



**CAIRDE EANLAITH NA GAILLIMHE
BIRDWATCH GALWAY**
www.birdwatchgalway.org
QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY
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This is a local newsletter. To help us keep distribution costs down we ask that you agree to receive it by e-mail. Over sixty members have done so to date. Please send me your E-mail address if not done so already.

Thought from the Chair

Dear friends, as I come to write my first 'thought from the chair' spring is well-advanced and from my open window I can hear small groups of Whimbrel (or Maybird as it is often called in Ireland) uttering their tittering cries as they pass through Lough Atalia. I'm acutely aware that I have a hard act to follow and am sure that we all very much appreciate Marianne ten Cate's efforts as chairperson over the last four years.

When you read this newsletter you will see survey work for the Galway County Heritage Plan, I-WeBS and CBS mentioned. You might feel daunted by the thought of participating in these projects, or that 'I don't know enough'. However, most of these schemes are not all that difficult to do and you may be surprised to learn that amateurs carry out a fair amount of the bird survey work in Ireland. Included in this would be data used for atlases and that used by the government and local authorities in planning issues, as well as things you see quoted in the press. With this in mind, why not contact the branch committee or HQ and volunteer to get involved?

Chris Peppiatt chris.peppiatt@iol.ie

Bird Ringing in Galway

It is a sad, but true fact, that many species of birds that were once common are now rare, not just in this country but also in the rest of Europe. It will probably not therefore surprise you to know that ringers throughout the continent collaborate in several studies of these species in an effort to try and understand such declines, and one such species under current scrutiny is the Swallow. Surprisingly as it may seem to some people, the Swallow ('Barn' Swallow to our continental cousins) has been showing a steady decline in numbers throughout Europe for the past 20 years or so, and nearly all the ringing schemes in Europe, ours included, are making a special effort to catch and ring as many as possible. My own contribution has been a total of 584 new ringed birds, most caught at roost in a nearby reed-bed or as nestlings in the past two summers. One of these birds, an immature caught in September 2002, was recovered in South Africa the following March, after travelling 9821 km southwards. Unfortunately for this individual, it did not survive a severe thunderstorm, dying after it flew into a house near Bloemfontain, Orange Free State.

Another visitor, this time in winter, from foreign shores is the Merlin. Of course we have our own resident population, but in winter this is augmented by birds from further north, mostly Icelandic birds that are identified in the hand by their larger wing measurement and weight – both being larger than 'our' Merlins. I was lucky enough to catch an adult male of this race, *subaesalon*, in mid December, the second of this species I caught during the autumn, following on from a first year male in October. We do not catch many full-grown Merlins in Ireland or Britain in any given year, typically about a dozen or so, so to catch two birds in quick succession was very pleasing. The first Merlin caught was attracted to Meadow Piptits that I had caught in mist nets set to intercept them as they went to roost on nearby bog land in early October. From the beginning of September through to mid-October ringers can catch good numbers of these birds, given the right conditions, as they migrate southwards and this year I managed to catch some 366 individual birds in this period. Three of these birds already wore rings, two birds ringed as nestlings in 2003 and one was a nestling from 2002 all ringed within a hundred metres of the capture site. The Merlin was not the only bird of prey attracted to these Piptits, with two Sparrowhawks and a Kestrel also being captured.

Fieldfares are difficult birds to catch at the best of times, and during winter 2002/03 I caught just 13 of this species. However I've had a bit more luck this year, catching 24 to date (mid January), but coincidentally, one of these birds was one I had ringed in December 2002, caught just yards away from its original capture site. Given the many thousands of Fieldfares there are around here at the moment, it's a notable coincidence and at least shows that some of these birds return to winter in exactly the same location (and field!) from year to year, something that not all winter visitors do.

Finally, could I make a plea for anybody who finds a dead bird to check it for a ring? No matter what the species, any could be ringed and would help us to understand a bit more about individual birds and their movements. Details of any ring found can be sent to the Ringing unit at the BTO, or to myself at the address below, the sender will in return receive a sheet of the original ringing details (species, age sex, place, date, etc). You don't even have to identify the bird as all rings have a unique number and so identification is easy through the BTO's computerised database, even a leg with a ring found on a tide-line somewhere can be traced as to its owner!

Chris Benson. E-mail – llaune@eircom.net

Galway County Heritage Plan 2004-2008

One of the actions of the heritage plan to which BirdWatch Galway has committed itself for the next four years is the mapping of important breeding colonies of birds in County Galway. We will do this in conjunction with staff of the DoEHLG National Parks and Wildlife Service. As funds and manpower are limited we appeal to all our members to help locate bird colonies and submit observations to me as soon as possible. We will need a grid reference and, if at all possible, a rough indication of the number of pairs in the colony. All records are welcome but to keep the project manageable fieldwork will be restricted to just three species this summer:- cormorants, grey herons and sand martins. Colonies of the latter species are always under threat as quarrying can destroy them overnight. Similarly, the trees in which herons nest are increasingly vulnerable due to encroaching development. Once we have the colonies listed and mapped there is no excuse for developers to plead ignorance of their existence. Therefore, please help and send in your records to me ASAP.

Marianne ten Cate, Ardnasillagh, Oughterard

Birds of New Zealand - Part 2 Rediscovery, Re-location and Recovery

Post war New Zealand was a time of mounting prosperity. Increased employment opportunities and the Kiwi ideal of, according to novelist C.K Stead, "fresh air, open landscapes, plenty of sunshine and to own your own car, house, bach, boat, golf clubs." attracted some 77,000 Brits between 1947 and 1975.

The resultant encroaching human population exerted more strain on an already pressurized bird fauna. Already, 32% of indigenous land and freshwater birds and 18% of seabirds were extinct, the most recent being the Huia in 1907. Information on the remaining populations of birds under threat was sparse. Vast areas of native forest and bush were unexplored owing to extremely rough terrain, such as Fiordland in the Southwestern corner of the South Island. However, it was here in 1948 that Dr. Geoffrey Orbell rediscovered the once presumed extinct Takaha, the largest living member of the Rail family. A 500 km sq. reserve was set aside, but by 1982 the population was down to 118 birds. This decline coincided with the establishment of a deer herd within the

Takaha range. Overgrazing by deer was found to have a detrimental effect on the birds' nutrition and habitat. To conserve the species, several pairs were placed on predator free islands. This measure, along with the artificial incubation of eggs and rearing of chicks, increased the island numbers to 60 and produced birds suitable for releasing into the original wild population. Today, the total number of live Takaha is around the 220 mark. Examination of other rare endemic birds by the recently established New Zealand Wildlife Service, found many species to be on the brink of extinction. In 1972, the population of Chatham Island Black Robins, isolated to just a single island, was estimated as 18 individuals - in the world!! In 1976 only 7 birds remained. Extreme measures were required. An adjacent island was purchased by Forest and Bird; 120,000 trees were planted and the last few birds netted and transported by hand, down a 60m cliff and delivered by boat to their new home. However by 1980 just 5 birds, three males and only two females, remained. To exacerbate an already desperate situation, only one of the females laid fertile eggs - Old Blue.

Between 1980 and 1989 an intense cross-fostering programme of eggs and chicks, with Chatham Island tomtits, was successful in saving the Black Robin population. Two pairs were moved to the larger nearby East Island in 1983, and it this sanctuary that now holds the main population of 250 Black Robins. Old Blue lived for 13 years and produced more eggs than any other robin. She and her partner, Old Yellow, are the sole ancestors of every robin alive today. The Adam and Eve of the Chatham Island Black Robin. The fostering programme was such a success that it has been used as a case model around the world to save endangered birds. Nearly all of New Zealand's endemic birds are still under threat from habitat loss, mammal predation, invasive weeds, disturbance and low population size. Department of Conservation staff use predator free islands to transfer birds to (Saddleback, now 5000), captive rearing (Black stilt (80) and Takehe), on-site breeding (Fairy tern - New Zealand's rarest at just 36 individuals) and continuous eradication of predators to protect species. New Zealand was the 'great bird experiment' of evolution prior to the arrival of humans. Today it retains that title because of a devoted group of conservationists and volunteers, who are committed to preserving a unique fauna in its unique habitat. Long may we have the pleasures of these 'oddball' characters of the bird world.

Enda McLoughlin

Coming Events

Sunday 16 May National Dawn Chorus Day, meet at the car park of the NUIG sports grounds in Dangan at 5am – not 4am as in *Wings*

Weekend 22/23 May, outing to Inishmore with overnight stay. Ring Marianne for details – 091 552519

Saturday 5 June, joined outing with the Galway Naturalists' Field Club to the Annagh Marsh EU-funded project run by Dave Suddaby (BW) on the Belmullet peninsula in Co. Mayo.

For further details see our Web-site or contact Chris (091-763665) or Marianne (091-552519).

Just to remind those involved that it is time to fill in returns for 2003/04 winter counts I-WeBS and to get active on those CBS squares..

