



CAIRDE EANLAITH NA GAILLIMHE
BIRDWATCH GALWAY
www.birdwatchgalway.org
QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY
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This is a local forum newsletter –
contributions and comments are
most welcome.
Distributed by e mail only

BRANCH MATTERS

It must be a relief for the organisers of the new *Atlas of Birds of Britain and Ireland* survey that the deadline has come and gone and that they can now start to analyse the data for the production of the Atlas. BUT, if you have any records in your notebooks that pertain to the 4-year survey period, please send them in now so that they can still be incorporated.

Isn't it wonderful that the calling corncrake found by Tom Cuffe will make it into the Atlas? His article below should bring back memories to many members who used to hear corncrakes calling off the Headford road. An excerpt of Tony Whilde's *Birds of Galway* of 1990 reads: "Bred at site of old sugar factory near Tuam in 1988 and 1989 and was recorded near Creggs and Ballygar in 1989. Calling birds were recorded on Inishbofin in 1990 but only one bird has been reported from the mainland (near Inveran) at the time of writing. The well known Corncrake haunt "opposite the shopping centre" on the Headford road in Galway is currently [1990] being turned into a car park. Need more be said?" Tom's corncrake has obviously recognised the attraction of the damp pastures north-east of the city boundaries!

As you will see from the Forthcoming Programme item at the end of this *Newsletter*, there is not much planned for the coming season. Tom Cuffe will host a Nimmo's Pier Outing during Heritage Week and our regular first-Saturday-of-the-month Nimmo's Pier outings will start again on 1 October at 10.30am. You may notice that Tim Griffin is no longer mentioned as the leading guide to this outing. He has been in charge of the Nimmo's Pier outings since 1995 and, considering that each season has on average 8 outings, Tim will have hosted well over a hundred of them. Many members and non-members have benefited from his expertise and readiness to impart his knowledge to those less experienced. His recent illness has forced him to retire as leader of the outings but, thanks to his remarkable recovery, we will, no doubt, see him at the Pier again.

Nobody has come forward with an offer to organise talks for the branch but, hopefully, that may change before the Autumn sets in. Feel free to give me a ring at 091-552519 or email me at mariannetencate@gmail.com if you would like to find out what it involves and how you could help.

Enjoy what is left of the summer and the abundance of young birds in gardens and the countryside.

Marianne ten Cate

A CALLOW(S) YOUTH

Forty years ago, having been born, reared and educated in working class Dublin, I was offered a job and went to live in Athlone – then not too different from the 19th century garrison town it had once been. The culture shock was considerable ... I remember telling fellow Dubs that the secret to survival in small town Ireland was to cultivate an air of mild eccentricity – not so much that they'd lock you up but enough for them to tolerate anything you did! In those far off days, birdwatching definitely registered on the eccentricity scale.

One of the great bonuses of the region, from a birding point of view, was the flood meadow area of the Shannon south of the town – the "callows". In winter it provided refuge for vast numbers of waders and wildfowl in remote areas accessible by a network of minor roads and boreens. Spring would sometimes provide spectacular numbers on migration – I remember seeing temporary islands on the river covered with tens of thousands of black-tailed godwits about to head north.

Late spring saw fields emerge from the flood to be occupied by breeding pairs of a wide range of species. A walk out onto the big callow at Clonmacnoise in late April or early May would provide an almost deafening cacophony of song from typical meadow species, wildfowl and waders. On one memorable occasion, I found myself being harassed by a very agitated black-tailed godwit. We subsequently confirmed a breeding pair – so not all the many thousands in the area for the winter went home!

The star bird, of course, was the corncrake. Still common at that time on the callows to the south, there were even a few birds just north of Athlone. As the numbers began to decline and concern grew, the IWC, as Birdwatch Ireland was then called, began to organise fieldwork during the breeding season to investigate the cause of the decline and recommend conservation measures. By then, with a colleague, Dick Devlin (T.R.E. Devlin to older members who may remember him), I had been persuaded to form a local branch of the IWC. One of our projects was to gather information on the location of calling corncrakes in the weeks before the annual migration of fieldworkers from the UK. Our secret weapon was a child's spy-toy, "borrowed" by one of our members from his young son. It consisted of a handheld parabolic reflector feeding a small microphone with the output going to a pair of earphones. With this we could pick up calling birds from a distance and, moreover, could usually separate out the typical echoes from buildings and other objects. We would then hand the migrant fieldworkers a map of the area with the territories marked, as soon as they arrived. Saved a lot of blundering around boreens and stumbling over field drains in the middle of the night!

One year, I got a call from the incumbent fieldworker to know if I'd be interested in helping her trap a particular corncrake for ringing and measurement purposes. I was a bit sceptical at the thought because it was pouring rain that evening and the forecast was for it to continue for hours. Not ideal conditions for corncrakes, I reckoned. Still, at least I had the right gear, being also a sailor! At about 1 o'clock in the morning, dressed in full oilskins and wellies, we walked gingerly into a field of rank vegetation – an abandoned meadow with grass about half a metre long. Mary (not her real name!) lay down on the grass and rolled around energetically to flatten a patch. She placed a tape recorder in the middle and laid a fisherman's landing net beside it. We lay on the grass, illuminated the area with a torch and the tape lure was switched on. Soon, the local corncrake started to rasp back. A few minutes later he made a quick reconnaissance flight over the tape recorder. Shortly after, he scuttled across the edge of the illuminated area and out again, peering across at the recorder. Next time, he came straight into the light and headed for the "opposition", clearly determined to make mincemeat of the intruder! Flick went the landing net – we had him. Mary produced what I subsequently described as a sado-masochism kit for corncrakes – a kind of waistcoat with velcro flaps by means of which assorted bits of bird could be briefly exposed for measurement without distressing the occupant too much. A quick series of measurements and the quarry was released to find other outlets for his aggression.

Nowadays, of course, the corncrake is almost gone from the callows. Only two calling males were heard there last year. Debate continues as to what caused the decline but I'm afraid I, for one, have little doubt – they were too dim to learn to swim!

Martin Ryan

P.S. If you would like to learn more about the Shannon callows and their wildlife, keep an eye out for Stephen Heery's book *The Shannon Floodlands: a natural history*, published by Tir Eolas. **MR**

HERITAGE IN SCHOOLS SCHEME

I have just complete my first full school year as an INTO Heritage Specialist and what a busy year I have had. It has been a big change from my previous work in the architectural business for near 30 years. Heritage in Schools is a project managed by the INTO and funded by the school and the Heritage Council. There are about 160 Heritage Specialist in the country, specialising in all aspects of Irish heritage and culture. Check out their web site for what is available in each county. <http://www.heritageinschools.ie/>

I had the good fortune to visit 35 schools this school year, which equals 170 classes and over 5,000 children; some schools as small as 12 children on Inisméán and the biggest, Renmore N.S., with 800 pupils. I have to say it has been the most rewarding job I have ever done, but it is hard work. After a full week in school, which can include visiting 10 classes, totalling upto 250 children, the mental and physical fatigue is something I have never experienced before. I now have an appreciation for teachers which was not there before – they work hard!

My day in school usually starts with the junior/senior infant class for about one and half hours - after that time they start to get bored listening to me. I talk about the biggest and smallest birds in the world first and I then do the same thing for Irish birds. I teach them how to draw a bird and then, if it's fine, we go around the school looking for and listening to the birds. The rest of the day is spent with 5/6th class. I have a similar format with the senior classes but with much more detail and a bird watching walk around the school with binoculars. I have 25 binoculars for the children and, naturally enough, this is the best and most enjoyable part of the day for them. On wet days I usually get the children to make origami birds.

Some of the stories children, in their innocence, relate to me about what their daddies and uncles have shot or trapped are frightening. I tell them about the law and let them know that it is illegal what their elders are doing. They appear shocked when I tell them that the law is such that you need a licence from the National Parks and Wildlife Services to take a photograph of a bird at or near a nest; most adults are surprised by this, too.

As far as our avian fauna is concerned there are also some brilliant and knowledgeable children. It is an absolute joy to hear these children and some will remain in my memory for a long time. The future looks bright for Ireland's wildlife.

Some schools invited me back to do the Owl Pellet Dissection Project. I started this project as a follow up to the standard presentation. It is usually reserved for 5/6th class although I have also had 3rd class students do the project. The students are organised into teams of 2 and they are given an owl pellet to dissect. They find all the bones in the pellet and do a bone survey and skeleton reconstruction. In one school 13 pellets were dissected which yielded 45 skulls of various rodents and birds. It's a tough little project but the children really enjoy the experience.

I am also available to give talks/presentations to other groups and have worked with a retirement home in Tuam, Salthill Youth Club, Glenamaddy Community group and the Ladies Association in Headford.

I am looking forward to my second year and bookings are already coming in.

My contact details: 087 9190818 HYPERLINK
"mailto:tblcuffe@iol.ie" tblcuffe@iol.ie. I also have a blog



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Tom Cuffe

P.S. - Plea for old binoculars

When I visit schools the children always enjoy the field trip most. There is nothing like seeing birds up close with good quality binoculars. I delight in hearing the wow factor when they see the detail and colour of the birds. I have been very fortunate in obtaining binoculars from various companies and received a grant from the Heritage Council to purchase binoculars this year. I have 6 pairs which are ok but a little too big and not of great quality. So I am looking to replace them. The ones which best suit the children are internally focused roof prism design, 8x32mm, and water proof. So, if anyone has similar binoculars lying around and wants to put them to good use, please let me know. Thank you. TC



TWENTY YEARS ON

A few weeks ago Michael Davis asked me if I recalled an early trip to Belmullet and in what year it took place. I well recalled the trip and looking up past diaries established that it happened in June 1991 – how time flies!

It was a bright summer's Saturday that we met up in Belmullet town; this was very much pre-Celtic Tiger Belmullet and there was still a faintly abandoned 1940s air about the town – food shops did not open early as those needing supplies found to their cost.

My recollection as to who were on the outing is incomplete – Michael Davis, Mary Finnegan, Gordon D'Arcy, Bob Chapman and myself come to mind but there were certainly more. I would welcome hearing about the others who travelled and indeed any other recollections of the day. Bob Chapman was a first class English birder, then based in Castlebar

Our chief destination was the BirdWatch sanctuary at Annagh at the northern end of the Mullet. Here Red-necked Phalaropes had been discovered nesting in the 1930s and the Irish Ornithological Society – a forerunner of the Irish Wildbird Conservancy, now BWI – had established the sanctuary there to protect the species. Numbers nesting had ebbed and flowed since then but from the 1970s on a decline set in and only occasional birds had appeared each summer. So, our hopes were not that high. But we travelled out hopefully, so to speak.

After some scouting around someone spotted a phalarope – but it was not right for a Red-necked! After lots of discussion and observation Bob identified it as a Wilson's Phalarope! Bob may well have seen one before but it was a total 'first' for the rest of us. We had hardly got over the shock of this when a second phalarope appeared. This time there was little doubt it was the elusive Red-necked Phalarope. The only problem was that the Wilson's kept getting in the way of our view of the Red-necked – how terrible! – two Phalaropes in less than an hour.

For readers not familiar with these birds, they are small waders breeding mainly in Arctic regions, the Belmullet site being the most southerly site at that time. They have the unique ability to swim as well as wade.

The day was not yet finished – over lunchtime we spotted several Corn Buntings nearby. Sadly, this bird is now extinct in Ireland and the birds we spotted that day may well have been the last of their kind in Ireland. To my knowledge, from around that time they have never been seen since in the Mullet or elsewhere.

In the afternoon we saw a Little Stint in or about the sanctuary and finally our amazing day was crowned with

Tree Sparrows further along the Mullet. For most of us the day yielded five 'firsts' – truly a memorable occasion.

As I have said, this all happened twenty years ago and for those of us now that much older there is something of a moral to this account. This is the fact that many of us closely associated with the Galway Branch are finding it harder to organise and re-create the magic of such occasions – the passage of years perhaps?! We have been saying for some time now that the branch needs renewal and new faces to ensure that birdwatching in Galway remains vibrant and worthwhile – how about it, all you out there?

Neil Sharkey

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO FIELD BIRDWATCHING

1. Rain-gear. Even if the sun is beating down bring it. I sound like my mother when I say this but you can always take it off and put it in a rucksack.
2. Maps. Map out the area you are looking at. Make a plan of your route and stick to it. Avoid private property and angry men with guns and sheepdogs.
3. Beware of over eager 'Neighbourhood Watchers'. You know them. Those people who are masters of all they survey. Be nice when they ask you Templemore-style rhetorical questions. Quietly tell them that this is a public road and just because their house is on it does not mean they actually own the road.
4. Birdcall CD's. I keep a short play list of all the hard to identify tweets and peeps that you hear when out and about. Play it as you move from area to area. It's like subliminal messaging. It will help you get extra ticks...and shop more at Tesco.
5. Boots or wellies? Horses for courses. My rule is simple. If you are planning to go to an area you haven't been before, its wellies.
6. Local knowledge is always welcome. Farmers suspicious of my ramblings have cornered me. 99.9% of these guys are just curious. Tell them what you are doing and be friendly. The info they have shared with me about drainage, farming practice changes and birds they have seen has been invaluable. Just don't get into bird taxonomy with them. Jackdaws and Rooks are crows...just leave it at that.
7. Always walk to the end of the track. Even if it seems to go on for ages, walk to the end of it. So often I have walked tracks and seen nothing only to get to the end and find a pair of Jays, a Raven croaking overhead or a Whitethroat belting out a tune.
8. If all else fails remember the 3 H's. Hedgerows, hedgerows and hedgerows. I have seen everything from Spotted Flycatchers to Treecreepers just from walking along lanes and tuning into the hedgerow gossip.
9. Every tick counts. Doing the atlas squares it became apparent that some 'common or garden' stuff was often missing. Never disregard the usual suspects. If no one has recorded House Sparrow or Pied Wagtail, then it is not in the system.
10. Enjoy it. One is never so close to nature than when one is in pursuit of it. It is possible to get the same innate blood lust while hunting with a pair of binsoculars rather than with an unregistered shotgun.

John Carey

AN UNEXPECTED CORNCRAKE

One morning, I decided to go bird watching at Coarsefield on the Headford road. It was at least two years since I was there, as the last time I got locked in, before that it was a regular location for me. The farmers

erected a gate to stop some of our citizens dumping along this boreen. This tactic has worked - the place is kept very clean and the dumping has stopped.

When I am there I always make a point of talking to the farmers, just to let them know who I am and what I am doing; they all seem very interested. I always ask when was the last time they heard the Corncrake at Coarsefield - it appears to be suitable habitat.

On this particular visit, 24th June 2011, I got talking to a farmer I had never met before and I went through my usual routine. "Have you ever heard the Corncrake down here?" "YES, I think I heard one down here last week", was the farmer's reply. He indicated to me where he heard the bird. He did say to me "Don't tell anyone as they won't let us do anything down here". I informed him that there are grants available from BirdWatch Ireland for farmers who help protect Corncrakes. He seemed very interested in that concept.

I went back to Coarsefield at 8pm as the bird is noted for calling in the late evening. An hour and 20 minutes later I was not disappointed when the bird started calling. Holding my breath just in case my breathing would drown out the sounds I was listening for, I heard the bird call on and off.

I sent text messages to a few branch members - always nice to text some good news. It is 20 years since the last Corncrake was heard so close to the city!

The next day I contacted Tim Gordon, BirdWatch Ireland's Corncrake Officer, and gave him the details. Tim and I arranged to meet at Coarsefield one evening and he thought it was perfect habitat for the birds. He explained the requirements of the Corncrake scheme and how the species is doing in Ireland. 25 year ago there were an estimated 20,000 birds across the country; the estimate last year was 130 birds. This year the estimate is about 140; well, actually 141 as he had not added the Coarsefield bird yet. Tim heard the bird and left soon after. I found out the details of the farmer who owned the land and passed that information on to Tim. The land owner has agreed to the conditions of the scheme and will not harvest or graze the land until the end of August.

I have informed every farmer I have met along this boreen about the Corncrake and they are now texting me that they have heard the bird calling. I have not even gone into the field in case I might disturb the bird. Here's hoping that there is a nest and the birds fledge and looking forward to next spring with the hope they re-use the site.

Tom Cuffe

FORTHCOMING PROGRAMME

Saturday 27 August, Short outing at Nimmo's Pier with Galway Bird Guide, Tom Cuffe. Meet at the slipway at 10.30am. Children are welcome provided they are accompanied by an adult.

Saturday 1 October, Short outing at Nimmo's Pier with branch members who can help less experienced birdwatchers identify the birds of Inner Galway Bay. Meet at 10.30am at the slipway.

Details of further activities will be sent by email. If you get this *Newsletter* from Neil Sharkey but are not sure whether you are also on my mailing list, please mail me at marianetencate@gmail.com to confirm that you would like to receive further programme details.

MtC

BirdWatch Galway (Branch of BirdWatch Ireland) 2nd Quarter 2011

QUARTERLY BIRD REPORT COMPILED BY CHRIS PEPIATT

DATE OF ISSUE: 2nd November 2011

2nd April: Ad. Glaucous Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Pat Lonergan & Tom Cuffe).

2nd April: 2 Ad. Ring-billed Gull, Waterside, Galway City.

4th April: 2 House Martin, Salthill, Galway City (Brendan Dunne).

5th April: 1st Win. 'Thayer's-type' gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Michael Davis). (1)

6th April: albino Great Northern Diver, off Tully Cross (Dermot Breen).

7th April: 60 Greenland White-fronted Goose, 100 Mute Swan, 2 Pintail & 50 Wigeon, Rahasane turlough (Chris Cook).

7th April: 100 Light-bellied Brent Goose, Tawin (Chris Cook).

7th April: Yellowhammer, Rathmorrissey (Chris Cook).

8th April: 2 Long-tailed Duck, 2 Great Northern Diver & 5 Sandwich Tern, Dog's Bay, Roundstone (Miriam & Michael Harris).

9th April: Common Buzzard, Carnmore Cross (Chris Benson).

9th April: 2 (male & female) Common Scoter, Inishdoorus, Lough Corrib (Miriam & Michael Harris).

9th April: 1st Win. Iceland Gull, Baile na hAbhainn (Michael Davis).

10th April: Cuckoo, Woodford (Jamie Durrant).

11th April: male Montagu's Harrier, Knockranny, Nr. Moycullen (Stephen Bierley). (2)

15th April: Grasshopper Warbler, Cleggan (Tim Gordon).

16th April: 2 Long-eared Owl, Killannin (Aonghus O'Donaill). (3)

16th April: 2 Long-eared Owl, Moycullen (Aonghus O'Donaill).

17th April: 31 Light-bellied Brent Goose, Galway Harbour Park & Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Chris Peppiatt).

17th April: Corncrake, Inishturbot (Marty Burke).

17th April: White Wagtail & Sedge Warbler, Nr. Milltown, Tuam (Chris Benson).

17th April: 9 Whooper Swan, 12 Gadwall, 6 Shoveler, 32 Wigeon & Black-tailed Godwit, Rahasane turlough (Pete Capsey).

18th April: Corncrake, Inishturbot, probably a different bird from that of the 17th (Paddy Pryce).

18th April: Whimbrel, Mutton Island, Galway City (Michael Davis).

19th April: Common Sandpiper, Lough Inch (Brendan Power).

22nd April: 3 Little Tern, 6 Great Northern Diver & 10 Wheatear, Gurteen Bay, Nr. Roundstone (David O'Keeffe).

25th April: Greenland White-fronted Goose, 3 Whooper Swan & 7 Wigeon, Rahasane turlough (Pete Capsey).

25th April: 40 Whimbrel, Silver Strand, Galway City (David O'Keeffe).

30th April: Corncrake, High Island (Feicin Mulkerrin).

30th April: 5 Swift, Shantalla, Galway City (Aonghus O'Donaill).

1st May: 2 Dipper, Ballinahinch Castle (Miriam & Michael Harris).

6th May: Spotted Flycatcher, Menlo Castle, Galway City (Tom Cuffe).

8th May: 2 (Ad. Sum & 2nd yr.) Little Gull, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Dermot Breen).

9th May: 2 Turtle Dove, Tullyvoheen Estate, Clifden (Miriam & Michael Harris). (4)

12th May: 2nd Sum. Glaucous Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Michael Davis). (5)

14th May: Corncrake, Fawnmore, Inishbofin (Fearghas MacLochlainn).

14th May: 3 Corncrake, Cloon, Omev Island (Feicin Mulkerrin).

15th May: Corncrake, Goorateeny, Omev Island (Ian McDonagh).

17th May: Light-bellied Brent Goose & 3 Great Northern Diver, Galway Harbour Park & Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Chris Peppiatt).

22nd May: Pair each of Blue Tit & Great Tit, sharing same nest box, ? (Tommy Carey).

23rd May: 2 Long-tailed Skua, 2 Arctic Skua & Great Skua, Baile na hAbhainn (Aonghus O'Donaill).

23rd May: Manx Shearwater, rescued and released, Oranmore (Martin O'Malley).

24th May: Ad. Sum. Sabine's Gull, off Cleggan Head (Dermot Breen).

25th May: White-tailed Eagle (Sean), Tynagh (Bernie Rushe). (6)

28th May: 2 Arctic Skua, Blackrock, Salthill, Galway City (Brendan Dunne).

29th May: 3 Corncrake, Inishbofin (Pat Coyne).

30th May: 2 Arctic Skua, Gurteen Bay, Nr. Roundstone (Dermot Breen).
30th May: 3 Whooper Swan (still present), 3 Shoveler & Wigeon, Rahasane turlough (Patrick Veale).
31st May: Sub-Ad. male Montagu's Harrier, Lough Nuala, Nr. Spiddal (Aonghus O'Donail).
3rd June: 9 Corncrake, Inishturbot (Tim Gordon).
11th June: Greenshank, Inchiquinn, Headford (Neil Sharkey).
14th June: Sooty Shearwater & 40 Manx Shearwater, off Mutton Island, Galway City (Tom Cuffe).
15th June: 4 Whinchat & Whooper Swan, Clonfert callows/Bishop's Island (Stephen Lawlor).
18th June: 3 calling Corncrake, Inishbofin (Fearghas Mac Lochlainn).
18th June: Arctic Skua & 100+ Manx Shearwater, Silver Strand, Galway City (Tom Cuffe).
19th June: Long-eared Owl, Tarrea (Chris Peppiatt).
19th June: Calling Corncrake, Coarsefield, Nr. Lough Corrib (Tom Cuffe). (7)
19th June: Fem. Marsh Harrier, Angliham, Lough Corrib (Tim Griffin).
20th June: 2 Barnacle Goose, Fahy Lough, Omev Island (Dermot Breen).
21st June: Ad. Glaucous Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Ann Fleming).
22nd June: 3 Twite, Mutton Island, Galway City (Michael Davis).
27th June: Garden Warbler, Moycullen (Aonghus O'Donail). (8)

NOTES:

- (1) This hybrid gull was originally seen on several occasions at Rossaveal during February in the first quarter of 2011.
- (2) This Montagu's Harrier was also seen on the 12th of April at the same site.
- (3) These birds were again present on the 23rd of April.
- (4) The two Turtle Doves were still present until the 11th of May at least and a single bird was still present on the 13th of May.
- (5) This 2nd summer Glaucous Gull was also present on the 13th and 17th of May and the 21st of June.
- (6) The White-tailed eagle (named Sean) from the Killarney reintroduction project was also recorded near Flower Hill House (north-west of Portumna) on the 27th and 28th of May.
- (7) This calling Corncrake was present in the area for about a month, into July in the third quarter of 2011.
- (8) Garden Warblers almost certainly bred here and apparently did so in 2010. This species is not a common breeder in Galway and most summer records have been in the Shannon valley, normally in the Portumna area.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Two Montagu's Harrier, two Turtle Dove, White-tailed Eagle, as many as 17-18 calling Corncrake, Sabine's Gull, two Long-tailed Skua, four Whinchat and three Twite. Breeding Garden Warbler.

First Summer migrants: House Martin (4th April); Cuckoo (10th April); Grasshopper Warbler (15th April); Corncrake (17th April); Sedge Warbler (17th April); White Wagtail (17th April); Whimbrel (18th April); Common Sandpiper (19th April); Little Tern (22nd April); Swift (30th April); Spotted Flycatcher (6th May); Turtle Dove (9th May); Whinchat (15th June); Garden Warbler (27th June).