



Strasbourg, 26 August 2002
[Inf25e_2002.doc]

T-PVS/Inf (2002) 25

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

22nd meeting
Strasbourg, 2-5 December 2002

**Action Plan for the
Conservation of
Fuenteventura Chat (*Saxicola dacotiae*)**

*Document
prepared by BirdLife International on behalf of the European Commission*



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Timetable

Date of first draft: 15th July 1999

Workshop: 6th November 1999

Final draft: 15 December 1999

Partial update: July 2002

Reviews

This action plan should be reviewed and updated every four years. An emergency review will be undertaken if sudden major environmental changes, liable to affect the population, occur within the species range.

Geographical Scope

The action plan needs active implementation in Fuerteventura, Canary Islands, Spain.

NOTE

In this document the English name 'Fuerteventura chat' is used. This name is currently used by BirdLife International and is the name used in the Annex II of the EU Birds Directive. No agreement has been yet reached for the English name and a number of other names are used by different sources such as 'Canary Islands Chat' or 'Canary Islands Stonechat' Whatever common English name will be eventually used this action plan refers to *Saxicola dacotiae*.

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Summary

The Fuerteventura Chat *Saxicola dacotiae* is endemic to the island of Fuerteventura (Canary Islands). Its preferred habitats include earthy and stony environments and gullies with vegetation cover consisting of medium- to large-sized shrubs, large stones and shrubby slopes. In 1985, the species' population was estimated to be 650 to 850 pairs. The Fuerteventura Chat is identified as 'Near-threatened' by BirdLife International (Collar *et al.*, 1994, BirdLife International 2000). It is classified as a 'SPEC 2' species and 'Vulnerable' in Europe, because of its small population size and its restriction to a single island (Tucker & Heath, 1994). It is considered 'Vulnerable' under Spanish legislation, and included in Annex I of the EU Birds Directive (i.e. species requiring special habitat protection measures).

The population appears stable, although after the first census carried out by the ICBP in 1985 no more studies have been developed.

Threats and limiting factors

Destruction or alteration of the habitat - High

Disturbance by people - Unknown/potentially Medium

Grazing - Unknown/potentially Medium

Predation Unknown/potentially Medium

Conservation priorities

- To designate new Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for the Canary Islands Stonechat - High
- To designate new Protected Sites for the Canary Islands Stonechat - High
- To designate as Areas of Ecological Sensitivity (ASE) all the optimal areas for the Canary Islands Stonechat - High
- To control off-road driving and the opening of new tracks - High
- Significant reduction or removal of 'coastal goats' - High
- Research on the effects of livestock grazing on the habitat of the Fuerteventura Chat – High
- Determination of the distribution of the Fuerteventura Chat in Fuerteventura - High
- Surveys at Lobos Islet and Lanzarote Island - Medium
- Determination of the species' breeding success and identification of the main threats to breeding - Medium
- To carry out a regular monitoring programme for the population - Medium

Introduction

The Fuerteventura Chat is endemic to Fuerteventura Island in the Canaries' archipelago, Spain. The population has been estimated at 650 to 850 pairs (Bibby & Hill, 1987).

The Fuerteventura Chat is listed as globally near-threatened due to its small population (BirdLife International 2000). At European level it is classified as 'Vulnerable' Category 2 Species of Particular European Conservation Concern (SPEC 2) due to its small population size restricted to Europe (Tucker & Heath, 1994). Furthermore, the species is included in Annex I of the Birds Directive (79/409/CEE) and in Annex II of the Bern Convention. The classification under the Spanish National Catalogue of Threatened Species has been recently modified, changing from the former 'Special Interest' to 'Vulnerable' status. The species' status under the Canaries' Red List of Terrestrial Vertebrates is 'Rare' (Martín *et al.*, 1990).

PART 1 - Background Information

Distribution and population

The Fuerteventura Chat is an endemic species to the Canaries' archipelago, where the species' distribution range is restricted to Fuerteventura Island. It also have occurred on Alegranza and Montaña Clara until the beginning of the 20th Century and there are have been recent records from the neighbouring island of Lanzarote (Martín and Lorenzo, 2001).

Only one census has been carried out so far (Bibby & Hill, 1987), with a fragmented population of 650 to 850 pairs being estimated.

Natural history

Habitat Requirements

The distribution of this species is largely determined by the presence of steep, rocky slopes and ravines covered by medium- to large-size shrubs, (e. g.: aulaga *Launaea arborescens*, saltwort *Salsola vermiculata* and box-thorn *Lycium intricatum*) and boulders (Illera, 2001). These preferences are consistent with the higher food availability existing in these areas (Illera, 2001). The species can also occurs, in a few pairs, on lava flow habitats with soil patches, cultivated areas and gardens (Martín & Lorenzo, 2001)

Feeding

The Fuerteventura Chat is a largely insectivorous bird that hunts from a post site (bushes or stones) catching the prey both on flight and on the soil. It also takes vegetal matter such as fruits of *Lycium intricatum* (Martín and Lorenzo, 2001). Nevertheless, data describing the diet of this species are scarce and imprecise (Martín and Lorenzo, 2001). There is a lack of basic information on the type and size of preys that it feeds on regularly, as well as preferred taxons, annual variation in prey consumed (if any), etc.

Breeding biology

Breeding is mainly from January to April, although there are records of nests with eggs and chicks in the middle of December (Martín and Lorenzo, 2001). Average clutch size is 3-4 eggs, with the possibility of two clutches (Collins, 1984). Nests are often located under rocks and bushes, or also inside holes or fissures in walls (Collins, 1984).

Movements

There are few records of any movements. Despite the presence of the species in the non-breeding season in gardens of tourist areas in Fuerteventura, it seems to be a quite sedentary bird (Martín y Lorenzo, 2001). However, inter-insular movements have been recorded recently as the species has been observed on the nearby island of Lanzarote (Martín and Lorenzo, 2001).

Threats and limiting factors

Destruction or alteration of the habitat

The main threat is the increasing urban expansion that is taking place in Fuerteventura consisting of new urbanisation, extending urban areas and villages, installation of new access and roads, thematic parks, etc., most of which are being programmed in the new Development Plan for the Island (Plan Insular de Ordenación de Fuerteventura, PIOF). In addition to the direct destruction of suitable habitat, it is necessary to take into account that fragmentation could cause negative effects on population size at the affected area, due to the preference of the Fuerteventura Chat for mountain slopes with high bush coverage (Illera, 2001).

Importance: High

Human Disturbance

A characteristic present in all territories where the species forages and breeds is low human presence (Bibby & Hill, 1987; personal observation).

An excessive human presence in those zones with optimal conditions for the species, due to the opening of new tracks to off-road vehicles or new track ways, could be very prejudicial to the species, especially if the disturbances take place during the breeding season.

Importance: Unknown/Potentially Medium

Overgrazing by domestic and feral goats

Overgrazing in the Canaries causes in a number of cases notable damage to native and endemic flora. The increase in the number of goats and sheep is mostly due to perverse subsidies from the EU.

Grazing causes direct damage to flora and fauna and also enhances the process of desertification resulting from the loss of vegetation cover. This leads to increased erosion and, consequently, soil loss. In the case of Fuerteventura, this process is further intensified owing to the rough relief and arid weather conditions in the Island, with sudden rain storms that contribute to the process of degradation. Off-road driving by shepherds also increases disturbances to the Chat.

Importance: Unknown/Potentially medium

Predation

Predation by introduced mammals such as rats, squirrels, cats and hedgehogs is unknown.

Importance: Unknown/Potentially medium

Conservation status and recent conservation measures

1985- ICBP carried out the only census of the Fuerteventura Chat in Fuerteventura (Bibby & Hill, 1987).

1988- Jandia is designated a SPA for the Fuerteventura Chat.

1990- The species is catalogued as a species of 'Special Interest' in the National Catalogue of Threatened Species.

1994- Approval of the Regional Countryside Act Law in the Canaries. This has favoured the protection of several optimal zones for the species.

1994 - The species is classified as 'Near-threatened' and Species of European Conservation Concern (SPEC, Category 2) by BirdLife International (Collar *et al.*, 1994)

1998- The category of the species in the National Catalogue of Threatened Species is reviewed from 'Special Interest' to 'Vulnerable'. This new category requires the formulation and approval of a Conservation Plan and, if necessary, the protection of the habitat of the species, according to the national Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation Law (4/89).

1998 - SEO/BirdLife publish an updated edition of the Spanish Important Bird Area (IBA) inventory, where 9 IBAs have been identified as especially important for the Fuerteventura Chat (Viada, 1998).

1999 - The Island Authority of Fuerteventura (Cabildo) partially funds a research project on the habitat selection pattern of the species (Illera, 2001).

1999 - The Island Authority of Fuerteventura (Cabildo) carries out the first awareness campaign on the species, including the production of leaflets and posters.

Aims and objectives

Aims

The aim of this action plan is to maintain the Chat population in Fuerteventura island, favouring the enlargement of the distribution range through the elimination or reduction of the limiting factors affecting the species.

Objectives

1. Policy and legislation

1.1 To designate new SPAs for the Fuerteventura Chat

Currently, there is only one SPA (Jandía) specifically designated for the species. It is necessary to increase the number and area of SPAs to cover all nine IBAs identified for the species (Viada 1998). The Chat is also present in other two protected SPAs (Betancuria and Pozo Negro).

Priority: High

Time-scale: Short

1.2 To designate new Protected Sites for the Fuerteventura Chat

Although the designation of SPAs would be a satisfactory step towards the adequate protection of any bird species, the real protection of the Canary territory is stronger in statutory protected sites under the regional nature conservation law.

It is necessary to designate new protected sites with good populations of the Fuerteventura Chat to ensure, in a more effective way, the legal protection of the species and its habitat. This would also benefit other steppe birds of Fuerteventura. As far as possible these designations should cover all the nine IBAs (Viada 1998).

Priority: High

Time-scale: Short

1.3 To designate as Areas of Ecological Sensitivity (ASE) all the optimal areas for the Fuerteventura Chat

This administrative protection regulation (according to the regional Environmental Impact Assessment law) provides for the assessment of the environmental impact of any important plan or project to be located in an ASE. This is especially important for the Fuerteventura Chat because of the different infrastructures planned to be developed in the island (both general interventions included in the PEOF and other more specific ones such as thematic parks in optimal sites for the species, etc.), which are the main threats to the Fuerteventura chat.

Priority: High

Time-scale: Short

2. Species and habitat protection

2.1 To control off-road driving and the opening of new tracks

Fuerteventura is mainly a tourist island. Visitors are offered the possibility to participate in safaris (both organised and not), in four wheel drive vehicles, without being informed of the high natural value of the island. This means that any part of the island is reachable by car, highly affecting the conservation of those natural values, including the Fuerteventura Chat, due to very frequent off-road driving, in spite the fact that this activity is not permitted. Periodical advertising campaign in rent a cars agencies, tour operators, etc., on the damage of off-road driving and improved controll by the environment staff of motorised traffic and of the opening of new trails is a priority in those areas that are most suitable for the species.

Priority: High

Time-scale: Short

2.2 Significant reduction or removal of 'coastal goats'

Controlling and reducing the number of goats is a high priority. These goats are known on the island as coastal goats or "*cabras de costa*" and graze extensively with little attention from the farmers). Stock farmers should be informed by the competent public institutions about the damage of these goats on the environment. After this, stock farmers and public institutions should come to an agreement for significant reduction or removal of coastal goats.

Priority: High

Time-scale: Short

3. Monitoring and research

3.1. Research on the effects of livestock grazing in the habitat of the Fuerteventura Chat

Research on the effects of grazing is essential to provide for the integration of traditional economic activity and the environmental requirements in Fuerteventura. Priority action should be taken to eradicate or reduce the number of 'coastal goats') grazing in particular areas and to study the resulting recovery of the vegetation cover and of the invertebrates communities in order to understand the impact of habitat regeneration on the chats in the areas formerly affected by grazing.

Priority: High

Time-scale: Short

3.2 Determination of the distribution of the Fuerteventura Chat

The aim would be to obtain, for the first time, information on the presence of the species across its entire range and to update the population estimate. The distribution of the species in Fuerteventura should be determined using 1x1 km squares (or otherwise 2,5 x 2,5 or 5 x 5 km). This would provide extremely useful information for land use planning and management. In addition, this information would provide the basis for the identification of future SPAs, Nature Reserves and ASE.

Priority: High

Time-scale: Short

3.2.1 Surveys at Lobos Islet and Lanzarote Island

Field surveys at the Lobos Islet and the southern part of Lanzarote Island are recommended in order to establish whether stable populations of the chat already exist here and to evaluate the habitats for the species. This would be undertaken with the view of establishing a 'reserve' in case of a natural 'catastrophe' in the main Fuerteventura population).

Priority: Medium

Time-scale: Medium

3.3 Determination of the species' breeding success and identification of the main threats to breeding

Studies on the breeding biology of the species are needed so as to determine the main factors upon which the breeding success depends. In addition, the likely threats to the Fuerteventura Chat should be identified (e.g. nest predation by introduced mammals such as rats, squirrels, cats and hedgehogs). The breeding biology is almost unknown.

Priority: Medium

Time-scale: Medium

3.4. To carry out a regular monitoring programme on the population

To carry out a complete census in the next two years and to develop a monitoring programme in previously selected places every 3-4 years. Both measures should be established so as to monitor the long term trends of the population of the Fuerteventura Chat .

Priority: Medium

Time-scale: Long

4. Public awareness

4.1 To inform and increase awareness about the need to protect the Fuerteventura Chat and its habitat

Efforts to raise awareness among the local population about the species are very important to promote respect and appreciation for this unique bird of the Canaries.

Priority: High
 Time-scale: Medium

4.2 To inform and raise awareness of the need to protect the Island's natural value among the tourist population visiting Fuerteventura

Informing and raising awareness of the natural richness of the Island among future visitors (Spain's nationals and, mainly, foreign tourists) can contribute to promote a high regard towards these natural assets. Consequently, the production of leaflets to be distributed through car rental business, safari organisers, tour operators, etc. is highly recommended. These materials should inform about the potential damage that can derive from off-trail driving.

In addition, information posts and panels in Nature Reserves, restricted access zones, etc., should be placed in visible locations. Character size should also be sufficient to be read at an adequate distance, and the message should read in several languages (at least Spanish, English and German). The Fuerteventura Chat has a wide distribution in Fuerteventura; the conservation of the main environmental values of the Island requires the protection of important areas for the species.

Priority: High
 Time-scale: Medium

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