



CAIRDE EANLAITH NA GAILLIMHE BIRDWATCH GALWAY

www.birdwatchgalway.org
QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY
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Issue No. 37 – 2/2002 23 April 2002

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

THOUGHT FROM THE CHAIR

In *Arctic Ireland*, the extraordinary story of the Great Frost and Forgotten Famine of 1740-41, David Dickson quotes an anonymous poet who lamented the decimation of bird populations as a result of the extremely cold winter of 1739-40:

No lark is left to wake the morn,
Or rouse the youth with early horn;
The blackbird's melody is o'er
And pretty robin sings no more.
No thrush to serenade the grove
And soothe the passions into love,
Thou sweetest songster of the throng,
Now only live in poet's song.

This couplet of the poem made me realise, once again, what a desolate place the world would be without birds, without their song. During our last very mild winter the dawn chorus never really died down and I have had an abundance of birds outside my bedroom window all through the spring. I have to admit that, at times, they even annoyed me. But, would I want to live without them? Certainly not!

What is it in birds, which so much appeals to so many of us? Their colourful plumage, their lively flight, their melodious song or raucous call? Or is it, too, that deep down we know, that if the birds do not fare well it is very likely we are facing into the same fate? The latter may not always be a conscious consideration but I am sure that most of us take part in surveys and conservation projects for more than only bird-centered reasons. We do not only want to monitor bird populations for the sake of crunching figures but we also want to keep a check on the environment in which they – and we – live. Especially in an age when environmental aberrations are more often caused by human activities than by climatic events such as the mini Ice Age referred to above. If detrimental changes are caused by our own species, we can at least try to call a halt to them. Therefore, I hope the officers in BirdWatch headquarters will formulate strong policies on various issues while we keep supplying them with the data to prove their points. And, in the meantime, I will enjoy the dawn chorus and hope you will join us on the 12th of May - National Dawn Chorus Day.

Marianne ten Cate

IT NEVER RAINS IN...

Southern California where I decided to take some time out this winter. While it wasn't planned as a wildlife holiday, I packed my new 8x42 Leica binocs and American bird book. I split my time between a farm in the hills near the border and Encinitas on the Pacific Coast. Weather-wise, it was cold nights and hot sunny days, up to 25°.

On the farm itself there was plenty of bird life – Acorn Woodpeckers hammering on the palm trees, Anna's Humming Birds on the specialised feeders, Red-winged Blackbirds, American Crows, etc. The Black Phoebe Flycatcher was everywhere, although insects seemed to be few. Apart from having a much greater number of species, America has a multiplicity of races within species. If you don't believe me, look up the Dark-eyed Junco, a Bullfinch look-alike with a large variety of plumages.

Outside the farm was a wilderness area of Holm oaks, cacti, big rocks, dirt trails and sparse undergrowth – a landscape instantly recognisable to anyone raised on Hollywood B-movie cowboys like Roy Rogers, Gene Autry or The Lone Ranger. This is the habitat of rattlesnakes (hibernating), coyotes (heard at night), vultures, Scrub Jays and the Californian Tree Frog (the only frog that says "Ribbit-ribbit"). As I sat on a lookout rock one day, I was personally checked out by a Turkey Vulture.

On the coast, the waders were very approachable; I could get to within 2 metres of them. Although they were different

species, they looked very similar to our own waders and had similar names – Dunlin, Sanderling, Godwit, Whimbrel, etc., presumably filling the same niches. The Western Grebe is an elegant bird and a larger version of our Great Crested. The awkward-looking Brown Pelicans were surprisingly expert flyers as they glided over surf and surfers alike off Swami Beach. Other times, they dived like Gannets.

I identified 33 species new to me. I gave up on warblers, just as I do here, and gulls (sorry Tim). Tick of the trip was an Olive Sparrow, a tropical bird which, according to my book, was as much out of place in California as yours truly. If I go there again, I will rent a 4-wheel drive, complete with surfboard and a bucket of fake tan, man.

Gerry O'Keeffe

BIRDS IN POETRY

The siskin is a resident finch and is a regular visitor to gardens in towns and cities during the winter. This poem by Theodore Roethke, an American Poet who was born in Michigan, captures its vivacious behaviour.

Pat Finnegan

The Siskin

*The bank swallows veer and dip,
Diving down at my windows,
Then flying almost straight upward
Like bats in daytime,
And their shadows, bigger,
Race over the thick grass;
An the finches pitch through the air, twittering;
And the small mad siskins flit by,
Flying upward in little skips and erratic leaps;
Or they sit sideways on limber dandelion stems,
Bending them down to the ground;
Or perch and peck at larger flower-crowns,
Springing, one to another,
The last - abandoned stalk always quivering
Back into straightness;
Or they fling themselves against tree trunks,
Scuttling down and around like young squirrels,
Birds furious as bees.*

*Now they move all together!-
These airy hippety-hop skippers,
Light as seed blowing off thistles!
And I seem to lean forward,
As my eyes follow after
Their sunlight leaping.*

Theodore Roethke

**Acknowledgement: Theodore Roethke, Collected Poems
Faber and Faber**

A NICE SURPRISE

A treecreeper is an unusual sighting in my back garden. I've seen about 6 in years of watching. However, on 3 March, 2002, as I watched one from the conservatory, spiraling up a tree trunk, a movement to my left caught my eye. I glanced, to see two goldcrests about 6 or 7 feet away from me, in a hedge. I was just breaking my glance - to go back to the treecreeper - when the 'goldcrest' nearest me, which was facing away, turned its head and the world went into slow motion. This 'goldcrest' had more orange in its crest and it had stripes on its head, where no self-respecting goldcrest has stripes. I was seeing, from about 6 feet, a firecrest for the first time. I have no doubts about it being a firecrest, because I had the two together for comparison - the other bird was a goldcrest, about a foot further away. The firecrest moved about 10 feet along the hedge, away from me and then flew into a neighbour's garden, out of sight. The

whole experience seemed to last for ages, but was more likely only a minute or less.

I was not in a position to wait to see if it would come back - I'd two people waiting at the door, with their coats on, ready to be driven to Roscrea!

This bird has haunted me since - I expected it to appear when, on 2 April, I spotted a treecreeper. I think the two will be forever linked in my head. Every twitch of a twig has me grabbing binoculars, hoping to see it again. I have watched goldcrests intensively since but alas no repeat!

Brendan Dunne.

GALWAY NATURALISTS' FIELD CLUB

Congratulations to Maria Long and an enthusiastic committee on the recent founding of a new naturalists' field club for Galway. A varied programme has been arranged including botanical trips to the Burren and Connemara. Further details from: galwaynaturalists@eircom.net or look up their web-site: <http://homepage.eircom.net/~gnfc>

COMING EVENTS

Saturday 4 May, short outing with Tim Griffin at Rusheen Bay: assemble at Rusheen Bay sailing school car park at 10.30am.

Sunday 12 May, National Dawn Chorus Day outings, all starting at 5.30am:

- the garden of Breandan O Scannail, Beach Road, Clifden;
- the grounds of NUIG at Dangan, Galway;
- Coole Park near Gort, in conjunction with Duchas;
- Portumna Forest Park with Alex Copland.

Wednesday 22 May, BirdWatch Galway members committee meeting, Anno Santo Hotel, Threadneedle Road, Salthill. 8pm.

Saturday 22 June, bird ringing with John Murphy in Newmarket-on-Fergus, Co. Clare. For details ring Marianne at 091-552519 nearer the time.

CBS & I-WeBS

A reminder that after the 'foot and mouth' break of last year the Countryside Bird Survey is back on this year and for those doing squares completion of the first visit will have a mid May deadline.

For those with I-WeBS forms still outstanding a reminder that it is time to complete and send in the paperwork!

'JANUARY' NEWSLETTER

Because of a computer glitch (what else!) at HQ those of you with Galway City addresses did not get a copy of the last (No 36) Galway Newsletter. Apologies for this and we are asking that it be included with the current issue.

BIRDWATCH GALWAY ON LINE

Our website has got off to a fine start - hundreds of visitors. Do please make full use of it at:

www.birdwatchgalway.org

Thanks again to Chris Peppiatt for making it possible.