

Celebrating the Chough

(Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax)



on the

Ceredigion Coast

This special member of the crow family is instantly recognisable by its red legs, red bill, glossy black plumage and wing feathers separated into 'fingers'.



The chough (pronounced 'chuff') can often be heard before it is seen, with its distinct, clear cry of 'chee-ow' announcing its presence.

The Welsh name 'brân goes goch' means red-legged crow.

Chough can be found on rocky coasts with short grassland, where they hunt for insects and larvae with their long bill. In the winter, when the ground is frozen, cereal grains on stubble fields are an important source of food.

Chough pairs stay faithfully together all year and can be seen engaging in territorial flight; flying in powerful, tumbling swoops; calling as they descend. Pairs can also often be seen preening each other.

Chough now only live on the very western edges of the British Isles; so while this engaging bird can be easily seen locally, it is nationally scarce.



Chough roost communally outside of the breeding season, and non-breeders often do so all year. Flocks include pairs of breeding and non-breeding birds. In April and May flocks are mostly non-breeders.

The life expectancy of a chough is approximately ten years, although a few older birds have been recorded. The oldest known individual was twenty years old.

A Chough's Year

March

Pairs can be seen building or renovating last year's nest; nests are made of dry twigs, roots and moss and lined with sheep wool and thistle down. Nests are built in recesses in caves and crevices on rock faces.

April

The female lays 3-5 eggs and incubates them for 21 days. The male feeds the female at the nest. The female broods the young constantly for the first two weeks.

May

Both adults are busy making foraging trips to find food that they regurgitate for their hungry chicks. Ants are a particular favourite. Nesting pairs will join daytime feeding flocks to forage outside their immediate territory.



Early June

Chicks make their first appearance outside of the nest, spending a week or so 'bouldering' as they gain confidence to fly.

July-August

The young fly at 6-7 weeks of age and can be seen near the nest site practising their flying technique. They are able to feed themselves at 9-10 weeks, but remain with their parents for a further 1-2 weeks before becoming independent.

Autumn

The now independent fledglings join a flock of immature birds, and spend time exploring the coast searching for food. They only leave the flock when they are ready to breed themselves at two to four years old.

The first six months after fledging is a dangerous time, and many young birds do not survive their first winter.

Threats

Habitat loss is the biggest threat to chough populations, Chough needs appropriate land management to provide suitable foraging habitat.



Can you help?

If you see chough anywhere along the Ceredigion coast, please report your sightings to the Marine Protected Area Officer via the Cardigan Bay SAC website

www.cardiganbaysac.org.uk



Photos: Janet Baxter

