

Choughs

I have recently been looking through the 118 (yes, 118) Wildlife Notes that I have written for PP over the years, starting in 2005, and realised that I have never written about Choughs.

This is odd because I really like Choughs. They are a charismatic and characterful bird and emblematic of our part of the Pembrokeshire coast. I never tire of seeing them; hearing their characteristic “chee-owng” call always cheers me up. In UK terms they are really quite rare, so to be able to reliably see them at the Deer Park is quite a privilege.

Red-billed Choughs (to give them their full name) in Wales are doing reasonably well and if they survive their first year they can live for a long time. Their biggest problem is finding enough food. They need short grazed turf and as long as that can be provided, by grazing at low densities with sheep and ponies, they can find enough to eat.

In 2017, 66 pairs of Choughs attempted to breed in Pembs, and 51 pairs successfully fledged young. There were also non-breeding territories and about 100 young non-breeding birds. This breeding population is quite a high proportion of the UK total of about 300 pairs, 150 of which are on the isle of Man.

Choughs in the UK are rare birds of cliffs and islands, and they live and breed at sea level. There are also Choughs in the mountains of Europe, Morocco and Ethiopia and the mountains and high plains of northern India and the Asian steppes. In world terms they are not rare at all. Interestingly, in many parts of the world they share their habitat with Yellow-billed Choughs which are a slightly different looking bird, not as elegant, and with, as you would expect, a yellow bill.

Incidentally the name Chough is thought to be onomatopoeic in that it was originally pronounced “Chow” (as in plough) (and did you know that there are 12 different ways of pronouncing “ough”?)

We have seen Choughs in many countries on our travels, often in huge flocks in mountainous areas with goats and sheep grazing. In the Russian Altai they share the terrain with Demoiselle Cranes and seemed to favour primitive farmhouses where they nested in the roofs. But somehow these Choughs do not have quite the same charisma as those who carry out their aerobatics so effortlessly over the Pembrokeshire cliffs on their broad and fingered wings.

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