



GALWAY BRANCH BIRDWATCH IRELAND

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BOOK REVIEW: BIRD GIRL **Maya Rose Craig**

This remarkable book tells of Maya's travels to the bird world hot spots with her parents. These included Amazon, Antarctica, Africa, Australia, California and several other bird-rich locations. Before she was fourteen years old, she had 'ticked' 4,000 of the world's bird species. Finding those in remote places is described in graphic and exciting detail. Each chapter for a trip/location is headed with a colour illustration of some exotic bird seen there. The book also describes family happenings and her life as a young girl. She subsequently wrote the book in her early twenties. If any other *Newsletter* readers have come read this book, I would appreciate a more comprehensive review. In the link below, it is also well reviewed by *The Guardian* - <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jul/14/bird-girl-by-maya-rose-craig-review-a-prodigy-takes-flight> (Select the link first - hold Ctrl and then click.)

I got this book through the Co. Galway Libraries request service. Provided you have a library ticket, you can request any book or author on the library website and it will be searched for over the entire national library branches and you will be e-mailed when it is located and brought to your local library – Headford Library, in my case. I started using it when my book shelves started to overflow! This book is also available on Kindle but without the colourful bird pages before each chapter.

NS

HOUSE MARTINS AND SWALLOWS

The evening of the 10th of September 2022 was cloudless, still and warm in Lawrencetown. I sat outside the back door and watched 'our' Swallows dashing about over the garden. Young birds with noticeably shorter and faster-moving wings and streamerless forked tails were among them. Every now and again, a young bird was fed by an adult, both birds stalling in mid-flight to face each other. How did they co-ordinate such a meeting? The pair had raised three broods in the shed, building a big new nest at the beginning of May, repairing an old nest for the second brood and returning to the first nest for the third.

The morning of 11th September was dull and still, with a steady rain falling. Three hundred or so Swallows and House Martins were arranged along the telephone wires in front of the house. About one third were Martins. In the persistent misty rain, they were preening on the wire and dashing about in the air. At various times, and often, several birds alighted on the flimsy wet stems and foliage of young Ash which had emerged during the summer from the rich hedge beneath the wire. Those executing this feat did so in a fluttering spray of water droplets from the wet leaves. Watching through binoculars, I could see that some birds at least were pecking at the leaves, presumably taking insects. On the series of nine photographs I took

through a rain-splattered window-pane, all but one (of thirty birds seen perched among the leaves) were House Martins.

It was still raining at 13.15hrs and the Swallows and Martins had departed, perhaps to another telegraph wire or perhaps on their migratory journey. I am reminded of the pithy children's poem: On the wire we gather / In a nearly-ready row / We won't shiver in the winter / When the cold winds blow / I wonder which wee swallow / Has the job of shouting "Go!" 'Our' swallows were alone again, flying around their familiar territory.

I (at least) was surprised to learn that little is known about House Martins on their wintering grounds in Africa; apparently, only one British-ringed bird has ever been recaptured. Swallows often fly low and assemble in huge roosts in reedbeds on their wintering grounds, so their recaptures are well documented. Stephen Moss, in *Swallows: a biography* (2020), witnesses such a roost in South Africa. House Martins, on the other hand, when seen at all, are often flying high and do not form large roosts; hence the absence of recapture.

Closer to home, in 1996, I noted a colony of 66 apparently occupied nests under the parapets of the bridge spanning the River Shannon at Banagher. I did not, however, record how many were on the Co. Galway side. A pair were feeding young in a nest at the Beautiful Bird pub in Lawrencetown on the 4th of October 2009, a late date.

Stephen Heery

JOHN TEMPLE LANG RIP

John Temple Lang, who has recently died, played a major role in the protection of our Irish birds and their environment. He was the founding figure of the Irish Wildbird Conservancy (IWC) that is now BirdWatch Ireland. A solicitor by profession, he held a senior role in the European Commission in Brussels where, at all times, he was a supporter of Ireland's environmental interests.

I corresponded with him over the years and it was also always a pleasure to meet him at the annual BirdWatch/RSPB bird conferences.

In recent months, just before his untimely death, John drafted a piece for me on the setting up of the IWC in 1970. While, sadly, we never got to fully finalise it, I hope to include this piece in the next *Newsletter*. There is a very extensive obituary in the *Irish Times* of November 19th for those who have on-line or print access. Alternatively, I can send a copy on request.

NS

WOODCOCK IN COUNTY GALWAY

A scarce but possibly under recorded Galway resident, the Woodcock is a widespread passage and winter migrant, with birds arriving in October/November and departing the following March/early April. Opinions differ as to when the Woodcock was first noted breeding in Galway. Vesey-Fitzgerald (1939) stated that there was evidence of Woodcock breeding in Galway as far back as 1770. Palmer (1891) noted that Woodcock had been first recorded breeding on the Clonbrock

estate north-west of Ballinasloe sometime around 1868 and that birds had bred there in most years since then, while also noting reports of Woodcock breeding in the wooded hills in south Galway prior to the discovery of breeding at Clonbrock. Moffat (1899) was not so assured of these reports of breeding, quoting the omission of the Woodcock as a species whose eggs were to be protected in the Act for the Preservation of Game, passed by the Irish Parliament in 1786, as 'a convincing proof that no Irish landowner at the time believed Woodcock to be nesting on their land. By the late 1940s, it had extended its breeding range as far west as Ballynahinch and Kylemore. The Breeding Atlas survey of 1968-1972 recorded breeding or probable breeding in a number of 10km squares in Connemara south-east of Maam Cross, in north-east Galway and across south Galway as far east as Woodford. The Breeding Atlas survey of 1988-1991 recorded only about thirteen 10km squares with birds breeding or present, though Ruttledge (1994) considered this a gross underestimate owing to the difficulty of accurately censuring this species. The Breeding Atlas survey of 2007-2011 recorded no confirmed or probable breeding in Co. Galway, with birds recorded as possibly breeding in only two 10km squares.

The crepuscular and nocturnal nature of breeding Woodcock dictates that dedicated surveying at dusk and after dark is essential for locating displaying birds and it is thought that little such work was carried out during the last two Breeding Atlas surveys. It was persistently searched for between Moycullen and Maam Cross during the breeding seasons of the most recent Breeding Atlas survey and no trace of it could be found. Suitable breeding habitat for the species undoubtedly exists in east and south Galway but, as noted previously, dedicated survey work is required to ascertain its true breeding status. The only recent record of a displaying bird was of one roding east of Lough Cutra at Derrykeel on 25th April 2021.

North-west Russia constitutes the main breeding area for migrant Woodcocks wintering in Britain and Ireland, followed by Scandinavia and Finland (Hoodless et al, 2020). Peak arrival of wintering birds occurs in November and it is widespread and sometimes numerous in suitable habitat, particularly so in Connemara. Thompson (1850) stated that Galway was known to have many excellent Woodcock shoots. 140 were shot – 55 on one day alone – by five guns over three days around Christmas of 1842 or 1843 at Ross, Co. Galway (Ussher & Warren, 1900).

Woodcock is a not uncommon winter and passage migrant in Inishmore. Ussher recalled being shown a location near Dun Aengus where fifty or sixty emaciated Woodcocks were found during autumn passage. It is less commonly recorded on passage in Inishbofin, no doubt owing to its much-reduced suitable cover. In Co. Galway, birds ringed in Russia and Scandinavia are, as elsewhere in Ireland, regularly recovered in winter while smaller numbers of birds ringed in the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Portugal have also been recovered. Notable ringing recoveries have included the following:



- 1910** One ringed in Galway in 1910 was recovered in Minho, Portugal, on 28th December 1910.
- 1929** A bird ringed at Jamtland, Sweden, on 1st August 1928 was shot in Galway on 10th January 1929.
- 1929** A bird ringed at Jamtland, Sweden, on 27th June 1929 was shot in Galway (1,692km WSW) on 21st December 1929.
- 1980** One ringed at Helogoland in Germany on 2nd April 1980 was shot at Rosscahill (1,126km W) on 20th December 1980.
- 1985** One ringed at Ballater, Grampian in Scotland on 13th August 1984 was shot at Tuam (537km SW) on 10th November 1985.
- 2009** An adult ringed at Helgoland, Germany, on 7th March 2009 was shot at Glann, Oughterard (1,131km W) on 18th December 2009.
- 2014** An adult male ringed at Kamenka, Primorskiy District, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation, on 22nd June 2014 was shot in Galway (2,473km W) on 6th December 2014
- 2015** A first-year bird ringed at Novosaratovka, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation, on 9th October 2014 was shot at Coolcarta West near Clonfert (2,441km W) on 20th January 2015.

- Hoodless, A., Heward, C.J. and Williams, O., 2020.** Migration and movements of Woodcocks wintering in Britain & Ireland. *British Birds*, 113: 256-278.
- Moffat, C.B., 1899.** The Woodcock as an Irish Breeding Bird. *The Irish Naturalist*, 8: 109–112.
- Palmer, J.E., 1891.** Breeding of the Woodcock in Ireland. *The Zoologist Series III* 15: 191-2.
- Thompson, W., 1849-1851.** *The Natural History of Ireland, Volumes I to III.* Reeve, Benham & Reeve, London.
- Ussher, R.J. and Warren, R., 1900.** *Birds of Ireland.* Guerney and Jackson, London.
- Vesey-Fitzgerald, B., 1939.** *A Book of British Waders.* Collins, London.

Aonghus O Donail

A LIST OF BIRDS IN COUNTIES GALWAY & MAYO BY R.F. RUTLEDGE

(Continued from Tree Creeper)

Great Tit. *Parus major newtoni* (Prazak)

Resident and common but not as widespread as the two following species. Rare in Achill Island where proof of breeding is still lacking. Very rare in Connemara.

Blue Tit. *Parus caeruleus obscurus* (Prazak)

Resident, widespread and common. There is no evidence that it is resident in Clare Island or other marine islands except Achill where a few breed. The only record for the Mullet appears to be one at Bingham Castle for two days in March 1922. I have, however, found it as far west as Clifden in Co. Galway and it nests at Kylemore and Carna, Ballinahinch and Roundstone.

Coal Tit. *Parus ater hibernicus* O. (Grant)

Resident, common and generally distributed - its range extends to woods on the coast line in both counties. It has spread to Achill by 1900; Dr. C.B. Ticehurst saw pair three in 1904 and it is now said to breed in Glendarary.

Long-tailed Tit. *Aegitalos candatus rosaceus* (Matthews)

Resident. Until the end of January 1945, it was common except in bare country and large numbers could be seen hunting for food in company with other tits in winter and soaring. The severe spell at the end of January 1945 took such a toll that it is now exceptional to find any of these birds in most parts of the counties. It must be considered rare at present. Some survived very locally, but no recovery has been made similar to that after the 1916/17 winter. I have seen it as far west as Ballinahinch woods in Connemara in June and G.R. Humphreys has seen it in the Kylemore woods. In May 1944, I saw numbers near Spiddal in Connemara and at Louisburg in January 1944 where W.A. Wallace states they are only seen in winter. Ussher knew it to occur in Achill.

Red-backed Shrike. *Lanius colluria colluria* (L)

One was obtained at Eeragh Island Lighthouse, Aran Islands, Co. Galway on October 3rd 1927.

Waxwing. *Bombycilla garrulous garrulous* (Mullet)

Has twice occurred in Co. Galway – one at Craughwell March 18th 1893; one at Ballinasloe January 14th 1895 (*Birds of Ireland*, Ussher and Warren p. 45). In February 1909 nine visited Eagle Island (*Irish Nat. Vol xxiv* p. 15) and in Co. Mayo there are now two further records in 1946; one was seen and clearly identified by W.A. Wallace at Oldhead, near Louisburgh on December 11th; one was identified by W. Rutledge near Mullaranny on December 26th.

Spotted Flycatcher. *Muscicapa striata striata* (Pall)

Summer visitor, May to September. Earliest date May 2nd 1945. Latest date September 2nd. In 1932 it wasn't seen before May 29th and was exceptionally scarce all that summer. Somewhat local, its numbers fluctuate and none appeared in the Westport district in 1924. Not seen by Messers Fitter or Course in Achill in 1938 and 1939, though Ussher recorded it as a regular visitor there.

J. Walpole-Bond found it nesting in 1906 and a pair probably nested in 1947. Breeds as far as the shores of Clew Bay in Co. Mayo and in Co. Galway at Ballinahinch (McClintock) though it is very scarce generally west of Lough Corrib. I have not noticed it on any marine Island

Pied Flycatcher. *Muscicapa hypoleuca hypoleuca* (Pall)

Very rare straggler. Has occurred once in spring and three times in autumn. In Co. Mayo an adult male was obtained in Dugort on Achill Island on May 9th 1920. The specimen is now in my possession. One was said to have been captured in Louisburgh on November 23rd 1921. Mrs Gough has

twice observed a bird which came in 1928 to Radford House near Athenry, Co. Galway, one on September 15th 1928 and one on September 26th 1930, respectively.

Note: For several species Major Rutledge precedes their names with 'British' and in one case 'Irish' (Coal Tit). I think the feeling then was that they were somewhat different in plumage from their equivalent European ones. I have omitted these prefixes. Not sure what the basis was as it is not mentioned nowadays as far as I know. An early form of 'Brexit' difference perhaps! Has anyone else an opinion?

NS

BIRDS IN POETRY

'Lonely, White Fields' is another carefully structured poem by Mary Oliver. The introductory lines remind us of John Clare's gift of painting a word-picture with a few deft brush strokes. The beauties and terrors of the natural world are conveyed in lines of brilliant linguistic effect.

Pat Finnegan

This is a repeat from a well-chosen poem by Pat in the 2001 *Newsletter* and I extend a repeat thanks to him for this.

NS

Lonely, White Fields

Every night
the owl
with his wild monkey-face
calls through the black branches,
and the mice freeze
and the rabbits shiver
in the snowy fields —
and then there is the long, deep trough of silence
when he stops singing, and steps
into the air.
I don't know
what death's ultimate
purpose is, but I think
this: whoever dreams of holding his
life in his fist
year after year into the hundreds of years
has never considered the owl —
how he comes, exhausted,
through the snow,
through the icy trees...
past snags and vines, wheeling
out of barns and church steeples,
turning this way and that way
through the mesh of every obstacle —
undeterred by anything
filling himself time and time again
with a red and digestible joy
sickled up from the lonely, white fields —
and how at daybreak,
as though everything had been done
that must be done, the fields
swell with a rosy light,
the owl fades
back into the branches,
the snow goes on falling
flake after perfect flake.

Mary Oliver