



GALWAY BRANCH BIRDWATCH IRELAND

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BIRDS & BIRDWATCHING DURING COVID-19

During this pandemic birdwatching has been changed and curtailed in strange ways, with no travelling to distant and favoured bird locations. Indeed, those over 70 were told or, more correctly, advised to hardly leave their houses, never mind visit favoured places to watch birds. I would, therefore, ask for contributions and reflections on how people were affected in relation to their birdwatching during this period. I would then, hopefully with your help, like to write this up in the next *Newsletter*. Thanks.

NS

TURNSTONE

As the tide goes out on an autumn day Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls swoop down to grab anything edible revealed by the receding waters. But a flock of smaller birds is there too, their dappled brown plumage blending in with the glistening rocks as they quietly go about their business. These are Turnstones.

Turnstones are stocky little waders which, as you'd expect from their name, flip over stones and pebbles and probe behind seaweed curtains in search of small shellfish and crustaceans, which they dispatch and dismember with their short, stout bills.

These unprepossessing waders are one of the great global voyagers. They travel from their breeding grounds in the high Arctic to their winter quarters on coastlines all around the world, from Europe to South Africa, the USA and South America and from Thailand to Australia. Some of them pass through Britain and Ireland on their way south, while others spend the whole winter here.

The Turnstone's rather drab winter plumage is nothing to write home about; but in spring and summer it is as intricately patterned as a tortoiseshell cat; a fusion of vivid chestnuts, blacks and whites that transforms it into a truly beautiful bird.

Perhaps because they nest in such remote places, they seem unafraid of people, often living cheek by jowl with holidaymakers in coastal resorts. They have been spied foraging for food in the rainwater gutters of a warehouse, and even using a passenger service to cross a river.

A remarkable but often under-appreciated bird.

Tweet of the Day. Brett Westwood & Stephen Moss (Permission acknowledged.)

BAHRAIN (First published in 2007)

Over the past eight or nine years, family connection has brought us almost annually to Dubai and the Galway *Newsletter* has had several pieces dealing with that, now exotic, location - synonymous with high (really high!)-rise hotels, world sporting events and (surprisingly) first class opportunities to watch

wintering birds. However, just recently, events have brought about a change of location to Bahrain which we then visited in March. The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small island further up the Arabian Gulf from Dubai and several hundred kms to the north-west of the UAE. In 1986, a long causeway connection with Saudi Arabia was completed. The island is small – perhaps about the size of County Carlow, if you can imagine that county as an island! Like most Middle Eastern countries, it is hot hot – even in winter. However, until recent years, it did have a lot of agriculture and at one time, not that long ago, was self-sufficient in food. But, alas, over- extraction of aquifers and increased salinity have greatly reduced fertility and agricultural output.

Bahrain is much less wealthy than Dubai, having exhausted all of its oil reserves. In appearance, it is typical Middle East – high-rise and 'glittery' in Manama, the largest and only city, with small dusty and untidy villages elsewhere. There are impressive remains and evidence of the very ancient 'Dilmun' civilization dating back to circa 2000BC. The Bahraini national museum is of dramatic design and with excellent content and presentation.

Signs of environmental awareness or concern are sadly lacking. Economically, it is a lively trading and banking centre and has a healthy per capita GDP, although this could be more evenly distributed. However, for birdwatchers the real test of any travel destination is its bird potential. In this Bahrain was not lacking and I achieved a, for me, respectable list of sixty-five species. This list would not have been at all possible to any extent without the help and guidance of local birdwatchers Brendan Kavanagh and Howard King. I knew Brendan from years back before he moved to Bahrain where he is currently [2007] on secondment from the Royal College of Surgeons Dublin, who are setting up a campus there. Howard King is a genial Welshman and a long time Bahrain resident, with an unrivalled knowledge of Bahrain's birds. As with all birdwatching away from home, local knowledge is indispensable and Brendan and Howard provided this with a generosity of time, friendship and enthusiasm. In Middle Eastern countries birdwatching can involve security and permission issues. Without local knowledge and help at best your birdwatching is limited and at worst can involve unwelcome interviews with local police or other security forces!

Species seen included European Bee-eater, Red-throated Pipit, Purple Heron, Water Pipit, Black-eared and Desert Wheatears, Yellow Wagtail (Feldeg), Squacco Heron, Gull-billed Tern etc., with the final total of sixty-five. Bahrain seems particularly good for wheatears and shrikes. However, the bird of the trip has to be the Grey Hypocolius (*Hypocolius ampelinus*). This is a single genus species with the Waxwing being its nearest 'relation'. It is considered to be among the most difficult birds to see or record. The reason for this is geographical. It breeds almost wholly in Iraq and Iran and winters mainly in Saudi Arabia. For obvious reasons, these areas are not particularly conducive to everyday birdwatching! However, Bahrain has a wintering population. The birds are fruit eaters and spend their days in date plantations. Just before dusk, which comes quickly, they fly into established roosts. The long-established Bahrain roost is in an acacia tree in a suburban open

space in Saar in the east of the city. Sadly, the site it is now much degraded by neglect, dumping and encroaching development. Given that this is the only spot in the world where the Grey Hypocolius can be seen with any certainty, it is a shame that there is absolutely no protection or regard by the authorities for this location. Roosting numbers peak in mid-winter – Dec. to Jan. At one time, they peaked up to a thousand or more but nowadays they peak to only the mid to low hundreds. By late March, the time of my visit, the birds had mostly departed and I was fortunate to see just the single bird that came into roost that evening. Nevertheless, I got good views of this elusive species.

While Bahrain may not be a 'must visit' destination for birdwatchers, a trip there can prove to be a surprisingly rewarding one.

NS 2007

BIRDS IN POETRY

Mary Devenport O'Neill (1879-1967), born in Loughrea, Co. Galway, was a poet, playwright and hostess of a literary saloon, as well as the wife of Education Minister, Irish scholar and author, Joseph O'Neill. One of her poems is "Swallows":

SWALLOWS

*This is my toy –
To sit in this place
Trying to trace
On a misty sky
The pattern the swallows make
As they fly;
But they break the lines with
Their fluttering wings,
And I have more joy
Than is in things
Not knowing why.*

From Mary Devenport O'Neill, *Prometheus and Other Poems*. London, Jonathan Cape, 1929.

Geraldine Ward

LOOP HEAD OUTING

In early March this year [1999], John Murphy gave an illustrated talk on Loop Head. The response and level of interest was so great that straight away an outing to Loop Head itself was suggested.

Thus, it came to pass that on Sunday 29th of August, Galway members joined with Clare members at the Bridges of Ross in sight of Loop Head. John was on hand to lead the outing. He had chosen the end of August date to capitalise on the annual passage of migrating seabirds for which Loop Head has become well known.

In the course of the day we had the thrill of seeing huge numbers of passing seabirds. Gannets, fulmars and gulls passed in their thousands. We viewed, many of us for the first time, no less than four species of shearwaters – sooty, Manx, great and Cory's. Two solitary whimbrels flew south on their



way to their wintering grounds in Africa. Numerous kittiwakes enlivened the place with their distinctive cries and one lonely puffin gave us another 'tick'!

We had a good variety of our regular waders, including oystercatcher, redshank and grey heron.

Choughs enthralled us with their acrobatic flight, diving with wings closed and then swooping up again in a broad arc.

We also saw many of our resident passerines as we made our way to Loop Head itself.

From the Head we saw good numbers of guillemot and black guillemot.

For me the highlights of the day were the birds of prey. The kestrel hovering over the lighthouse at Loop Head, the peregrine flying fast along the cliffs and the sparrow hawk being mobbed by passerines.

Our final count was 52 species, plus the marvellous bonus of an icterine or melodious warbler at Kilbaha on our way home. Yes, it certainly was a memorable day!

Ian Brophy (1999)

BIRDS AND MEN

Derrycahill Bridge spans the River Suck, across the Galway/Roscommon border, four and a half kilometres, as the crow flies, downstream of Ballyforan. When I first crossed this forty-metre bridge, during counts of Greenland white-fronted geese in the mid-1980s, it was called the 'Wooden Bridge'. It had rattling wooden planks, multi-aged through constant replacement, and rusting railings framing wire mesh as a barrier to the dark, unruffled, peaty waters flowing beneath. The bridge gradually became unsafe for cars and has recently been refurbished using cement and steel girders with galvanised zinc railings. There was a footbridge here in the mid-nineteenth century.

We had come to the bridge in November 2019 on the off-chance that a flock of geese would fly over so that my son could record the sound of their bugling. It was a long shot, of course, and no geese came. If we had waited all day, we would probably have seen them flying downriver towards us in a loosely horizontal line above the water or flying high with unhurried wingbeats along the horizon, moving between dispersed traditional feeding locations up and down the river callows and across to the satellite turloughs.

We had three simultaneous encounters at the bridge that day. The first was with two men with guns who were searching for a cock pheasant, they had heard was in the vicinity. We had just seen him but kept quiet. They told us how many geese they had shot in 1979 before the shooting ban. The second was with a man who told us about curlews nesting in 2018, not two kilometres from the bridge, and how he and others had successfully kept a bush fire away from the ultimately successful nests. The third was with two farmers loading cattle onto a trailer. On hearing that we were enquiring about geese they shouted across the bridge to us that they had just that morning seen a flock at Shannonbridge, where the Suck meets the Shannon. This was twenty-one kilometres away even as the crow flies, and in my experience Greenland white-fronted geese have long abandoned those hectares of perfect goose grazing along the Shannon and lower Suck. Now, they may

have been telling the truth. After all, birdwatchers know that any bird can turn up anywhere. But I prefer to think that, mistaking us for shooters, they were trying to send us on a wild goose chase to divert us from the geese that at that very minute may have been winging their way towards us on Derrycahill Bridge.

Stephen Heery
13th January 2020

WHOSE BIRD – FORSTER J.

Forster Caracara *Phalacrocorax auratus* [Striated caracara]

Forster's Petrel *Puffinus gavia* [Fluttering shearwater]

Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*

Johann Reinhold Forster (1729-1798) was originally a clergyman in Danzig. He became a naturalist and accompanied James Cook, the famous British explorer of the Pacific Ocean, on his second voyage around the world from 1792 to 1793. The voyage extended further into the Antarctic than anyone had previously reached. Forster discovered five new species of penguin. However, he gained a reputation as a constant complainer and troublemaker. His complaints about Cook continued after his return and became public, destroying Forster's career in England. He went to Germany and became a Professor of History and Mineralogy. Unpleasant and troublesome to the end, Forster refused to relinquish his notes of the voyage. They were not found and published until almost fifty years after his death. His son Johann Georg Adam (known as George) (1754-1794) was also on Cook's voyage, [as a naturalist, ethnologist and travel writer - *A Voyage Round the World*]; his name has been incorporated in a number of birds' scientific names.

Whose Birds – Bo Beolens and Michael Watkins

BIRDS IN COUNTIES GALWAY AND MAYO

This is a continuation of my presentation of Major Robert Ruttledge's work of that title dating from the late 1940s. Just to say again, it is presented to give a flavour of birdwatching and the writing of that period. It takes up after Rose-coloured Starling.

Golden Oriole. *Oriolus oriolus oriolus* (L)

An adult was obtained at Renvyle Co. Galway on April 20th 1891. An adult male was picked up dead at Oughterard Co. Galway in May 1947 and forwarded to the National Museum Galway.

Hawfinch. *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* (L)

Rare vagrant. One was obtained on Achill Island in Clare Island Survey 1874 and another in October 1897, the latter is now in my possession. It was once recorded from Belmullet and once near Ballina in 1859 (Clare Island Survey *Aves* p.15). Usher stated (*ibid* p. 15) that it had been obtained a few times in Galway. One was shot at Mount Berner, near Ballinasloe in that county on December 31st 1906 where it was in the company of Chaffinches (*Zool* 1907 p. 70). One was killed striking Slyne Head Lighthouse on November 1st 1910

Greenfinch. *Chloris chloris chloris*

Resident, common and breeds wherever there are gardens and bushes. Although it resorts to marine islands in winter (Clare Island survey *Aves* p. 15) I have not noted it on them in summer. Proof of breeding in Achill is required although it was recorded as a breeding resident in 1891 (Clare Island Survey *Aves* p. 25). Was breeding in 1906 when one nest was found. (J Walpole-Bond.) Rather scarce general in Connemara although I have seen it at Firbolg and at Spiddal in June; near Clifden in July; a small party in desolate country south-west of Cleggan in July and even in more desolate country at Lettermore in April. Found breeding at Crana in 1945. Mrs Bingham did not list it for Bemullet and I have not seen it there, though in June 1944 I saw it at Glencoo near Bangor-Erris, a wild region of Co. Mayo. Considerable flocks occur in autumn in the more enclosed areas.

Goldfinch. *Carduelis carduelis britannica* (Hart)

Resident and breeds in suitable localities on the mainland. I have seen flocks near Barna on Galway Bay and in a desolate valley near Lough Nafooy. I have note of seeing it at Toomboola near Ballinahinch in Connemara in 1943 and also west of Clifden. Protection has caused increase and consequent spread. Considerable increase in these counties was noted in 1929. Further increase noticeable in Co. Mayo in 1939 and again in 1942. In Co. Mayo flocks of fifty to seventy are not infrequent. Still appears to be absent from Achill Island in summer and I can obtain no information of it on the Mullet from which Mrs Bingham, in years of residence, found it absent.

Siskin. *Carduelis spinus* (L)

Resident but very local and rather scarce. Tendency to increase. In Co. Galway it breeds in numbers at Ashford near Cong. Some breed near Clonbur. Witherby found it breeding at Clonbrock near Ballinasloe in 1903, but when I was there in June 1944, I could find none. As in other places much of the suitable woods had been cut. Several seen in Kylemore woods in Connemara in June 1943 but not found at Ballinahinch. Mrs Gough believes that Siskins were seen at Dunsandle near Athenry in 1940. In extensive search in many places I have not otherwise traced it. Has been seen in summer on Lough Corrib Co. Galway (*Birds of Ireland*, Ussher & Warren, p. 56). Warren considered it rare in North Mayo. Good knew it in the Westport district, having seen it on several occasions. I found it nesting in Tourmakeady on the western shore of Lough Mask in June 1932, this being the first recorded case in the county, where, however, it has probably been overlooked. It continues to breed there. It is probably increasing as recently I have noted small parties at Creagh near Ballinrobe, where it now breeds, and at Cloonelee, beside Lough Corrib in autumn and winter. At Breaghwy [Breaffy] near Castlebar I noted one or two in December 1945. In spring of 1946 I saw and heard several at Castle MacGarrett, near Claremorris, where no doubt they were breeding.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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