Whinchats are representative of the larger agricultural biocenosis and this project will provide solutions for policy makers to balance agricultural usage and biodiversity requirements, thus encouraging a more stable agri-ecosystem.

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