



GALWAY BRANCH BIRDWATCH IRELAND

For information on or to get involved with the Galway BWI branch, e-mail Chairman Cyril Manning (cyril.manning@hotmail.com) or Secretary Bláithín Kennedy (blaithin.kennedy@gmail.com). **NS**

GALWAY BRANCH – A YEAR IN REVIEW

When the branch committee met last year in November, we planned to have 2020 packed full of birding activities. At that meeting, we came up with ideas for outings up to June of this year. One of the first thoughts we had was to arrange a get-together for Christmas so that we could at least thank those who had supported us throughout 2019 and we hoped that this would become an annual event. Unfortunately, that's not how things panned out in 2020. It got off to a good start in January. On Saturday, January 4th, Tom Cuffe led his regular Saturday outing from Nimmo's Pier. On the 14th, we had a most informative talk from Mary Joyce Glynn and Fergal Tymon from Galway Claddagh Swan Rescue on the work being done at the sanctuary at Rusheen Bay.

February brought some indications of what the year ahead would bring to branch events. Tom's outing on February 1st, 'Lá Fhéile Bhríde', the familiar herald of spring, was disrupted by preparations for Galway 2020. The regular route taken by the group was cordoned off behind fencing. The next event planned was a trip to Belclare Turlough near Tuam in North Galway on Sunday, February 9th. This turlough is one of our favourite spots to check during the winter, and we are rarely disappointed. Over the last 10 years since moving to Tuam, we have seen several birds at this site, including overwintering Curlews, Lapwing, Greenland White-fronted Geese, Golden Plover, Whooper Swans, Scaup, Wigeon, Herons and, of course, Mallards, to name but a few. We have also been lucky enough to see Buzzards and Kestrels on the bog road that connects Tuam to Belclare via Sylane. However, this time we were foiled by the weather with storm Ciara forcing us to cancel the event. Whatever we thought about February, we certainly didn't realise then what the rest of 2020 would hold for us.

On March 18th, my employer asked that those of us who could work from home do so until further notice. While it took a bit of getting used to, we soon got into a routine of going out for walks in our local area. Tuam has some great walks and water bodies. The Palace Grounds have a lot of resident crows as does our estate. Watching them and the Rooks sitting in the spring sunlight on rooftops while we did a few laps of the green in front of our house in the morning became a ritual. When the full-on Covid restrictions came into force, and with the reduced traffic noise, it was a joy to be outside and to hear the birds in our estate. Seeing the many garden birds and watching them fighting on the nut and seed feeders we have in the garden was very entertaining. We regularly see and hear House Sparrows, Goldfinches, Chaffinches, the odd Greenfinch, Bullfinches, and lots of tits. There are also a host of Starlings, some Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, a small flock of Collared Doves, Herring Gulls and the odd Great Black-backed Gull passing through. The green in front of our house is a

great food source with five trees, three with feeders being stocked by different households, and a fourth feeding station at a house where they put out food for our resident urban Fox which the crows and gulls are quite partial too.

With the arrival of the Swallows, we got to see an energetic pair build a nest on our neighbour's house directly opposite us giving us the pleasure of seeing them feed offspring and watching all the fledglings learn to fly as the summer progressed. As evenings got longer, we started to follow a roughly-5km loop from our house, which brought us out into the countryside where 1km was private road only fit for walkers or tractors. On one such walk, we startled 3 female Pheasants into flight from long grass in the fields either side. The River Nanny flows east to west through the town of Tuam. On occasion, we have spotted a Dipper along the section by Coral Leisure. Further along the Nanny, by the Mill, is a memorial garden to Ann Marie McHugh who died in 9/11. This little garden is a very peaceful spot, regularly visited by a Grey Wagtail. We often take a walk down the private road behind Curragh Park; we have been told by another local couple of birders, Willi and Maura Kiefel, they spotted a Moorhen there. Unfortunately, this bird has eluded us but we have regularly seen a Grey Heron in the same area of reclaimed flood land. When restrictions did begin to ease, we started with a trip to Greenfield, outside Headford. We were greeted in the harbour by a small flock of House Martins carrying out crazy acrobatic stunts noisily overhead, while groups of well-fed, relaxed Mallards basked lazily in the sunlight. The Inchiquin causeway is a favourite walk when in Greenfield; it is often alive with insects. We have been lucky enough to spot damselflies, dragonflies and the odd fleeting butterfly when taking this route. At the end of the causeway, among the reeds, we have heard and briefly spotted a Little Grebe. On the return trip, we visited Rostaff Lake but, on that occasion, there were no birds to be seen. One of the highlights of our summer outings was a day trip to Connemara; we left home early in the morning intending to reach Omev Island at low tide. This island off the Galway coast is only accessible overland at low tide. We were able to drive onto the island and, while exploring, we got to see a pair of Choughs around an old derelict building on the edge of the island. This has been one of the species we have travelled to several locations for with a hope of seeing it.

As the autumn started to settle in, we began to revisit the many lakes and turloughs around Tuam to check water levels. The locations we regularly visit include the I-WeBS sites for North-East Galway, including Gardenfield, Levally, Springfield, Mullaghmore and Horseleap. Each of these sites holds different memories for us. Gardenfield is about 500 meters from our house across the fields; we regularly hear Whooper Swans in the winter. We recently counted 31 Whoopers, 50 Lapwings and 200 Golden Plovers. Levally plays host to a variety of birds; we regularly see Lapwing, Curlew, Moorhen and Coot along with Mute Swans and a variety of ducks. Springfield has a tree at the far end where 8 or 9 Cormorants have been spotted perched on its branches. However, for an impressive body of water, it doesn't host many other birds. Mullaghmore, on the other hand, is a favoured spot by many overwintering birds, including

Curlew, Lapwing, Golden Plover, Whooper Swans and many varieties of duck, including Tufted Duck, Goldeneye and Wigeon. We have also spotted Moorhens and Coots at Mullaghmore and regularly see Buzzards riding the air thermals when travelling to and from there to Levally. On one occasion, we saw an unphased Raven being harassed by some crows flying overhead. Horseleap regularly hosts a Grey Heron, and we once spotted 3 Little Egrets in a field nearby. Tom Cuffe recommenced the Saturday outings from Nimmo's Pier, and we had two wonderfully bright, sunny Saturdays in September and October. Despite the changes of needing to take names and numbers for contact tracing, maintaining social distance and no sharing of optical equipment, everyone involved thoroughly enjoyed these outings. Now back to the present. We had planned a talk by Cólín MacLochlainn for May of this year but as this couldn't go ahead, Cólín has kindly offered to present his talk via web-conferencing software. The presentation will be on Lough Ree, a wildlife wonderland, and why it deserves to be Ireland's next National Park. A national park that would encompass the lake and its islands; its shoreline and headlands; and its neighbouring boglands and turloughs. Cólín MacLochlainn has been editor and designer of BirdWatch Ireland's *Wings* magazine since 1991. He also produces magazines and newsletters for other environmental organisations, including The Native Woodland Trust, Mountaineering Ireland, The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group and others. He has a Master's degree in Zoology from UCD and a graduate diploma in journalism from DCU. His most significant concerns are climate change and loss of biodiversity. His greatest interest is in promoting the restoration and expansion of native woodlands to act as a carbon sink and to provide habitat for many of Ireland's lost species. This event will take place on December 8th, starting promptly at 19:00. If you wish to be added to the invite to attend the event, please contact blaithin.kennedy@gmail.com.

Having previously lived in Athlone and spent a lot of time in Portlick Millennium Forest and having visited Lecarrow and St John's Wood after lockdown lifted both of us to see the great potential in the area. We highly recommend it as a destination for anyone interested in birding and biodiversity. Cólín's talk will give anyone interested an excellent grounding in understanding the area around Lough Ree and in what birds to expect to see and where to see them.

Cyril Manning (BWI Galway Branch Chairman) & Bláithín Kennedy (BWI Galway Branch Secretary)

LOCAL BIRDS OF A VILLAGE IN LOCKDOWN **2020**

Birdwatching during the lockdown was a local affair. Most of us watched 'common or garden' birds more intently. It made us aware, with unintended tautology, that watching birds is an integral part of a birdwatcher's day. We notice birds like we notice cars or clouds.

Lawrencetown is a village noted for its trees. While standing outside the small local shop, where by tacit agreement we waited for our turn inside, a Blackcap always sang from half-way up and deep inside the foliage of a sixty-foot lime tree. Its song could be



drowned out by the continuous sequence of five cooing notes of a Wood Pigeon which, when it eventually died down, was seamlessly replaced by the three cooing notes of a Collared Dove. The road to Portumna exits Lawrencetown via a straight and magnificent avenue of beech trees, well over a century old, gold in autumn and pastel green in spring. Regular walks here revealed a Starling nesting in a tree hole, ten metres up and facing the road. The bird would perch woodpecker-like at the entrance, to the raucous din of unseen youngsters.

Here, on the same tree, on 10th May, my eye was drawn to the unmistakable silhouette of a Spotted Flycatcher, a bird like no other which, therefore, always has an 'other-worldly' feel about it. I next saw the flycatcher on 5th July feeding around the tall grey poplar that looks over Pádraic Reaney's sculptural piece of Diarmuid and Gráinne, who stand under an old oak tree, with cloak and spear. While washing up, I saw a Linnets collecting cherry blossom petals and taking them away, presumably for its nest. While tending the village pollinator-patch, I watched a Treecreeper creep up the moss-covered incline of the tiled roof of the parochial house and swoop down into an ivy-laden cypress tree, presumably to its nest. Sometime during the first half of May, a pair of Swallows began to build a nest in our shed. Around the start of Phase 1 of the easing of lockdown on 18th May, they stopped building and moved away (maybe only five kilometres). One third of a nest had been built and now the shed was silent. Then, on 27th June (I have it in my notebook), two days before the start of Phase 3 of the easing of lockdown, when more travel was allowed, a pair came back and began to build up the unfinished nest. By July 7th, the new walls were dry and as I write, on 24th July, eggs have just hatched. In September they will fly abroad. Let us hope, when they return next spring, there will be no need to isolate themselves.

PS: Ten days later, much too early for the young birds to have flown, the shed is inexplicably silent. No chicks raising their heads, no adults frantically feeding. A strange and tragic tale of lockdown.

Stephen Heery

BIRDS IN POETRY

The Key-Note

Where are the songs I used to know,
 Where are the notes I used to sing?
 I have forgotten everything
 I used to know so long ago;
 Summer has followed after Spring;
 Now Autumn is so shrunk and sere,
 I scarcely think a sadder thing
 Can be the Winter of my year.

Yet Robin sings thro' Winter's rest,
 When bushes put their berries on;
 While they their ruddy jewels don,
 He sings out of a ruddy breast;
 The hips and haws and ruddy breast
 Make one spot warm where snowflakes lie,
 They break and cheer the unlovely rest
 O Winter's pause – and why not I?

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

OPTICS AND BIRD RECOGNITION – PAST AND PRESENT

Many of today's birdwatchers may not appreciate how lucky they are with the optics and general information that is available to them for bird spotting and recognition. When I see people like Tom Cuffe fixing his smartphone via an app onto a state-of-the-art Swaraski telescope for instant clear recognition and recording of a distant bird, I am still a bit amazed by it all. Even as recently as the 1970s, most binoculars were big and awkward and telescopes were hardly known. I recall the late Brendan Dillon OP of the Claddagh Priory having a Hertel and Reuss Televari which, while probably somewhat advanced technologically, in shape, handling and appearance was not a lot different from what Nelson would have been using at Trafalgar! Indeed, at one time Brendan's was the only one of two telescopes available to us in Galway. The angled eyepiece Kowa and the Zeiss Dialyt in the 1980s were great steps forward in optics and for bird recognition.

Bird observers of earlier times set great emphasis on written species description. It was all important as, invariably, there was no photographic evidence.

One book I have is by James Fisher (1912 -1970):

Bird Recognition I

Describing the appearance, life, and habits of seabirds and waders, with many maps and charts and over eighty illustrations by 'FISH-HAWK', published by Pelican Books in 1945. Each species has two pages, one dealing with the appearance and habits of the bird, and the opposite page showing a black and white illustration. (See Godwit picture as sample.) The following is an extract from the book:

Field Identification in General

The following principles are compiled from the published advice of H.G. Alexander and the late B.W. Tucker (when editor of *British Birds*) and the late H.F. Wetherby (editor of *The Handbook of British Birds* and previous editor of *British Birds*).

Faced with the problem of field identification, make notes and sketches AT ONCE. Do not attempt to use this or any other book, or any field key, until you have made full notes on all of the bird's plumage. Otherwise the book may suggest things to you that you did not see or hear.

Be precise about the exact parts of a bird's surface. Note –

Distance from bird.

Whether using glasses.

Condition and direction of light.

General characters and behaviour at rest.

General character and behaviour in flight.

Habitat.

Whether alone or with birds of the same or other species.

Colour, size and shape of bill. Legs and feet.

Precise size, shape and position of what appears to you to be distinctive markings.

Shape, length of tail and colouration of tail and rump (extent and position of bars, if any).

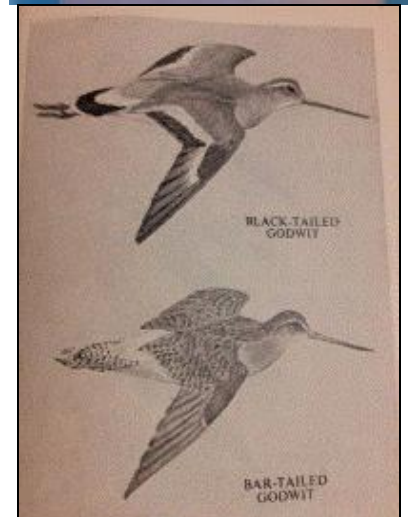
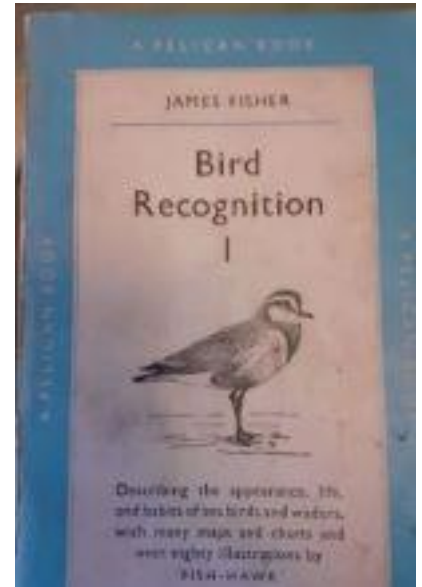
Voice.

Date and time.

Initials of companions in case subsequent confirmation is needed.

How many birdwatchers would compile such notes today? Instead, just capture and record via your telescope and smartphone app. Changed times!

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Bird Recognition - James Fisher

IRISH BIRDS No. 41 - COPY NEEDED

I am looking for a copy of last year's *Irish Birds*. It is Number 41 and has a pair of Pintail on the front cover. If there is a copy taking up too much space on your bookshelf and you are looking to sell or swap it for something, I'll happily come to your aid. Thanks.

Aonghus O Donail
 (aonghuso@hotmail.com)

BIRDS IN COUNTIES GALWAY AND MAYO

This is a continuation of my presentation of Major Robert F. Rutledge'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 Siskin.

Mealy Redpoll. *Carduelis flammea flammea*
 Rare winter visitor to County Mayo where on Achill Island it has been obtained or seen as follows –Two



shot in 1893 out of a flock of eight. One obtained in 1894. One obtained in October 1898 during which month Mealy Redpolls were seen every day, in small parties of six, from October 14th to the 21st.

Holbolls Redpoll. **Carduelis flammeas holboellii** (Brehm)

The specimen of a Redpoll obtained in Achill Island in November 1894 formerly recorded of this species is a Mealy Redpoll. It was examined and identified as such by Witherby.

Greenland Redpoll. **Carduelis flamea rostrata** (Coues)

Rare vagrant and only thrice recorded from Co Mayo. The specimen obtained in October 1897 is in my possession. Two females were recorded on Achill Island in October 1892. One, evidently a male, was picked up dead in Eagle Island on May 30th 1942 and had probably been killed about May 20th (*British Birds*, Vol. XXXVI p. 73).

Lesser Redpoll. **Carduelis flammea cabaret** (P.L.S. Mull)

Resident and breeds. I find it a very local breeder. The parties seen just previous to the breeding season do not settle down to breed in those localities which they frequent in spring, no matter how favourable they may seem. Mrs Gough confirms this observation for her district in Co. Galway. Most frequently found in summer in willow and birch copses in valleys of the mountainous districts (rather than in those of the more cultivated regions) as, for instance, in the Maam Valley which seems most favoured. Breeds sparingly in Achill. I have not found it on the Mullet, although it was given as breeding there (Clare Island Survey, Aves, p. 17). However, Mrs Bingham did not include it in her list for that locality.

Flocks which in winter are never very large do not break up until mid-May.

Twite. **Carduelis flavirostris pipilans** (Latham)

Resident. Met with sparingly on the eastern bogs. Become plentiful in the higher western districts. And locally common on the seaboard and western islands, on which it nests freely.

Linnet. **Carduelis cannabina cannabina** (L)

Resident. Breeds widespread and common, particularly in open localities and open districts. Favours wasteland and areas of small holdings. I have found it on Inshibofin, Inishshark and Clare Island in summer where it was probably breeding. It is said to breed on Achill Island.

Bullfinch. **Pyrrhula pyrrhula nesa** (L)

Resident and has increased since 1924. In Co. Mayo it is common only as far as the great lakes to the west of which it becomes scarcer, though more noticeable in places such as Westport and Murrisk. Common throughout Co. Galway except in the west of the county. Occurs occasionally in the Maam Valley though I have not seen it elsewhere in Connemara, absent from marine islands except in Achill where very occasional.

MORE LOCAL EVENTS IN LOCKDOWN TIMES

A Goldfinch's escape

Toward the end of August, I was sitting in the Crow's Nest (aka the observatory), reading. Two Collared Doves were feeding on seed I had put outside the balcony door; the entire is at first-floor level on a flat-roofed garage attached to me house. There was a loud bang on the glass. The doves were speeding away – I looked around for a Sparrowhawk, thinking a spooked dove had hit the window in panic – nothing. (There is clear glass on both sides of the Crow's Nest). I saw a flutter at the edge of the balcony, a small bird was lying on its breast, with its rear towards me, tail straight up; the fluttering stopped – a 'window kill'. I took a close look to identify a juvenile Goldfinch.

It began breeding heavily! Within seconds a Magpie landed on the balcony. I normally do not interfere in such instances, but I thought the Goldfinch might recover so I shooed the Magpie away. If the Goldfinch died, I was only delaying the Magpie's recycling effort for a few minutes!

After a couple of minutes, the breathing eased and the head started moving side-to-side. A little later it struggled to a sitting position, looked around for a while, and stood up, shakily. And after a few seconds it flew into a nearby clump of ivy. Safe for a while!

A fox on the prowl

One morning in early July, from my conservatory (the Crow's Nest at first-floor level) I perceived a movement near a small square structure at the far end of my garden. I looked closely but could see nothing.

About twenty seconds later a fox exploded from behind this structure, body low on the ground, ears pinned back, moving very fast towards a raised, round bed (the Rotunda) about 10 metres away from a juvenile Woodpigeon eating grass - it missed by probably less than 10cm. The pigeon had a lucky escape.

I have occasionally seen a fox in my garden - this was the second time I have seen a hunt. The first time wasn't as dramatic. I arrived home late one night and noticed the security light at the back was on. I cautiously peeked behind a kitchen curtain - to see a fox standing on the garden path, staring on the grass. It pounced into the grass, then resumed its position. A few seconds later, something white, probably a moth showed in the light - the fox pounced on it. The light went out. The fox moved towards the house, the light came on and the fox moved back to its spot.

Brendan Dunne