

Species Action Plan
for the
Cream-Coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor*
in Europe

Final Draft, December 1999

**Prepared by BirdLife International on behalf of the
European Commission**

Species Action Plan for the Cream-Coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* in Europe

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Timetable

First draft: 15th July 1999

Workshop: 6-7 November 1999

Final draft: 15 December 1999

Review

This Action Plan should be reviewed and updated every five years. An emergency review will be undertaken if sudden major environmental changes, affecting the population, occur within the species range.

Geographical scope

This Action Plan needs to be implemented in those islands where the species has been recorded: Lanzarote, Fuerteventura, Gran Canaria and Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain.

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Summary

The Cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor cursor*) is present in the islands of Lanzarote, Fuerteventura and Gran Canaria, Canary Islands, Spain. It is considered extinct in Gran Canaria Island. There are also records from Tenerife but reproduction has never been confirmed in this island.

The population is estimated in 200-250 pairs.

Due to the large decline of the Cream-Coloured Courser, it is considered as SPEC 3 and vulnerable. It is also listed in the National Catalogue of Threatened Species in the category Sensitive to Habitat Alteration, in Annex I of the Birds Directive 79/409/CEE and Annex II of the Bern Convention.

Threats and limiting factors

Habitat destruction, alteration and fragmentation - high, locally critical

Human disturbance - high

Military manoeuvres - low

Overgrazing - unknown, potentially low

Collisions with powerlines - unknown, potentially low

Interactions with introduced mammals - unknown

Illegal hunting - unknown, potentially low

Conservation priorities

Designation of Special Protected Areas (SPAs) - essential

Designation of protected areas - essential

Approval of the Management Plans of the Protected Areas already declared for the species - essential

To define critical areas for the Cream-coloured Courser in the Eastern Islands - high

Restrict and control vehicle movement in critical areas - high

Grazing control in critical areas - high

To prevent alteration in critical habitats - high

Research on the species - high

Regular monitoring and census of the population - high

Campaign to raise awareness of the ban on off-road driving - high

Introduction

The Cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor cursor*) is present in the islands of Lanzarote, Fuerteventura and Gran Canaria, Canary Islands, Spain. It is considered extinct as a breeding species in Gran Canaria Island. There are also records from Tenerife but reproduction has never been confirmed on this island.

The species is considered Rare in Lanzarote, Out of Danger in Fuerteventura, and Insufficiently known in Gran Canaria Island. according to the Red Data Book of Terrestrial Vertebrates of the Canary Island (Martín *et al.* 1990). In the Red Data Book of Spanish Vertebrates it is considered Vulnerable (Blanco & González 1992). The legal status of the Cream-coloured Courser has changed recently with the upgrade of the threat category in the National Catalogue of Threatened Species from Special Interest to Sensitive to Habitat Alteration.

BirdLife International (Tucker & Heath 1994) considers the Cream-Coloured Courser SPEC 3 and Vulnerable. It is listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive 79/409/CEE and Annex II of the Bern Convention.

Background Information

Distribution and population

The world species' distribution ranges from Canary Islands to Pakistan, from Kenya to Turkmenistan. The Cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor cursor*) is present in the islands of Lanzarote, Fuerteventura and Gran Canaria, Canary Islands, Spain. It is considered extinct as breeding species in Gran Canaria. There are also records from Tenerife and La Graciosa, but reproduction has never been confirmed. It has been recently recorded in Alegranza islet (Quilis & Nogales 1998).

The population is estimated in 200-250 pairs (Tucker & Heath 1994). This figure is very likely an underestimate of the population, because a specific census of the species has never been carried out. Population estimates come from the Houbara Bustard census carried out during the last ten years, which do not often cover the best areas for the species.

The core of the population is located in Fuerteventura Island, where the species is locally abundant on the Tindaya plains, Llanos of La Laguna and in the El Time slopes. In sandy areas of Fuerteventura, Suárez (1984) estimates a density of 0.12 birds/10 ha.

In Lanzarote the population is very small and it is concentrated in Llanos of La Mareta-Hoya de La Yegua and in Los Ancones-La Hondura.

In Gran Canaria the Cream-coloured Courser was mentioned in the past (Bannerman 1963).

Nowadays it is considered extinct as a breeding species, and in recent observations in the South of the island (Rodríguez *ET al.* 1987) is regarded to vagrant individuals.

In Tenerife there are regular observations in the south of the island during winter and the beginning of the spring (Lorenzo & González 1993). There is suitable habitat (i.e. in the area between Mountain of the Erales-Las Galletas- and Mountain Pelada -El Médano-), but there are no breeding records (Martín 1987).

Bannerman (1963) registered a population decrease in the Eastern Islands. During the 1980's the population declined in some areas of Fuerteventura (K. W. Emmerson *pers. com.*). On this data it is believed that the population decreased significantly between 1970 and 1990 (Tucker & Heath 1994).

Life history

Breeding

Information on the Canary Island population is limited. Most clutches are laid between March and early April, with some early eggs laid in February. Brood size is two (exceptionally three) eggs and chicks are nidifugous. Replacement deposition can extend the laying period. It is known to happen in other parts of the distribution area as an adaptation to rain in the very arid habitats it occupies.

Feeding

There are no studies on diet in the Canary Islands. According to Cramp & Simmons (1983).

Invertebrates and small vertebrates are the main preys of the species in most areas of the world.

Habitat requirements

Desert and subdesertic open areas, with earthy-stony plains, as well as ploughed sand extensions (jables) and lava fields (malpaís) and occasionally degraded environments. The species generally selects habitats with low and very disperse vegetation. Typical plant species of this habitat are *Frankenia* spp., *Salsola vermiculata*, *Launaea arborescens* and *Lycium intricatum*, together with *Atriplex glauca*, *Aizoon canariense* and annual herbs.

Threats and limiting factors

Habitat destruction, alteration and fragmentation

Uncontrolled tourist development and a population increase in the Canary Island during the last decade favoured an important destruction and fragmentation of steppe habitats. Infrastructure construction (urbanisation, windfarms, roads, etc.) and associated activities (off road tracks, human presence, noises, traffic increase, etc.) as well as off road increase of four-wheel vehicles has a great impact on the deterioration of habitat and the species.

Importance: high, locally critical

Human disturbance

There is a clear increase in off road and tracks from driving across Cream-coloured Courser areas during the last years. There is a clear relation to the newly established Rent a Car office offering "safaris" all around the island, including the most remote sites. Frequent vehicle movements is a direct disturbance for the Courser and a habitat alteration because of the new roads. This threat is especially important in Corralejo, Jandía and Lajares in Fuerteventura.

Importance: high

Military manoeuvres

Military manoeuvres often take place in Lajares plains. This activity has a clearly negative impact on the Courser because of direct habitat alteration and disturbance, particularly during the breeding time.

Importance: low

Overgrazing

Impact of goat grazing in Fuerteventura and Lanzarote on the vegetation cover has greatly contributed to the soil loss and desertification of the islands. Goats are locally increasing in Fuerteventura after a decade of decline, mainly because of the subsidies granted by the island authority (Cabildo) and other institutions. The increased traffic caused by the shepherds' vehicles result in disturbance to the species.

Importance: unknown, probably low

Collision with powerlines

Collision with powerlines is not well known for steppe birds. Preliminary studies conducted in the eastern island do not show a direct impact on the Cream-coloured Courser. Nevertheless, specific studies could reveal effects on the species. There is data on collision of other steppe species such as Houbara Bustard, Stone Curlew and Black-bellied Sandgrouse (Lorenzo 1993, Lorenzo *et al.* 1998).

Importance: unknown, probably low

Interaction with introduced mammals

Introduced mammals (such as cats and rats) in both Lanzarote and Fuerteventura may be a threat to the population of the Cream-coloured Courser.

Importance: unknown

Illegal hunting

In the past, illegal hunting could have played an important role in the survival of the species, as happened with other steppe species such as the Houbara Bustard. Nowadays, the impact of illegal hunting on the species is unknown.

Importance: unknown, probably low

Conservation status and recent conservation measures

1984: ICBP (now BirdLife International) carried out a general bird survey in Fuerteventura. Some data on Cream-coloured Courser was gathered.

1985: In view of the alarming results of the Houbara Bustard census, several conservation measures for the conservation of the species and its habitats were taken. Because the Courser is sharing the same habitat of the Houbara Bustard, it also benefits from some of these measures. Hunting was banned in three reserve areas in Fuerteventura (Istmo of Jandía, Lajares and the Tesjuate lagoon) and two more areas in Lanzarote (Rubicón and Teguisse).

1986: Spain became a member of the European Community and some Special Protected Areas (SPAs) were declared according to Birds Directive 79/409/CEE. To date only 2 SPAs have been declared for the Houbara Bustard Jandía (n° 039) and Dunas de Corralejo e Isla de Lobos (n°042).

1987: The Canary Island Countryside Act was passed, and two important Courser areas were declared a Natural Park (Corralejo and Jandía), but up to date the designation has no practical consequences.

Preliminary work by ICBP/SEO for the preparation of the Important Bird Area Inventory is conducted. This inventory has been recently reviewed (Viada, 1998) including some priority areas for the species Llanos de la Corona-Las Honduras (n° 331), Jable de Famara (n° 332) and Llanos de La Mareta-Hoya de la Yegua (n°335) in Lanzarote and Istmo de Jandía (n° 345), Jable de Lajares (n° 349), Barranco de Los Molinos-LLanos de La Laguna (n° 347), Península de Jandía. (n° 344), Macizo de Pozo Negro Vigán (n° 341) and Jable de Corralejo (n° 337) in Fuerteventura.

1994: The new Canary Island Countryside Act was passed, including areas formerly designated but categories are changed.

Aim and objectives

Aims

To identify and avoid limiting factors affecting survival of the Cream-coloured Courser. In the medium to long term to promote that the species has a sufficient population level to ensure its survival in all its natural distribution area of the Canary Islands.

Objectives

1. Policy and legislation

1.1. Designation of new Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

The best steppe areas for the Cream-coloured Courser have not been designated as SPAs. It is necessary to complete the network of SPAs for the protection of the species and ensure effective protection in the existing ones to avoid threats such as habitat alteration

Priority: Essential
Time-scale: Immediate

1.2. To declare new protected areas

To complete the insufficient network of protected areas for the conservation of the species

Priority: Essential
Time-scale: Immediate

1.3. To pass management plans of already declared protected areas for the species.

The approval of use and management plans, master plans (plan directories) conservation regulations and special plans in protected areas is a priority. The implementation of these regulations will ensure the conservation of these areas containing Cream-coloured Courser.

Priority: Essential
Time-scale: Short

2. Species and habitat protection

2.1. To prevent non-natural mortality

2.1.1. Control of non-natural predators

Although problems related to feral dogs or cats have not been detected, it is advisable to initiate eradication measures in areas where the Cream-coloured Courser is regularly present.

Priority: Medium

Time-scale: Medium

2.1.2. Collision with powerlines

There is no preliminary information on collision with powerlines in the species. A study on the impact of powerlines in the best areas for the Cream-coloured Courser should be carried out, and corrective measure implemented. As a precautionary approach, all new lines in the species areas should be laid below ground, or their routing altered with the lines appropriately marked.

Priority: Low
Time-scale: Medium

2.2. *To ensure effective protection and prevent alteration of Cream-coloured Courser critical areas*

2.2.1. To define critical areas for the Cream-coloured Courser in the Eastern Islands

Critical areas for the species are breeding and feeding areas (see § Monitoring and Research).

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

2.2.2. Restrict and control vehicle movement in critical areas

Vehicle movements along tracks in protected areas and SPAs where Cream-coloured Coursers are detected, should be restricted through appropriate management plans and regulations. In the mean time, the Decree 124/1995 on the general use regime of track in Canary's Protected Areas should apply, including clearly marking of off road banning. These measures must be accompanied by an increase in surveillance and an awareness campaign (see § Public awareness and training).

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

2.2.3. Grazing control in critical areas

Habitat deterioration due to overgrazing in critical areas can be diminished by fencing. It is also necessary to monitor trends in stocking densities in Eastern Islands and initiate research to define the advisable stocking density for Courser areas. As a precaution, it is advisable that the progressive elimination of goats within protected areas through regulation measures included in the management plans and subsidies.

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

2.2.4. To prevent alteration in critical habitats

Proposals for building or commercial projects (sand extraction, new roads, windfarms, etc.) in critical Cream-coloured Courser areas will need to be accompanied by a compulsory Environmental Impact Assessment on the species and its habitat.

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

2.2.5. Avoid holding military manoeuvres in critical areas

It is necessary to establish direct contact with military authorities and to provide them with information on areas recommended that manoeuvres should not be carried out, and to suggest alternatives in areas less important for wildlife.

Priority: Low
Time-scale: Ongoing

3. Monitoring and research

3.1. To promote the development of applied research to ensure effective management of the species and its habitat in the Eastern Islands

3.1.1. To carry out research on the species

It is necessary to study the ecology and biology of the species (breeding success, habitat requirements, etc.) in order to support management conservation measures.

Priority: Medium
Time-scale: Short

3.1.2. Carry out inventory and mapping of the distribution area

The objective of this basic study is to define the nesting areas and the distribution of the different groups. This information is indispensable for evaluating the possible ecological impact of new roads, powerlines, urbanisation, etc.

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

3.2 Regular census and monitoring of the population

The censuses provide indispensable information on population trends. The total census should be carried out before two years.

Priority: High
Time-scale: Short

4. Public awareness and training

4.1. To inform and increase awareness about the need to protect the Cream-coloured Courser and its habitat

4.1.1. Campaign to raise awareness about a ban on off-road driving

The campaign would involve a leaflet with a code of conduct for vehicle users in steppe areas. Emphasising both the need to use the tracks correctly and the ban on driving off the tracks and disturbing the birds. Other publicity measures would also be used.

Priority: High
Time-scale: Immediate

4.1.2. Undertake an educational campaign directed at young people and groups important for steppe areas and Cream-coloured Courser

This campaign would include a series of talks for arable, livestock farmers, hunters, tour companies and the civil guard. The use of the media to publicise steppe birds and especially Cream-coloured Courser and emphasise the need to conserve it.

Priority: Medium
Time-scale: Medium

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