

## News & Thoughts about Whinchats

Whinchat in Forchheim/Lkr. Neumarkt / Germany (Photo: © Helmut WOPPERER)

### Thoughts on the autumn passage of Whinchats *Saxicola rubetra* in Upper Franconia and elsewhere

JONATHAN GUEST (Kronach, Germany)

#### Gedanken zum Herbstzug des Braunkehlchens im Frankenwald und anderswo

Fragen, auf die ich die Antworten nicht kenne. Erfolgt die Zunahme des Kurzstreckenziehers Schwarzkehlchen in den letzten Jahren in Deutschland und anderswo etwa auf Kosten des Langstreckenziehers Braunkehlchen? Der Bestandsrückgang des Braunkehlchens verläuft anscheinend schneller als die Verschlechterung seiner Brutbiotope. In Oberfranken werden viele Braunkehlchenfamilien von der Heumahd frühzeitig aus ihren Brutrevieren verdrängt. Studien aus anderen Regionen zeigen, dass Braunkehlchen-Trupps bis drei oder vier Wochen im Juli und August noch in der Nähe ihrer Brutplätze verweilen. Ist der Mangel an Habitaten, wo sie vor dem Wegzug Fett anlegen könnten, eine Teilerklärung für das Sterben vieler jungen Braunkehlchen im ersten Lebensjahr? Dass wegziehende Braunkehlchen im Landkreis Kronach erst ab Mitte August erscheinen, lässt vermuten, dass diese Vögel nicht aus Oberfranken, sondern aus nördlichen Beständen stammen. Aber wo halten sich oberfränkische Braunkehlchen dann im Juli auf? Eine ökologische Verschlechterung der Agrarlandschaft im Frankenwald und den angrenzenden Gebieten hat diese erste Strecke der Zugroute nach Afrika degradiert.

#### Introduction

Early in 2018 I was asked to act as co-editor of WhinCHAT III. Never having concentrated on Whinchats but having some experience of the species dating back to the 1960s, I searched my memory and came up with the following thoughts. I have tried not to state the obvious too often, and hope that the specialists will be

patient if I try to reinvent the wheel. Most of the literature that I have found on Whinchats deals with their breeding ecology. Whilst the extent of their breeding habitats has undoubtedly shrunk (and perhaps of their wintering habitats also) I suspect strongly that their continuing decline can be attributed primarily to deterioration of their migration routes.

### Whinchat and Stonechat

These two species are closely related. Females and young birds of eastern races of Stonechat can show a strong resemblance to Whinchats. The two species breed in open landscapes. In England and Wales, I knew the Stonechat primarily as a breeding bird of heaths, including coastal heaths with gorse (*Ulex europaeus* or *U. gallii*) and heathers (*Calluna vulgaris*, *Erica cinerea*). Inland habitats were more varied, and here the same territory might be occupied by Whinchats or Stonechats in different years.

European Stonechats are short-distance migrants or, in mild and coastal regions, residents. Although they may decrease greatly in severe winters, they are regularly double-brooded and sometimes rear a third brood (CAMPBELL & FERGUSON-LEES 1972), so that a rapid recovery is possible. The Whinchat is a trans-Saharan migrant and thus avoids the worst winter weather. It is however single-brooded, so a high survival rate on migration and in its winter quarters is essential to its survival.

Given the superficial similarity of habitat and diet between the two species, one might expect that Stonechats would increase to occupy breeding grounds vacated by the declining Whinchat. Within Germany, the Stonechat has indeed increased strongly since the late 1980s (GEDEON et al 2014). Is there any correlation here with the decline of the Whinchat?

### Pattern of distributional decline in Whinchats

Some forty years ago, I searched the available literature on birds in the county of Cheshire, north-western England. As early as 1900, COWARD & OLDHAM described the Whinchat as occurring “in fair numbers in Wirral and throughout the Cheshire Plain” chiefly in “low-lying, open country and ... nowhere more plentiful than in the meadows bordering the Mersey between Stockport and Warrington”. COWARD used closely similar wording in 2010, adding the marshy fields of the Gowy valley as another favoured haunt. Between 1919 and 1922, Norman ABBOTT (unpublished diaries) mapped singing summer visitors including 36 male Whinchats in an area of some 22 square kilometres in the east of the county. The subsequent decline or collapse of the breeding population seems to have escaped the attention

of the birdwatching community. Into the 1970s it was still dismissed in the annual Cheshire Bird Reports as a common species but without supporting evidence. My own observations from the late 1960s onwards however told a different tale. Then, between 1978 and 1984, we mapped the breeding bird species of the county on a grid of 2km x 2km. In some 2300 sq. km. we found fewer than 50 pairs of Whinchats (GUEST et al 1992). Many Whinchat haunts had changed little visibly but were no longer occupied. Yet immediately across the Welsh border of the county, in the Clwyd Hills, Whinchats appeared to be flourishing as well as ever. A ringing group reportedly found fifty or so nests there each year in just a few square kilometres. Since the 1990s the Whinchat is effectively extinct as a breeding bird in Cheshire (NORMAN 2008).

On Salisbury Plain, England, breeding success is good and it was estimated that the available habitat could support 3.5 times as many territories as are currently occupied. However, the survival of young birds during the first winter is low (TAYLOR et al 2015).

In Upper Franconia too, the Whinchat population has gravitated to a few strongholds (TSCHERNEK 2018). And so the pattern repeats itself over the decades. Apparently suitable habitats are deserted although neighbouring areas retain seemingly healthy populations. The destruction and degradation of breeding habitats continues but is outstripped by the decline in breeding numbers. Shrinking Whinchat populations retreat into regional strongholds.

### Winter quarters

Following the population crash of Whitethroats *Sylvia communis*, Sedge Warblers *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*, Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* and other trans-Saharan migrants in 1968-69 (WINSTANLEY et al 1974), awareness grew of the connection between degraded migration routes and winter quarters in Africa and the decline of such migrants. We will probably never know how many Whinchats formerly spent the winter south of the Sahara. Nowadays however, having arrived in their wintering grounds, their survival there appears to be good (CRESSWELL 2015). If the winter quarters are in good shape, and this is a huge area with few studies available, and

Tab. 1: Habitat choice of autumn passage Whinchats in the Kronach District by ten-day periods. - Habitatwahl durchziehender Braunkehlchen im Laufe des Wegzugs durch den Landkreis Kronach.

| Habitat                                    | 10-day period /Dekade |        |        |        |        |        |        |       |
|--|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
|  | Aug 01                | Aug 02 | Aug 03 | Sep 01 | Sep 02 | Sep 03 | Okt 01 | Summe |
| <b>Hedge/Woodpile</b><br>Hecken/Holzstapel | -                     | 7      | 12     | 31     | 20     | 2      | -      | 72    |
| Wildäcker                                  | -                     | 2      | 6      | -      | 6      | 10     | -      | 24    |
| <b>Maize/Mais</b>                          | -                     | -      | 2      | 15     | -      | -      | -      | 17    |
| <b>Potatoes/</b><br>Kartoffeln             | -                     | 3      | 5      | 5      | -      | -      | -      | 13    |
| <b>Hill-Meadows</b><br>Bergwiesen          | -                     | 13     | 9      | 7      | 2      | -      | -      | 31    |
| <b>Tall-Perennials/</b><br>Hochstauden     | -                     | -      | -      | -      | -      | 1      | -      | 1     |
| <b>Sum/Summen</b>                          | 0                     | 25     | 34     | 58     | 28     | 13     | 0      | 158   |

breeding success in European strongholds is also good, then the migration routes between the breeding and wintering ranges deserve far more attention. As CRESSWELL (2015) also suggested, the first journey from the natal territory to the winter quarters may well be the most dangerous period in the life of a Whinchat.

### Autumn migration

Although a great deal has now been written about the breeding biology of the Whinchat, such that clear ideas of its habitat requirements are emerging, the initial dispersal from the breeding territories and subsequent migration across Europe and northern Africa remain poorly documented.

In Geltsdale, Cumbria, England, Whinchats form small foraging groups towards the end of the breeding season and remain together for three to four weeks from mid-July to mid-August (WESTERBERG et al 2015). Most young birds leave by the middle of August, the adults remaining until late August. Since the young birds leave first, it appears that they have to find their way without prior experience through an increasingly degraded agricultural landscape, in which their insect prey is increasingly scarce.

In his Salzwedel studies, OLEJNIK (2018) found that Whinchat families leave their breeding territories very soon after the young fledge, namely from the middle of June onwards. In July many territories are devoid of Whinchats. In August and early September, Whinchats are to be seen

again but it is suspected that these are migrants from further north.

Two different patterns emerge here. In Cumbria, the upland, moorland habitat appears sufficiently extensive to maintain these foraging groups for several weeks. At Salzwedel, as in many other lowland, agricultural habitats, mowing of hay meadows forces the Whinchats to move elsewhere. In such cases, it would be instructive to learn just how long the family groups remain together. Presumably the young birds move faster than the moulting adults.

The migration route may be said to start as soon as Whinchats leave their breeding territories. At Geltsdale, the migration appears to begin in earnest from mid-August. At Salzwedel, and other meadow sites, the birds are forced to leave the breeding sites much earlier. This would appear to be a great disadvantage for the more southerly populations.

### Autumn migration in Kronach district

Between 2009 and 2017, mostly whilst preparing an avifaunistic profile of the Kronach district (GUEST 2016) I noted 158 Whinchats during the autumn passage period (Fig. 1). The earliest sighting was on 13th August 2012 and the latest on 29th September 2016. These records were collected in a purely random manner, with no predetermined methodology. Most passage birds perched on hedges or wood-piles next to stubble-fields. Hill meadows were also favoured, as were “Wildäcker” – fields sown temporarily





Fig. 2: Old, structurally diverse hedge (above), and (below) hedge cut to ground and ploughed to base in 2014, Fischbach, March 2017. - Alte, strukturreiche Hecke (oben) und vor wenigen Jahren gepflegte Hecke (unten), Geschützte Heckenlandschaft, Fischbach, März 2017 (Photo: © J. GUEST).

with mostly non-native flower mixtures variously attractive to bees, partridges or other game species. These habitat categories are somewhat artificial, since most “Wildäcker” lie within the few protected hedged landscapes or are bounded on at least one side by a hedge. In some cases set-aside arable fields also lie nearby.

It is however quite clear, that hardly a single migrating Whinchat was encountered in the intensive, agricultural landscapes that characterize most of the non-wooded parts of the district. Whinchats must cross such landscapes but only stop there very briefly if some localised food supply, together with the required perches, presents

itself. In the hedged landscapes with “Wildäcker” however, it was suspected that Whinchats remained for days or even weeks at a time, since birds were seen on successive visits to the same areas at such intervals.

The timing of autumn passage around Kronach fits with the departure dates noted at Geltsdale so may well involve Whinchats from northern Europe, and not the local breeding population. The obvious question that arises is thus, where do Whinchats go when they leave Teuschnitz or Salzwedel, or other sites in June and early July? Since they appear not to forage locally for three or four weeks as do the Geltsdale birds, are they

able to build up adequate fat reserves before they go?

Records from hill-meadows were almost all from the hill called Lerchenhügel, a groundwater protection area near Nordhalben, in 2011. In that year the meadows remained uncut into the autumn (late September or October by memory). The Whinchats used scattered thistles, knapweeds and suchlike as hunting perches. In the following years the meadows were mown in July, which rendered the hill (a former Whinchat breeding site) effectively useless as a foraging area. Do Whinchats in lowland agricultural landscapes need meadows that are left unmown throughout July? Is this why recruitment is so poor?

In nominally “protected” hedged landscapes, as at Fischbach (Fig. 2), agricultural intensification proceeds relentlessly. Many track-sides and field-margins have been sprayed off and ploughed within the past decade. Wide, tall hedges that had long remained untouched were cut to the ground. The fields were then ploughed into the root systems of the hedges. In many places only thin, non-flowering hedges remain without the accompanying tall herbage that formerly lined their bases, without mosses and lichens and, one must assume, without the rich insect communities which Whinchats and other birds were accustomed to eat.

I have long understood that farming has four principal roles to play in a healthy landscape. It provides food for people, creates employment for the rural community, promotes the well-being of livestock, and maintains the natural environment in a favourable condition. The long-term trend in agriculture here in Bavaria, as in most “developed” countries, is to ignore all but the first of these criteria. One result of European agricultural policy has been to degrade the migration routes for many species of insectivorous birds.

One last thought. Many records of migrant Whinchats must have been entered into ornitho.de or comparable national databases. What can we learn from these records in terms of the timing of migration? July records may be particularly informative.

*Author's address:*

Jonathan Guest, Parkstrasse 7, 96317 Kronach, jpguest@kabelmail.de

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