



**CAIRDE EANLAITH NA GAILLIMHE  
BIRDWATCH GALWAY**

**www.birdwatchgalway.org**  
**QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY**  
Telephone: 086 1680856 e-mail: neilsharkey@eircom.net  
Issue No. 55/06 Nov 2006

Wishing all Galway BirdWatch members and other friends of birdwatching a very happy Christmas and a good 2007

**THOUGHT FROM THE CHAIR**

The theory of global warming has been current for many years now. However, the popularity of Al Gore's documentary film 'An Inconvenient Truth' has brought the issue into the forefront of the news of late. It is thought that the temperature of the earth is rising because heat from the sun is trapped by gases in the atmosphere (carbon dioxide, methane, water vapour and nitrous oxide). This is known as the Greenhouse Effect, where increasing concentrations of these 'greenhouse gases' cause the earth's temperature to rise. The major cause of the increase of greenhouse gases (especially carbon dioxide) is human activity, principally the burning of fossil fuels (oil, gas and coal). The overwhelming body of scientific opinion now supports the global warming theory, although there is argument as to the possible extent of its effects. However, it seems that the average temperature of the globe will continue to rise and that this will give rise to increased unusual weather conditions (e.g. hurricanes) and a rise in the global sea level due to the melting of the polar ice caps. It should be recognised that global warming could actually lead to a colder Irish climate if the routes of ocean currents change, for example.

In any case, mankind's dependence on fossil fuels will have to cease as world stocks of oil, coal and gas diminish. On an individual level we can look to save energy, by improving our home insulation, using long-life light bulbs and by using renewable energy to heat our homes, for example. There are currently government grants available for homeowners who install renewable energy heating systems e.g. woodchip/pellet boilers, solar water heating and geothermal heating. On a national level more will have to be done to replace fossil fuels for electricity generation. There is a strong antipathy in this country to nuclear energy and this makes it all the more important that we embrace sources of renewable energy like wind, wave and tidal power. While these technologies do have potential to impact bird populations and it is important that they are sited properly (after thorough ecological study) to ensure that this does not happen, I feel that we will have to learn to love landscapes that include wind turbines and wave barrages.

You might ask: what does all this have to do with birds? The arrival times of spring migrants have been getting earlier and earlier across

Europe in the last three decades, as has the average date of the laying of the first clutches of these migrants' eggs. These phenomena, along with others like the earlier spawning of frogs, have been linked to global warming. Since the 1970s, the occurrence of overwintering by Chiffchaff and Blackcap, the latter now a common sight in Galway winter gardens, has increased. In recent years there have also been winter records of Garganey, Swallow and Ring Ouzel. A small (approximately 5-10 birds) group of Sandwich Terns, once strictly a summer migrant, have been overwintering in Galway Bay in the last few years.

There is the strong possibility that global warming could mean changes to the Irish breeding bird list, either additions or losses, depending of the local climatic effects. In addition, the wintering bird populations could be affected by global warming. Already Smew, which are driven from continental Europe by hard winter weather, have become scarcer in Ireland (Lough Rea offers the best chance of seeing one in Galway). A part of the Icelandic Whooper Swan population (which winters in Ireland and flocks of which can be seen at our lakes and turloughs) currently stays in Iceland all year round. If the weather in Iceland becomes milder, it may be that we no longer get to see the Whooper Swan in Ireland. How do we know these things? Well, the information about the returning dates of migrants and about the movements and occurrence of different species come from simple observations, often made by amateur enthusiasts like BirdWatch members. This means that members' participation in bird counts and surveys can provide important evidence of global changes. I would be delighted to see members becoming involved with such work.

On a different note, a birdwatcher from Waterford has made a complaint to Galway City Council about the containers used by the windsurfing school at Rusheen Bay. Some local people appear to have 'got hold of the wrong end of the stick' and jumped to the conclusion that we are involved in this objection, which is not the case, either on a local or national level. **CP**

**BIRDS IN POETRY**

The Darkling Thrush by Thomas Hardy was written on the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which explains the lament for the previous century and the hopes aroused by the song of the thrush for the new century. Misplaced, however, in light of the disastrous events of the First World War. **PF**

**THE DARKLING THRUSH**

I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted night  
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.

**Thomas Hardy**

Taken from *On Wings of Song, poems about birds*,  
Everyman's Library Pocket Poets



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**THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME**

Seven hours with ESB contractors working out the logistics of erecting poles in environmentally sensitive areas had taken its toll. I needed to wind down. A quick spin up the bog road to the triangulation pillar on Keeraunduff Hill north of Spiddal to see if there were any Red Grouse calling would do nicely. I would be there for dusk. Half an hour would be plenty of time to listen for calling males before heading home.

The last day of January. It was calm and cold - perfect for Grouse. The van was placed in the best position on the gravel turning circle on the hilltop. All windows were opened and lights were turned off. In the half-light I could hear two male Red Grouse calling. One was calling from just south of the hill but I was not so sure of the other. I looked north, towards the concrete triangulation pillar, to concentrate my efforts in that direction. I would have been more than happy to have located the second male Grouse but instead I found myself drawn to the four-foot high concrete pillar. Something just wasn't right. Merlin sometimes use the pillar as a plucking post and through numerous visits to collect prey remains I was familiar with its size and shape. I raised my binoculars for a closer look.

Snowy Owl! She was no more than fifty yards away and she had spotted me long before I had set eyes on her. She sat motionless for a brief second and then swiveled her huge cat-like head right and left before focusing on me with her huge dark eyes. My heart pounded. She bobbed her head a number of times - a sure sign she was checking me out and was not comfortable. Panic struck. Was she going to fly and never be seen again? I phoned a friend who answered after what seemed like an age. I was trembling. "I'm just north of Spiddal and I'm watching a Snowy Owl". The response contained language that could not be described as parliamentary!

A female in her first winter. Still she stood and stared. How far had she come? Driven south by lack of food in her arctic home she would have travelled thousands of kilometers. I thought of Major Ruttledge's "Birds in Counties Galway and Mayo". Under Snowy Owl reads the following; "An adult male was on the moors north of Spiddal in January 1947. None has been recorded since." 59 years is a long time to wait. She flew behind the van and out over the bog. A brief hover and a short stoop and

she was gone, never to be seen again. Chance really is a fine thing.

**Anghus O Donail**

**NEWS**

In the winter of 1997-98 nineteen members of the Galway Branch contributed to the Non-Estuarine Coastal Waterfowl Survey. At that time sixty stretches of coast were surveyed and 4,877 birds were recorded. This winter a repeat survey will take place, again during the months of December and January. This survey, covering most of the Connemara coast, complements the estuarine IWeBS counts which cover the whole of Inner Galway Bay from Barna to Ballyvaughan.

This winter the Branch will try to cover 63 stretches again, all stretches marked as high priority and ranging in length from a mere 1.85km to as long as 19.02km, in total covering about 300km of mainly rocky shore and seaweed covered boulders.

We will organise a couple of group outings to visit some of these sites but many will have to be visited by members in their own time. Every pair of eyes, feet and helping hands will be very welcome. If you are interested in taking part in this survey, please contact Marianne at [mariannetencate@gmail.com](mailto:mariannetencate@gmail.com), tel. 091-552519 or 087-2378051.

**MtC**

**BIRDWATCH GARDEN BIRD SURVEY**

Many of you will be taking part in the annual Garden Bird Survey and in due course be completing the Wings recording form. As I mentioned in the last Galway Newsletter I hope to do a mini Co. Galway survey and I am asking that those taking part would photo copy the two sides of your form and kindly post it to me at : Neil Sharkey, Ellagh, Headford, Co. Galway. Thanks in advance.

**NS**

**THANK YOU**

A special thanks to all of you who responded to my request to some feedback on the newsletter. It was so encouraging to hear that it does fulfill a purpose and is not totally vanishing into the ether! All the replies were much appreciated. Whilst writing can I encourage readers to contribute to future editions. Why not write up a short article on birds seen at home or abroad or indeed any

item of ornithological or related interest. I would also welcome 'letters to the editor' with queries, suggestions or indeed on any topic.

**NS**

**FORTHCOMING PROGRAMME**

Friday 24 November, John Murphy on the *Birds of Florida*, Anno Santo, 8pm.

Saturday 25 November, Galway Bay count, start 9.30.

Saturday 2 December, short outing on Nimmo's Pier with Tim Griffin, 10.30am.

Wednesday 6 December, Christmas Sale and get-together, Anno Santo, 8pm.

**ALL MEMBERS ARE VERY WELCOME TO ATTEND.**

Wednesday 13 December, members/committee meeting, Anno Santo, 8pm.

Saturday 6 January, short outing on Nimmo's Pier with Tim Griffin, 10.30am.

Wednesday 17 January, AGM and committee/members meeting, Anno Santo, 8pm.

Saturday 20 January, Galway Bay count, start 9am.

Saturday 3 February, short outing on Nimmo's Pier with Tim Griffin, 10.30am.

Wednesday 14 February, committee/members meeting, Anno Santo, 8pm.

Friday 16 February, Kendrew Colhoun on *Irish Brent Geese - International Research Programme*. Anno Santo Hotel , 8pm.

