



BIRDWATCH GALWAY

This newsletter is issued in support of the Galway Branch of BirdWatch Ireland. To get involved or to get on the email notice list contact Secretary Blaithe Kennedy (blaithe.kennedy@gmail.com) or Chairperson Cyril Manning (cyril.manning@hotmail.com)

CUAN CAITRIONA

It is often thought that birdwatching in the outer part of Galway Bay - that is west of Barna or Spiddal - is not as rewarding as in the Inner Bay. This is a mistake. Many years back I regularly walked stretches of the coastline following the often misleading signposts and way marks for *Sli Chonamara*. Although I rarely encounter another human I never fail to record a good list of birds. A particularly productive spot is Cuan Caitriona near Inveran. Coming from Galway after Spiddal you pass *An Poitín Stíl* on your right then on the same side a yellow-painted two-story house. Immediately after this house you take the next left-hand bye-road down to the sea. There are many such roads so be sure to get the correct one. A good number of winter waders are always present and it is one of the best spots for Purple Sandpiper. I once had excellent views of Brambling there. There is usually a Great Northern Diver or two in sight and lots of seals. I write this particularly for the benefit of members living in or near this area. **NS**

BLACKSOFT SANDS

Blacktoft Sands RSPB Reserve is situated in south-east Yorkshire, on the south side of the east-flowing River Ouse, just before it is joined by the north-flowing River Trent to form the Humber estuary. These are major embanked rivers. The term 'Sands' may confuse because the reserve is based on hundreds of acres of estuarine reedbed with grazing marshes and scrub. Reed cutting, and grazing by Polish Konic ponies which are well-adapted to wetlands, creates a height/age mosaic of reeds. Cattle and sheep graze the marshes. Large open areas ('slightly salty lagoons') are maintained and their water-levels managed for optimum seasonal and avian diversity. Raised hides overlook some of these pools.

I knew Blacktoft only from envious telephone conversations with my brother who lives not too far away. We visited the place together for two hours on the fine evening of August 24th 2023. The light was perfect, the birds' plumage crystal clear and some were less than forty metres away. There were several green sandpipers, hints of green on their dark plumage, a few spotted redshanks, silvery with noticeable eye stripes, snipe, long-necked and golden as they waded in shallow water, and ruff. Close at hand, two great white egrets

were stabbing the mud from time to time from their great height. Little egrets were plentiful. A party of gadwall kept apart from the teal, wigeon and mallard. Several young mute swans slept on a little island with their warm-brown necks snaked across their backs. Someone saw a spotted crane moving quickly along the edge of the reeds, too quick for my scramble to the telescope. But I did see a reed warbler climbing a stem and bending it down to the water as it reached the top, and I saw the chestnut back and patterned wing coverts of a bearded reedling before it disappeared.

I didn't take too much notice of the long list of recently seen noteworthy birds (some perhaps still there) at the small reception hut, not wanting to spoil my modest birdwatching that evening. We were too late in the season to see avocets nesting on the little islands in the lagoon or to watch the breeding antics of the marsh harriers. And somehow the famous marsh harrier roost spectacle, that continues all winter, eluded us. Neither did the great bitterns emerge this time from their reed forest.

Just before we left the hide, a Cetti's warbler, also resident, sang from ten metres away; even the *Collins Bird Guide* cannot help using the onomatopoeic phrase 'Listen!...What's my name?...Cetti-Cetti-Cetti—that's it!' In the dusk, on the way to the car park, a barn owl flew over the fields, over the embankment and across the reeds. It was a less than ordinary two hours for Blacktoft Sands, but it was more than ordinary for me.

Stephen Heery

LOCAL PATCH – INCHQUIN

Most birdwatchers have a favoured place to visit regularly and 'Local Patch' is a good description. In my case it is Inchiquin on the Corrib near Headford.

In winter birds are seen usually on the rocky outcrops on the Greenfield side. as regularly in view are **Cormorant, Great Crested Grebe, Mute Swan, Tufted Duck, Mallard** and many others. From time to time the less common **Great Northern Diver** can be spotted further out on the lake.

In the small reed-bed to the north of the end of the causeway you can usually spot **Moorhen and Little Grebe**. Turning left at the end of the causeway you can at times see **Redshank** on the right-hand shore while in the fields and trees the classic winter birds - **Redwing and Fieldfare** - are usually present in good numbers. Turning back and right at the junction and then walking over some fields on your right there is usually a flock of **Greylag Geese** and if you are really lucky you might also come upon the winter flock of **Greenland White-**

fronted Geese to be seen also at Rostaff. This area yields more **Redshank, Wigeon** and **Tufted Duck** and very occasionally **Pochard** as well.

In summer things change – gone are the winter **Lapwing, Golden Plover** and others but the gulls remain and there is usually a small colony of breeding **Common Gulls** on the rocky islets which Arctic Terns also use. **Common Sandpipers** can occasionally be seen flitting low over the waters and the **Cuckoo's** call can carry a long distance over the lake. In May flocks of **Whimbrel**, with their haunting call, use the area as they head north to their Iceland and other Arctic breeding grounds. It is a favourite haunt of the **Sand Martin** – catching all those flies! – and at times towards the end of August I've had up to 800 recorded on the ESB wires as the birds prepare to head for Africa.

What makes Inchiquin a really special place for viewing birds is the unique causeway, giving a spectacular 360 degree field of view of the great expanse of the lake's water, which also enhances the light to a magical degree. It is a great place to watch birds

NS

WINGSPAN

When you have had enough of TV and screens over Christmas, maybe it's time to try a board game with the family. *Wingspan* (2019) developed by Elizabeth Hargrave, is a bird-themed game for 1-5 players. It is a game in which you play birds into a choice of habitats (woodlands, grasslands, and wetlands) for points which are all counted up at the end of the game to decide the victor.

The physical design of the game is very attractive, with playing boards, bird food tokens, multicoloured eggs, and dice with 6 different bird foods, and a very attractive set of cards, with nice birds designs with some bird features on them. A bird-house (that you have to construct) is used to throw the dice and is a charming element.

E of the game combine with the effects of other adjacent birds to create large combinations to more efficiently gather food, eggs and more bird cards to play.

The winner is the player with the most points accumulated from birds, extra points cards, end-of-round goals, eggs, cached food, and tucked birds. Games last 45-90 minutes depending on number of players. It's a strategy game but is not hugely competitive – you essentially build up your own habitats but without negatively affecting the other players.



As it's a North American composition, all the birds are found there, but there are of course many familiar birds or their close relations that we will recognise.

My friends who play board games recommend checking out the rules on YouTube in advance as this seems to be the easiest way to navigate the rules, that initially seem to be quite complex. As you get more familiar with the game, it will all become clearer no doubt.

The box suggests from the age of 14 up, but that may be a bit restrictive, as younger kids can enjoy it too. Available from Amazon for around €50 and there is a digital version too (about €10) if you'd like to try it out in advance

Aiden O Colmain

A LIST OF THE BIRDS OF THE COUNTIES GALWAY & MAYO by R.F. RUTLEDGE (Published 1950) (Continued from Whitethroat)

White's Thrush : *Turdus dauma aureus* L.

One was shot on January 9th 1885 in Westport Demesne Co. Mayo. It is preserved in the National Museum Dublin.

Fieldfare. *Turdus pilaris* L.

Regular winter-visitor. Arrives in October departs in April my latest being April 29th. Irregular in numbers. In some years scarce or almost absent, as in the winter of 1917-18. Said to visit the marine islands in winter.

Decimated by the severe winter of 1947.

Mistle-Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* L

Resident and generally distributed and winter-visitor. Though sparsely distributed in western districts it is increasing. In 1924 Good noticed an increase in the Westport district of Co. Mayo and is now plentiful there. Though Mrs Bingham did not know it on the Mullet up to 1924 and I have not seen it there it has now reached the vicinity of Belmullet. Breeds in Achill where it was unknown previous to 1860. I have not seen it on the more isolated off the coast, but even in the most desolate parts of Connemara as at Lettermullen and on Gorumna Island it breeds and is in evidence as far west as Clifden. Erislannan and Roundstone in which areas it becomes quite numerous in autumn. There is a migration in autumn. Decimated by the severe weather on 1947.

Song Thrush. *Turdus eritorum erictorum* Turton

Common resident and winter-visitor. Has evidently increased and spread in Ussher's time as it now breeds sparingly on the Mullet although even in 1924 it was still considered rare there in summer. Breed numerous in the most desolate parts of Connemara. Scarce as a breeding species on the marine islands with the exception of Achill and the less remote parts of Gorumna.. A very few breed on Clare Isle and, Inishturk, Inishmore and Inishmaan though not on Inishere which it is evidently absent in summer and on which I have not seen it. In Inishbofin too it is absent as a breeding bird. Not as widespread as the Blackbird and not so plentiful. After a very noticeable scarcity in July and August numbers increase in September and immigration is apparent in October. Almost exterminated in the severe winter of 1916 -1917 it had regained its normal status by 1928. The end of January 1945 was even more disastrous the offsets of which are still apparent. F. Pike considered that it had ceased to be a breeding-species in Achill following the severe February of 1947.

Redwing. *Turdus musicus musicus* L

Abundant winter-visitor and passage migrant. Generally distributed from mid-October until mid-April. Numbers vary from year to year and to some extent in accordance with the weather conditions.

Ring-Ouzel *Turdus torquatus torquatus*

Rare though previously not uncommon as a summer -visitor. I have failed to find this bird throughout ideal habitat, as has been the experience of others in 1945. According to Ussher it nested in the mountains of Mayo, Connemara, Achill Island though it was decreasing. (Clare Island Survey aves p7 and p 46.) Good did not recollect having seen it. A. W. Steel fox saw one on Clare Island between 1909 and 1911 but J Burke and I failed to find any or to obtain any information of any such bird in 1945. E. Brown who resided in Achill told me that he had only seen two, in June 1939, on Craughan. In Co. Galway I have made extensive but fruitless search in the Maam Valley mountains, near Kilkerrin and other ranges. Shepherds in most places are emphatic that they know no such bird. Mrs. Gough saw a single such bird evidently on migration near Athenry Co. Galway for one day only on September 13th 1944.

To be continued

NS

BIRDS IN POETRY

1947 George Mackay Brown was born in Stromness in the Orkney Islands in 1921. In his teens he developed tuberculosis and he suffered a recurrence in 1952 but survived to graduate from Edinburgh University. Following a period of postgraduate study he returned to Orkney and lived as a writer and one of the finest Scottish lyric poets until his death in 1996. **Pat Finnegan**

. THE HAWK

On Sunday the hawk fell on Bigging
And a chicken screamed
Lost in its own little snowstorm.
And on Monday he fell on the moor
And the Field Club
Raised a hundred silent prisms.
And on Tuesday he fell on the hill
And the happy lamb
Never knew why the loud collie straddled
him.
And on Wednesday he fell on a bush
And the blackbird
Laid by his little flute for the last time.
And on Thursday he fell on Cleat
And peerie Tom's rabbit
Swung in a single arc from shore to hill.
And on Friday he fell on a ditch
But the rampant rat,
That eye and that tooth, quenched his
flame.
And on Saturday he fell on Bigging
And Jock lowered his gun
And nailed a small wing over the corn.

George Mackay Brown

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From a much earlier newsletter. Thanks to Pat . **NS**