



GALWAY BRANCH BIRDWATCH IRELAND

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BIRD BOOKS OF PAST TIMES

Sometime in the early 1980s, the late Brendan Dillon OP, then based at the Dominican Claddagh Church, was re-assigned to Rome. The evening before he left, he called and gave to me some bird books that he didn't wish to bring with him. One was *Birds of the Hill and Forest*, published by Chambers in 1935. It contains attractive and, by now, old-fashioned descriptions of the birds of those habitats. The Treecreeper is an example – a bird that regularly visits an old moss-encrusted apple tree in my Headford garden.

Treecreeper

A small bird remarkable for its mouse-like creeping habits; fairly common in all wooded districts.

Description: four and three-quarter inches long. Upper parts brown, minutely variegated with black, white and buff streak above the eye and the under parts silky white; bill long and slender, and curved down-wards. Resident.

Its name sufficiently indicates the character of this little bird. It is a tree creeper indeed, creeping up the trunks and along the stouter branches of trees in search of small insect-life lurking in the crevices of the bark. It moves with a spasmodic running gait, with trailed tail and a gliding motion resembling that of a mouse. Its path is ever upwards, and having worked its way up to the bole of one tree it drops to the base of a neighbouring tree, there to resume its spiral upward path. This creeping habit it shares with Wryneck, Nuthatch and Woodpeckers, but it is a tiny bird in comparison with any of these. Its delicate, curved bill further distinguishes it. The song is rather shrill, but a faint piping forms the ordinary note.

The nest is placed in crevices in ivy-covered trunks, between a piece of hanging bark and the trunk of a tree, and in similar places. It is made of rootlets, grass and moss and is lined with such delicate materials as feathers, moss and wool and the soft inner bark of the birch tree. The six to nine eggs are white in ground-colour, with brownish, red or purple spots, often arranged in a zone near the larger end. The female incubates, and two broods may be reared in a season.

NS

A LIST OF BIRDS IN COUNTIES

GALWAY & MAYO by

R.F. RUTLEDGE

(Continued)

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* L.

Rare Vagrant. In County Mayo two were obtained in Achill, one in February, the other in March 1894 and others have since been seen there in August (Clare Island Survey, *Aves*, p. 18). One said to have been seen at Bangor Erris in 1909 (Mrs Bingham *in litt.*). One Black Rock Light Station (Clare Island Survey, *Aves*, p. 18). Crossbill were observed in Blackrock in July 1929 and in the three preceding years (*List of*

Irish Birds, 1937, p. 6). Rev. P.J. Kennedy S.J. observed a large flock at Mallafranny at the end of June and in the first two weeks of July 1929. Four or five were seen by W. Rutledge at Mallaranny on June 9th 1948. For County Galway Ussher gave it as a rare and irregular breeding species. I can obtain no information that it breeds there still. Apart from irregular occurrences previous to 1900, there are the following records:- One seen at Maam Cross on April 17th and 20th 1909 (*British Birds* Vol 111, p. 163). A male shot near Kylemore on November 25th 1909. A small party seen by E.M. Nicholson near Recess on August 19th 1927.

Chaffinch. *Fringilla coelebs gengleri* Kleinschmidt.

Resident, common.

The most widespread finch though it becomes scarcer in the west of both counties. Plentiful around Westport and in wooded areas of Connemara such as Kylemore, Ballinahinch and near Carna. Scarce in Achill where a few breed. Appears to be absent in summer from other marine islands, appearing on them in winter occasionally, as also on the Mullet, from which it appears to be absent in summer.

Brambling. *Fringilla montifringilla*

Rare irregular winter visitor though many were seen in Achill in October and November 1898. Specimens have also been obtained at Killalal and Castlebar (Clare Island Survey, *Aves*, p. 16). Warren considered it to be very rare in north Mayo. On Dec. 22nd 1916 in severe weather, I saw a few feeding with Chaffinches at Bloomfield, near Hollymount, in south Mayo. One bird was present the following day. In south Mayo I have the following records in addition:- One seen at Old Head near Louisburg by W.A. Warren in January 1940. From November 29th 1944 until January 15th 1945 a male and a female, with possibly a third, were in the vicinity of Cloonee House on the shore of Lough Carra. One seen near Ballinrobe, November 11th 1945, and another in a different locality near there on December 22nd 1945. Several were seen irregularly at Cloonee, December 1947 and January 1948. One in County Galway when an adult male was killed striking the light at Slyne Head Lighthouse on November 2nd 1945.

Corn Bunting. *Emberiza calandra* L.

Resident. Almost entirely confined to coastal regions where they are numerous. Scarce and very local elsewhere: inland I can only trace it in a very few places. I see no sign of decrease in the coastal areas and on the marine islands in the past twenty years, with the exception of Clare Island from which it was absent in 1945. It flourishes in Inishbofin, Achill and in many uninhabited islands adjacent to the Galway coast: less plentiful in the Aran group. Lt.-Col C.F. Scroope thinks it has decreased in the north-west coast of Mayo. I can nowadays find only a few pairs there, in the vicinity of Midfield. I have failed to find it in the east and south of Galway. In Connemara winter flocks may be observed in the small holdings along the coast.

To be continued

It is sad to read the entry about the Corn Bunting as it no longer breeds or is barely present at all in

Ireland. Why? It is hardly enough to simply say it is because of changes in agricultural practices – other seed-eating birds such as Goldfinches still seem to thrive. The last Corn Bunting I saw was on a branch outing to Belmullet in the late 1980s.

I just want to state again that the purpose of reprinting Rutledge's work is to pay tribute to him and all those others who pioneered bird watching and bird study in the past with far fewer resources, optical and otherwise, than we have nowadays.

NS

BREEDING CHOUGH SURVEY 2021

The Chough, which is also known as the Red-billed Chough, is an Annex 1 species listed in the EU Birds Directive. Ireland is estimated to hold 70% of the entire North-West European population. The species is normally associated with high-altitude mountains throughout Europe, North Africa and Asia. In Ireland, however, Choughs are mainly found along the coastal areas from County Wexford, along the south and west coasts, up to County Donegal. They are mainly found in areas of short-cropped grassland and are particularly associated with machair habitat (Ireland is now the only EU country where this rare coastal grassland habitat is found). The last estimate (2002/2003) for the Irish population was only 838 pairs, making it our rarest species of crow. The species was formerly found in many upland areas in Ireland but many of these areas have now been deserted, though it still persists in such areas in the south-west in particular. Choughs were once found in the Twelve Bens and Maumturk Mountains in Connemara but they have not been present there for many decades. The furthest inland breeding pairs that I have seen in Connemara were only around 1.3 kilometres away from the coast.

In Ireland, Chough have been surveyed nationally on four previous occasions. The numbers of breeding pairs for County Galway during those surveys were as follows:

1965:	45 – 52 pairs,
1982:	38 – 39 pairs,
1992:	38 pairs,
2002/2003:	20 pairs.

Pairs are now found breeding from the Aran Islands and along the Connemara coastline from Carna to Killary Harbour. They are also found on several offshore islands along this stretch. I would estimate that the current Galway population is still probably close enough to the 2002/2003 population estimate of 20 pairs.

It is notable that the Galway population nearly halved in size between the 1992 and the 2002/2003 surveys. It is hard to know what the reason for this decline really is but, like most bird declines, it is likely to be due to a combination of factors. It has been proven that the use of veterinary medication in the dosing of cattle can have severe negative effects on insect numbers that use cow pats during their larval stages because the lethal effects of the medication can persist within the cow pats. These invertebrates form an important food source for adult birds and their nestlings and Choughs can regularly be seen looking for these tasty grubs by demolishing dried cow pats.



This significant decline was not noted in the main Chough strongholds of counties Cork, Kerry and Donegal during the same period, however.

There are fourteen Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated for Chough nationally. Due to the relatively low numbers of breeding Chough in County Galway, no Chough SPAs are found in our county.

In my experience, most of the mainland Connemara breeding Chough use man-made structures, usually old cottages or castles. I have only seen three pairs using a natural cliff site on the mainland. While there is not a huge number of suitable sections of coastline with high cliffs in Connemara, there are a few stretches that formerly did have breeding Chough but no longer do for some reason. Most of the Inishmore, Inishbofin and Inishark pairs use natural cliff sites but all other Connemara island nesters use buildings. I know of two large old buildings that hold two breeding pairs each annually.

The species is generally considered to not nest colonially, like fellow corvid species such as Jackdaw and Rook do. During the non-breeding season, family groups and non-breeding birds can form small groups and will roost together. I've rarely seen over twenty birds together in Connemara.

Under the EU Birds Directive, Ireland is legally obliged to report on the status and trends of bird populations every six years. Suffice to say, we are now well overdue a repeat national survey of this important species. A new national Chough survey will be carried out by National Parks and Wildlife Service staff this year. This will involve walking linear transects along the coastline and suitable offshore islands twice during the breeding season which begins in early April and finishes by mid-June. Any evidence of possible, probable or confirmed breeding will be looked for. For example, a visit by a single bird or pair to a potential breeding site, birds carrying nest material or the presence of fledged young. "Flock birds" (non-breeding, young, un-paired birds) will also be recorded during the survey.

If anyone reading this article has encountered any Chough during the breeding season in recent years anywhere in County Galway, I would really appreciate to receive any such sightings. I can be contacted at dermot.breen@chg.gov.ie.

BIRD REPORTS

As well as Chris Peppiatt's invaluable Galway quarterly report of bird sightings and my reprinting of Major R.F. Ruttledge's *Birds in Counties Galway and Mayo*, Anghus O Donnell has also forwarded to me a link to the online availability of the entire run of *Irish Bird Reports* 1953 – 2017. They make for fascinating reads. I attach the link below.

NS

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/nreyknq6sc3nmqe/IBR%201953%20to%202017.pdf?dl=0>

BIRDS IN POETRY

Seán McCann has kindly given me permission to publish his poem below before its more formal launch in a forthcoming poetry publication. I am reminded of the time, some twenty or more years ago, when the late Séamus Heaney also gave me permission to have his poem *Flaggy Shore* published in the *Galway Newsletter* ahead of its more formal launch. So, Seán's poem is in great company.

NS

Standing on Anne Mannion's Grave

A wailing gate welcome
to the field of Colman's Bofin
(Ah, will you stop?
Breathnaigh! Do you see a coffin?)

I settled down in the long grass
among the old people,
among the stones
inscribed with their deadlines

the sun at the top of her Irish day
(Dia ár sábháil!)
Same again tomorrow, please,
we'd ask of MacAsamhlóir.

A still life hour
before a rasping
from that tourist trapper:
his hoarse voice, his looped patter

Great craic Great craic!
Great craic Great craic!

with never even a glimpse
of the Comcrake,
that plains wanderer
that Apache!

tiptoeing through the liminal grasses between
the worlds seen
and unseen
The King of Hide and Seek.

Just as my mind began to wander
(sleeping on the job, mar sin!)
he rose from his red bed
that swaggerer!

There he was, full of himself
that Joycean gallant!
standing on Anne Mannion's grave
[died 30 July 1944]

and she must have been the life and soul of the
party in her day
the way he remained there for several minutes
extolling
at the top of his voice

Great craic Great craic!
Great craic Great craic!

Seán McCann

TWEET OF THE DAY

For very early risers, and while perhaps having a 6am breakfast, there is a great opportunity to tune into the BBC Radio 4 *Tweet of the Day*. This daily 3-minutes' programme features a different bird each morning with comment and sound. There is also a book based on it by Stephen Moss and Brett Westwood. My thanks to them for their kind permission to allow me to quote from it. Here is the Sanderling entry:

Sanderling

Twinkling along the tideline, so fast that their legs become a blur, Sanderlings can be the highlight of a winter walk along a windy beach. These shoreline sprinters are tiny waders – even smaller than a Starling – and are pure white below and silver grey above, with a dark shoulder patch and beady black eyes.

But it's the Sanderling's sheer turn of speed that captures our attention, dodging the incoming waves before chasing after the waters as they retreat, frantically probing the sand for morsels of food.

In winter, when conserving energy is important, the dashing about looks like wasted effort, but Sanderlings do have a strategy. By searching the freshly disturbed sand and shingle, they increase their chances of catching the small invertebrates, which come up to the surface, to cash in on food delivered by each breaking wave.

Sanderlings may look rather cute (they are often compared to a child's clockwork toy) but they are tough little birds. The ones we see in winter have often bred in Siberia, though the species breeds virtually around the globe, on tundra mostly within the boundaries of the Arctic Circle.

On their breeding grounds Sanderlings lose their whitish winter plumage and turn rich chestnut mottled with black on their back, wings, head and upper breast, remaining white on their lower belly. They rear their young on stony areas near the water where there's a rich supply of insects, especially flies and their larvae.

You occasionally see this fly-catching behaviour from Sanderlings that have flown south to beaches in late summer, when some of them may retain a vestige of their bright summer plumage before moulting into their ghostly winter garb.

NS