

Twenty-five years on and Choughs continue to go from strength to strength in Cornwall

A record 161 young Choughs have fledged from nests around the Kernow coastline this summer – 32 more than the previous best of 129, set last year.

They were bred by 56 successful pairs, meaning that the average productivity of a Cornish Chough nest is almost three fledglings, suggesting the population is in robust health.

That wasn't always the case. Choughs died out in Cornwall in the 1970s, their now-familiar 'chee-ow' call falling silent until 2001 when three birds, thought to be from Ireland, landed at Lizard Point. Two became the pioneering breeding pair from which today's success has stemmed.

And the Lizard continues to be a prime breeding ground for Cornish Chough, with 26 chicks, 11 more than last year, emerging from eight nests on the peninsula.

Peter Hall, a National Trust Chough monitoring volunteer on the Lizard, said: "This is the 11th consecutive season that I have monitored Chough nest sites here on the Lizard. Never did I foresee a time when I would be monitoring five nest sites in my patch, and certainly not having 16 Choughlets fledge from those sites.

"The past two winters we have been blessed with chatterings in excess of 20 Chough around the Lizard. A far cry from the solitary single pair we had when I started as part of the then nest protection team in 2016.

"Long may the successful return of this iconic Cornish bird delight myself and others for many years to come."

Habitat loss was a key driver in the extinction of Choughs in Cornwall. This was turned around by conservationists, farmers and land owners working together to restore grazing on clifftops and coastal fields, to produce the short-cropped turf that allows Choughs easier access to the insects and their larvae that make up their diet.

Lydia Allt, Community, Participation and Volunteering Coordinator, Lizard and Mid-Cornwall National Trust, said: "This year has been an exceptional one for Choughs on the Lizard and elsewhere in Cornwall.

“When Choughs returned to the Lizard 25 years ago there were just three birds. Today, thanks to a quarter of a century of conservation work, partnership working and the support of local farmers and land managers, we are seeing record numbers of Chough across the area.

“The Chough is an iconic species and a powerful symbol of Cornwall’s natural heritage. Their remarkable recovery shows what can be achieved when habitats are restored and protected, giving wildlife the space it needs to thrive.

“To see so many Choughs successfully breeding and feeding across the Lizard is incredibly encouraging and highlights the importance of continuing to care for this special landscape for future generations.”

It is now four years running that more than 100 Choughlets have been born in Cornwall. Just ten years ago, only 23 fledglings were recorded.

Cornish Chough breeding figures 23-26:

- 2023 – 39 successful pairs, raising 112 young
- 2024 – 42 successful pairs, raising 114 young
- 2025 – 48 successful pairs, raising 129 young
- 2026 – 56 successful pairs, raising 161 young

Not only are the number of fledglings greatly increasing year on year, but their spread from the Lizard is remarkable too. Penwith forms part of a thriving stronghold for Choughs in West Cornwall, where the birds benefit from a rich variety of interconnected habitats stretching across the wider landscape. The return of their distinctive calls is a testament to the dedication of local volunteers, farmers and conservation teams who have worked together over many years to help this iconic species recover.

Choughs are also breeding on the Roseland and in increasing numbers in mid and north Cornwall, which is encouraging as the hope is to see chough eventually recolonise other parts of the country.

Hilary Mitchell and Steve Ashby from Cornwall Birds (CBWPS), said: “It is hard to believe that the Cornish Chough population is now up to over around 400 birds, and with over 80 pairs on territory in 2026. Back in 1943 the situation was very different, and papers recently found by Steve Ashby at Trefice (owned by the National Trust) include notes by the famous Cornish birder Lt. Col. B H Ryves stating that ‘*Years ago the Tintagel area was its greatest stronghold but this is no longer so. There*

is, however, some evidence that a pair may have bred lately near Bude. In the main it can be asserted that its range is now limited to the coast between the Gannel and a few miles northward of Port Isaac.

'I would not venture to say that there are more than three or four breeding pairs in Cornwall, and even these do not all breed every year. Besides them there are probably a dozen or so non-breeding birds.'

"We know that the Cornish Choughs clung on near Newquay until the last bird disappeared in 1973. The arrival of three Choughs from Ireland in 2001 on Lizard began the incredibly successful recolonisation that we see today. 2026 has been a fantastic year for Choughs on Lizard in particular, and testament to all the hard work done by volunteers, farmers and landowners across Cornwall that chatterings of Cornish Choughs are now found on much of the Cornish coast."

Volunteers have been vital to the story of the Choughs' return to Cornwall, from round-the-clock protection of nests in the early years to the monitoring of more than 70 breeding attempts in 2026.

Andrew Jones, Chough Conservation Officer for the RSPB in Cornwall, said: "There has been a huge volunteer effort over the past 25 years to protect and monitor Cornwall's iconic Choughs and we're grateful to everyone who has played their part in this conservation success story.

"This year, the RSPB and National Trust have had a team of around 50 dedicated volunteer Chough watchers, covering the coastline from the Roseland all the way round to Bude, monitoring the breeding efforts and reporting back so we could collate these fantastic, record-breaking numbers."

The next chapter of the Cornish Chough story is in everyone's hands – if you see Choughs in Cornwall please email your sightings to Cornwall Birds: choughs@cbwps.org.uk. Cornwall Birds are keen to receive all records. Some people have been lucky enough to see Choughs in their gardens so please let them know if you see this happening and what they are eating, so the team can find out how common this behaviour is.

Cornish Chough Conservation Network

