

Scottish Crossbill

Cam-ghob Albannach



Scottish Crossbill is thought to be Britain's only endemic bird species. It is also a species of European Conservation Concern given its small population of 300-1300 pairs, its restricted breeding range and specialised habitat requirements. The entire population of this species is resident in Scotland.

For a finch, these are large birds and they are brightly coloured and have a distinctive, musical call. Although many people would overlook them, anyone interested in birds would pick crossbills out as something noticeable and recognise the distinctive character of the overlapping bills which is what has given crossbills generally their Gaelic name of Cam-ghob (f).

Crossbills species are very similar in appearance and occur throughout the northern hemisphere, associated with the conifers on which they specialise. In the UK, we are familiar with the Common Crossbill, but the Scottish form was described as a subspecies in the early 20th Century and then

designated as a distinct species in 1980. Debate continues to this day on the exact relationship between the Common and Scottish Crossbills and their relationship with Parrot Crossbill – which was a rare vagrant in the UK and was first recorded breeding in Scotland in 1991. (Because of this we have created Gaelic names for both the Parrot and Scottish crossbills for this project).

Extensive research over decades on measurements, calls, breeding behaviour and DNA have concluded that the Scottish form is indeed a distinct species. It seems to be uniquely adapted to the mosaic of conifers that occur in Scotland and is associated with ancient Scots Pine forest. There has been speculation that human forestry practice may have led to the evolutionary adaptation of this species into such a distinct form. However, changes in forestry management in the future could have an impact. Recent regeneration and replanting of Caledonian Pine Forest provides a great opportunity, but the longer-term resilience of ancient Scots Pine habitat may be at risk as a consequence of global warming.