

Management of wet meadows and its effects on the Whinchat in Slovenia

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Feuchtwiesenmanagement in Slowenien und seine Auswirkungen auf das Braunkehlchen

Poster

Situation

In the last two decades, Slovenia experienced a dramatic decline of Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*) population by over 50%. The majority of the population is concentrated in central Slovenia in IBA/SPA "Ljubljansko barje", which is a mosaic of agricultural lowland habitat types.

In the frame of the Ornithological atlas of breeding birds of Ljubljansko barje (1x1 km grid) for the period 1991-1994, the population of Whinchat was estimated at 1858-2245 pairs. The population collapsed to only 300-500 pairs in the period 2005-2010. In the beginning of year 2000 there were 6561 hectares of Whinchat's potential breeding habitat in the area, however

78 % of it already represented sink habitats – improved early mown meadows - that had characteristics of ecological traps. At spring arrival Whinchats select them for breeding but they fail to predict that all nests there will be destroyed by early mowing. From 2000 to 2014, 912 hectares or 13 % of grasslands were lost in the area. In the same period, arable fields increased by 1167 hectares or 44.6 %. Through the LIFE project "Establishing Long-Term Protection of *Crex crex* in Slovenia" DOPPS-BirdLife Slovenia established a 63 hectares large nature reserve "Iski Morost" to test the effect of different management techniques for wet meadows upon grassland birds.

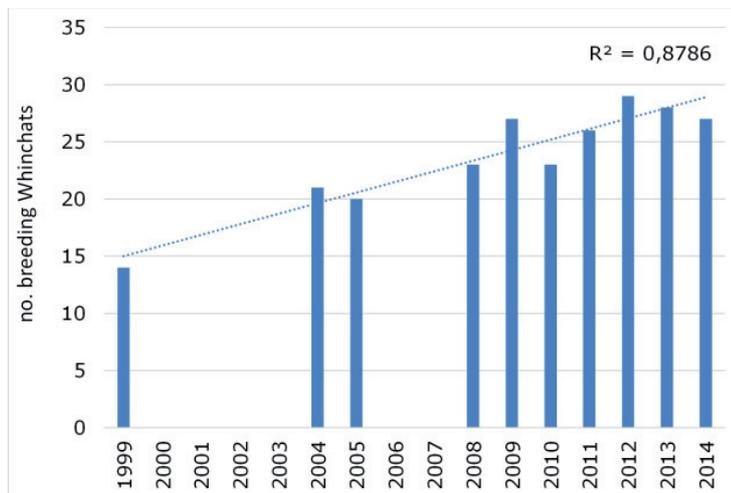


Fig 1: The number of Whinchats breeding pairs at Nature reserve "Iski Morost" increased as a result of restoration of overgrown meadows and its annual nature-conservation management. – Der Brutbestand des Braunkehlchens im Naturschutzgebiet "Iski Morost" stieg seit 1999 durch Grünland- Extensivierung und gezieltes Biotopmanagement.



Fig. 2: Through appropriate habitat management, like late mowing of the unimproved wet meadows at the established nature reserve, we locally stabilized and enlarged population of Whinchats. – Durch geeignetes Biotopmanagement, wie z.B. spätes Mähen nicht bewirtschafteter Feuchtwiesen im Naturschutzgebiet „Iski Morost“, konnte der Braunkehlchenbestand nicht nur stabilisiert, sondern sogar vergrößert werden (Foto A. MEDVED).

Results

In the nature reserve we restored 12 hectares of overgrown meadows and bushes into high-quality breeding habitat for Whinchats in the period 2004-2007. High-quality habitat is represented by a mosaic of oligotrophic wet meadows, with large proportion of high stem plants, meadows are never fertilized, and are mown after 1st August. With subsequent annual management of restored and existing meadows (all meadows together 48 ha) we managed to increase the number of breeding Whinchats from 14 in 1999 to 27 in 2014 (Fig. 1). Management is performed by mowing from inside of the parcel out with sickle bar mower after 1st August, and by removal of dried vegetation (Fig. 2). As this management turned out to be very effective for

Whinchat conservation it was proposed as an agri-environmental measure and was included in the Slovene Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2007-2013. However, the proposed measure “Conservation of unimproved wet meadows as habitats for birds at Natura 2000 sites, measure no. 214-III/5” was financially completely non-competitive compared to “nature unfriendly measures” and unfortunately did not represent a significant improvement in conservation of grassland birds on a larger scale. In preparation of the new RDP 2014-2020 DOPPS achieved that higher payments for the measure are now available but significant threat exist that during the implementation of the RDP the funds will be reduced again by the strong agriculture lobby.

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