



# CAIRDE EANLAITH NA GAILLIMHE BIRDWATCH GALWAY

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY

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The aim of the Newsletter is to give Galway members a local viewpoint and to promote a common interest in birds and their conservation.

## THOUGHT FROM THE CHAIR

"Hobby – a favourite leisure-time activity or occupation" – so say the Oxford dons. Birdwatching is just that for many. A nice and healthy way of spending spare time. But there can be more to it. And the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease brought home to me how much more BirdWatch means to a lot of our active Galway Branch members. Those who are involved in surveys to monitor birds and their habitats know how important it is to obtain consistent, long-term sets of data. Any gaps in our knowledge disarm us when it comes to fighting nature's corner in conflicts between conservation and development, for instance. Therefore, the moratorium on all field work during this spring and early summer came as quite a blow which will leave us with odd blanks in I-WeBS, CBS, and other runs of figures. However, the risks involved in pursuing these activities and jeopardizing other people's livelihood were too serious to even contemplate venturing out into the countryside. As long as this sort of thing does not happen too often statisticians can juggle non-existent data into meaningful pictures. And in the meantime, our time can be spent doing other things to benefit 'our' cause. Like writing papers and books to make available to a wider audience the data we have gathered, or looking into proposed developments to make sure they are not adversely affecting prime habitats; there are people out there waiting to be recruited into membership of BirdWatch and there are reserves and hides to be looked after. Despite the lack of getting out and about, which is regrettable but unavoidable, there is still a lot one can do to support the general BirdWatch objectives - as was evident from the extremely long agenda for one of our recent Branch meetings. The work is there and all who keep making contributions in whatever way or shape deserve appreciation for their efforts!

Marianne ten Cate

## BIRDS IN POETRY

Mary Oliver is an American poet, born in Ohio in 1935, who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1984 for her collection *American Primitive*. She is a very accomplished poet of great technical resource and in this poem she celebrates with lyrical intensity her empathetic relationship with nature.

Pat Finnegan

### Egrets

Where the path closed down and over,  
through the scumbled leaves,  
fallen branches,  
through the knotted catbrier,  
kept going. Finally  
could not save my arms  
from the thorns; soon the mosquitoes  
smelled me, hot and wounded, and came  
wheeling and whining.

And that's how I came to the edge of the pond:

black and empty except for a spindle of bleached reeds  
at the far shore

which, as I looked, wrinkled suddenly

into three egrets— a shower of white fire!

Even half-asleep they had

such faith in the world

that had made them —

tilting through the water,

unruffled, sure,

by the laws of their faith not logic,

they opened their wings

softly and stepped over every dark thing.

Mary Oliver

## Khor Dubai Winter Count

Travel and happy chance gave me an opportunity last Jan to take part in the winter wetland count of the Khor Dubai – a deep creek inlet running in from the Arabian Gulf. 'Winter' there is an acceptable 27C with cloudless skies! Therefore a wide hat and water bottle are necessary additions to binoculars and telescope – the sun and warmth being a far cry from the equivalent Inner Galway Bay count taking place on the same Saturday!

The count for the day came to 6472 waterbirds, mainly waders including Kentish plover, lesser and greater sand plover, little stint, red wattle plover and Pacific golden plover. Pride of place must go to the 1702 greater flamingo, Caspian and gull-billed terns and the raptors – osprey, spotted eagles and marsh harriers. A total of forty species of waders and other waterbirds were counted - more or less the same number as we encounter on the Inner Galway Bay counts. Of these about half would be particular to the UAE and the remainder would be found here in Galway also.

## Green sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) present in East Galway in winter, spring and summer of 1999 - 2001.

Sometime in May 2000, Padraig Higgins telephoned me to say that he had seen a "white-tailed" bird on the river near his home place near Monivea, east Galway. His father (now deceased) had first seen "a bird with a white tail down by the river" in June 1999. Subsequent information provided by Padraig indicated that the bird was seen in June and July 1999, and then each month from January to August 2000. It was very visible from February to April and very secretive during May to July. It was seen only once in June 2000.

Sightings on one occasion made him adamantly believe that there were two similar birds involved, although he has never seen two simultaneously. Padraig walks this stretch of the river every three weeks or so

We made a visit one evening at the end of June 2000 but saw nothing. The river is arterially-drained with high spoil banks but is well-vegetated with pondweeds and emergent species. The water was low and there were many muddy and stony banks. Grey wagtails, kingfishers and dippers also use this stretch of river.

I made a second visit on 24th July 2000 at 07.30 and stopped by the upper bridge with binoculars. I immediately saw a wader with a very conspicuous white tail fly from about 20m to alight on stones at 50m. The tail appeared all-white with no tail barring and was fanned a little on its short flight. There were no protruding legs visible. It made a few 'bobbing' actions. Its undersides were pure white and its back very dark uniform brown or dark grey. I could not distinguish any mottling from that distance. It very soon flew up-river at a height of about 6m and its very dark uniform back contrasted sharply with its white rump and tail. Its wings were pointed. It made what seemed like a high double-syllable call, tseet-tseet, tseet-tseet, and descended sharply into the river channel beyond sight. Ten minutes later it flew back down towards me and alighted, again from a height, just out of sight.

The bird was a wader, smaller than a redshank but larger than a common sandpiper. The uniformly dark back, white rump and tail, pure white undersides, its bobbing action and its call indicated it was a **green sandpiper**.

The site is regularly watched by Padraig. This bird was present in June and July 1999 and appeared again in January 2000. It was seen at least 20 times until August 2000. The pure white of the tail makes it probable that it was the same bird in both years. Padraig has seen a green sandpiper there again in January and March 2001 and it appears to be the same bird as last year.

Green sandpipers are usually seen, both inland and on the coast, during autumn migration from early July to October and, less often, during spring migration in March and April. There are a few records each year of winter birds and occasionally birds are seen in summer on the south coast. This is an unusual record from an under-recorded part of east Galway.

Stephen Heery

## I-WeBS, CBS & Local

As members will be aware the Foot and Mouth outbreak and necessary precautions have had a major impact on birdwatching activities. Fortunately the I-WeBS counts had been almost completed for the 2000/01 period and this is a reminder to those with outstanding count records to complete them and return them either to me or to Ruttledge House – attention Olivia Crowe. The CBS survey is to be curtailed with no early visits permitted and only the possibility of a June visit in certain circumstances. All local events are off for the moment. **NS**