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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

In a recent exchange with Niall Hatch at BWI HQ, I suggested that the present Galway setup is that of a branch without a committee rather than there being no branch at all – so, for the moment, we settle for that and carry on as well as we can. The first two Nimmo's Pier outings were well attended, with over 20 in October and, despite the hairiest of weather, only slightly fewer in November. Good to see young people coming along also and thanks to Tom Cuffe for all the hard work. There is now a Nimmo's reminder e-mail list and if members would like to be included (or excluded) just send me a mail. The next outing is on Sat 7th Dec, at 10.30am.

On Nov 3rd Chris Peppiatt organised a team of 12 or more to cover the first Galway Bay count of the season. Bird numbers were low but, as always, it was a good day's birdwatching. Contact Chris if you would like to take part in future counts: chris.peppiatt@iol.ie. Marianne organised the Nov Corrib count and 10 people counted nearly 10,000 birds on a bright calm day. People tell me they miss talks and outings so if anyone would like to organise an outing on a one-off basis, just contact me.

NS

BIRD LISTS

A note from Aongus O Donail says he and Tom Cuffe have a suggestion to add interest to your birdwatching. The idea is to start an annual list for the coming years. He mentioned Galway City as being an ideal unit. So, those of you city-based why not rise to the challenge in 2014? One hundred species would be a very reasonable target and I look forward to collating your lists at next year-end. Those outside Galway, just do the same for your immediate locality – set your own boundaries, say roughly a 5km circle. You will find that any recording of species, either by period or location or just on a walk, adds greatly to your enjoyment. Even better, use the excellent Birdtrack web site to record your counts – it's easy to register and if you have a smart phone it can be 'live' as you spot.

NS

COLLARED DOVES

The two collared doves behave as if it is I who am the intruder in THEIR garden. They are always on the move, uttering that rasping crooo as they alight. It seems as if, now that breeding is over, they have nothing to do but cannot do nothing. One follows the other flying onto the telephone wires. They sit side by side facing in opposite directions in a classic pose. Then the other takes the lead over the cypress hedge and back. Their feathers are left around the garden; buff-grey the books say but there often seems to be an almost invisible tint of pink. A favourite perch is low down on the thin branches of a young alder, watching the robin appear from nowhere next to the spade wherever it is digging. I came across a single dove in the alder and watched it watching me. I formed a few words of appreciation in my mind and in the middle of our conversation, in which the dove calmly appeared to take part, it took flight (or fright) more than suddenly

with a speed and clattering sound that belied its calmness. The corner of my eye registered for a split second a dark shape hurtling through the tree over the very spot - a Sparrowhawk, of course, though I could not describe it. I can still see that shape and its darkness and speed. If the robin was watching from the ground, and if birds have nightmares, this will be a recurring one; there is an aura of Hitchcock about it. There was no sign of the dove, or of any dislodged feathers with their tints of pink. The next day, two were again in the alder tree watching me, apparently confident of having instinct in the back of their heads.

Stephen Heery

IDENTIFYING OUR 'COMMON' RAPTORS

Birds of prey are universally recognised as being among the most difficult of all bird families to identify. Identifying a bird as a bird of prey can be relatively easy but identifying it as a specific species can be very difficult. Given reasonable views, most birders can identify Merlin, Kestrel, Peregrine and Sparrowhawk but with poor views many simply write them off as unidentified Bops (*Birds of Prey*). More often than not raptors are seen from a distance, at a height, and/or in flight which often makes colour and size difficult to assess and it is in these situations that silhouette, flight, movements and general behaviour – and the correct interpretation of these - become important identification characteristics.

Kestrel

This is our most commonly seen raptor. Familiarity with the Kestrel will make the other small raptor species much easier to identify. It is larger than the Merlin but noticeably smaller than the Peregrine. The most obvious behavioural characteristic of the Kestrel is its hovering. The Kestrel is the only small Irish raptor which hovers with any frequency or level of grace and proficiency. Merlins and Peregrines hover very occasionally but do so poorly. 99.99% of the time a small, hovering raptor in Ireland will be a Kestrel. The active flight is with rapid, loose wing beats, interrupted with frequent glides. While it has the typical falcon shape of narrow, pointed wings these are less pointed than those of the Merlin and Peregrine. As birds form only a small portion of the Kestrel's diet it does not require the dashing speed of either the Merlin or Peregrine and hence does not possess their powerful, sleek physiques. The tail is long and, if seen, the rufous-brown upper parts rule out all other falcons. Kestrels frequently soar and distant birds can appear quite similar to Sparrowhawk. When soaring the tail is usually partly fanned.

Merlin

This is the smallest European raptor. The male is no bigger than a Mistle Thrush, the female nearly the size of a male Kestrel. Its wings are short, broad-based (broad where they join the body), and sharply angled in flight. It is usually seen flying low over open spaces such as bogland or at the coast in winter. The angled-back wings are sharply pointed and beaten with a flicking action. The flight is very direct, purposeful and energetic, the rapid, almost spinning, wing beats

interspersed with short periods of gliding. Merlins are small and restless and exude energy when moving. It is most often seen in a high-speed prolonged tail-chase of some passerine or small wader which can last for several minutes with the Merlin twisting and turning with every movement of its quarry.

Peregrine

This is the largest of our native falcons and, if seen distantly and poorly and with little around for size comparison, can be misidentified or unidentified. In flight, it appears heavy and thick-set with a deep chest. It can look compact in flight due to the powerful body, bull-like neck and short tail. Like the Merlin, its wings are broad-based and noticeably pointed, with dimensions almost twice those of its smaller cousin. A female Peregrine can weigh over 1kg. A male Merlin tips the scales at about 175g. Peregrines eat Merlins, Kestrels and Sparrowhawks! Wingbeats are powerful, solid and stiff but not particularly deep and often interrupted by short, fast glides, with an action not dissimilar to a Fulmar or Cormorant. When hunting the wingbeats become faster, stronger and deeper. Peregrines are swift, agile and powerful fliers. Sudden consternation and mass panic among large flocks of any species smaller than geese often indicate the appearance of a Peregrine.

Sparrowhawk

If you see a raptor in your garden or in an urban area, it is likely to be this species. While Kestrel and Peregrine are regularly seen in urban areas, the Sparrowhawk is the quintessential backyard raptor. The most common of Irish raptors, it is a small bird with the male only weighing approx. 150g. It is small and short, with broad wings and a long tail. Unlike all of the falcons, the wings are blunt-ended in flight and when soaring. Soaring falcons always show narrower and straighter wings with more pointed wing tips than a Sparrowhawk has. 5-6 wingbeats are usually followed by a short glide. Wingbeats are fast and flappy with the bird rising slightly when flapping and falling when gliding. Sparrowhawks are fast and dashing over short distances. They hunt by surprise, making clever use of any available cover. Long, prolonged pursuits are not their domain. While soaring, it can be confused with Kestrel but usually it keeps its tail closed (fanned or partially fanned in soaring Kestrel).

Aonghus O Donail

BIRDWATCH IRELAND

The role of BirdWatch Ireland is to promote the welfare of birds and their environment. However, recently some of you may have been reading that our organisation has been affected by another 'environment', namely the financial one. Like all charities, it has been hard hit by lower funding and the general decline in disposable income. Members can pay their part in overcoming this by renewing subscriptions promptly and encouraging others to join. There is further information in *Wings* and the BirdWatch e-mail magazine which everybody can subscribe to. We wish all at HQ success in overcoming the present challenging times.

NS



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AMERICAN COOT AT MURLACH BALLYCONNELY

I was finishing up some I-WeBS counts down around Ballyconneely on the morning of 28th November 2012. I've been counting this area since September 2008. It is an area of sandy beaches, muddy bays and a shallow brackish lough called Murlach which is just below Ballyconneely village. It looks great and has a real rarity hotspot look about it, especially for waders, but it has never produced anything really up until very recently, a single Ruff probably being the best I've had there up to last year.

While counting from a second viewpoint on the south side, I had distant views of what I initially thought was the back end of a Moorhen. All I could see were white sides to the undertail coverts. Thankfully, as it turned around it showed a white bill. White sides to the undertail coverts on a Coot meant it couldn't be anything else but an American Coot! With closer views the bill wasn't all white but had a light black sub-terminal band. The white frontal shield, where the phrase "as bald as a coot" comes from, also differed from Eurasian Coot: it was much smaller and had a small very dark red patch stuck onto the top of the shield. The bird moved happily around the lough. Some of the back pools and channels were frozen over but it fed easily by upending and occasionally diving in the open water.

There is no way of knowing how long the bird had been present as the place hadn't been checked in about three weeks. I had been in Florida for a fortnight previously where I had seen hundreds of American Coots (most being migrants from the Northern States and Canada). An American Coot had shown up just two days previously on South Uist off Scotland so maybe this bird wasn't too long in. The first American Coot for Ireland showed up at Ballycotton in Co. Cork from 7th February to 4th April 1981. I had seen the second Irish bird, found by Dave Suddaby three years ago up on Termoncarragh Lough on the Mullet peninsula in Co. Mayo. That bird showed up on 15th November 2010 and stayed until 9th April 2011. It is interestingly to see that the more recent bird departed in around the same time in Spring - 13th April 2013.

I've never even seen any Eurasian Coot in the Ballyconneely/Slyne Head area and have only seen them less than three times in the whole of Connemara before. The no.1 and 3 best Irish sites for Eurasian Coots both lay within county Galway. Lough Corrib is the most important site for the species in Ireland. A peak of 20,444 birds was counted during the 2003-2004 count season, though numbers have decreased dramatically mirroring the huge declines also of diving duck. The last count I have to hand is the 2008/2009 count when only 4,840 were counted. 1,500 to 2,000 Coots are found at the third best site, Loughrea. I've often looked through these vast flocks wondering what the chances of picking up an American were and as to how noticeable one would stand out. I was glad this one turned up on such a small lough in a part of the county where a Coot automatically raises suspicions. A Green-winged Teal turned up shortly afterwards with

a small flock of Teal and a juvenile Lesser Yellowlegs dropped in for a week this September which gave fantastic views, so things are starting to pick up. Only took four years!

Dermot Breen

RAPTOR MONITORING IN GALWAY – FOCUS ON FALCONS

Recent years have seen a surge in monitoring efforts directed towards birds of prey in County Galway, and although there are still many gaps in our knowledge, steady progress is being made towards a better understanding of the status, trends and ecological requirements of several of our raptors, some of which are notoriously difficult to survey and study.

The Kestrel is practically ubiquitous throughout the country, and while the Buzzard colonisation is still gaining momentum in the west, Kestrels remain the most frequently observed bird of prey in the county. Its widespread occurrence, however, can make it a daunting species to census effectively, which is highlighted by recent survey findings which tell somewhat different stories in terms of Kestrel trends. Over the thirteen year period between 1998 and 2010 the Countryside Bird Survey has recorded a mean annual decline of 3.06% in Kestrel abundance. Although the Breeding Birds Atlas (2007 – 2011) has shown a worrying decline of 29% in breeding records over the 40 year period since the original atlas in the 1970s, there has been a short-term increase of 54% observed over the past 20 years since the New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland (1988 – 1991). The disparities between these surveys highlight the importance of specific monitoring of Kestrels alone to compliment these multi-species surveys and to provide necessary data to determine the true status and trends of their population.

Galway, and particularly Connemara, has been the main focus of such efforts since research and monitoring was initiated by BirdWatch Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in 2010. Results of this work have thus far been generally positive, with good occupancy and breeding success rates recorded. Of 27 Kestrel territories recorded throughout Galway in 2012, 20 (74%) remained active in 2013, with no activity recorded at the other seven sites. In addition to this high occupancy rate, Kestrels seemed to fare better than most other raptors in 2013, in what was a very poor breeding year for the majority of species. A total of 25 breeding sites were confirmed in the county in 2013. Of these it was possible to accurately monitor breeding at 22 sites, of which 17 (77%) successfully fledged young. This was similar to the situation nationally, although pairs in Galway had a slightly higher brood size of 3.7 young per nest (recorded at or close to fledging) compared with pairs elsewhere in the country (3.5 young per nest). Although the greater number of pairs confirmed in Galway compared with other counties reflects the survey effort, observed densities in Connemara in particular nevertheless appear to be healthy. Given Kestrels' adaptability, for which they are well known, it is not surprising that a wide range of nest site types have been recorded. The most popular nest site choice recorded in Galway is old corvid stick nests within shelter belts, woodlands or in isolated trees or even those in gardens. Buildings, including castles and churches, are also regularly used, as are nest sites on cliffs, rocky outcrops and also in quarries throughout the county.

Although Merlin are a close relative of the Kestrel, their elusive behaviour makes them much more difficult to detect. They are also more specialised in their habitat requirements and occur at lower densities, meaning significantly more time and resources are required to establish even basic information on their ecology compared with Kestrel. A pilot survey coordinated by BWI and the NPWS in 2010 assessed the best means to determine the status of the national population. The findings reinforced the difficulties associated with monitoring Merlin and, in the absence of basic information on abundance and trends, the requirement for conservation action or indeed the direction of such action is not fully understood. A recommendation arising from this survey was that an effective future monitoring protocol should focus on defined and manageable study areas to establish information on Merlin status, trends and breeding success over time.

Connemara is thought to be a traditional stronghold for Merlin. An intensive survey which was more akin to a painstaking test of endurance was carried out to locate Merlin nest sites in Connemara in the 1980s. Twelve nest sites were found and this survey still represents one of the most comprehensive studies of this small falcon undertaken in this country. Based on the findings of this work and subsequent monitoring, the Connemara Bog Complex SPA was designated for Merlin in 2010. This area is now the focus of more recent survey and monitoring efforts through BWI and NPWS, and detailed survey work in 2012 and 2013 was aimed at locating nest sites, assessing nest site suitability, availability and habitat requirements and to collate baseline data on breeding parameters and occupancy rates. In Ireland, Merlin traditionally nested on the ground in heather moorland, but due to the loss of suitable heather cover across large parts of their breeding range, the disused nests of Hooded Crows at the edges of forestry plantations are now the most popular nest sites. However, in Connemara pairs are also known to nest on small, densely vegetated islands on the lakes scattered among the vast areas of bog.

Eight nests were confirmed in 2012 and 2013, all of which were on islands in old Hooded Crow nests. Seven of these successfully fledged young and three broods were ringed, which were the first Merlin nestlings to be ringed in the county. The availability of nest sites on 75 islands in 20 lakes was also assessed, which revealed 23 suitable corvid nests as well as 13 active Hooded Crow nests. As Merlin don't build a nest of their own they are dependent on the old stick nests of other species; therefore, they tend to relocate to another suitable nest site if the previous nest is no longer suitably intact. To facilitate ease of monitoring and to encourage pairs to reuse the same islands in subsequent years, 30 artificial nest baskets, which resemble natural nest sites, were installed at suitable and traditional sites in 2012. However, none of these were occupied by Merlin (although one was used by breeding Long-eared Owl!), suggesting the local population is not limited by a lack of nest sites.

These monitoring efforts will continue in 2014. If you have useful information on Merlin or any other raptors in County Galway, please report to John Lusby, Raptor Conservation Officer with BirdWatch Ireland at jlusby@birdwatchireland.ie.

In the next issue of this newsletter we will report on the survey and monitoring work on owls in County Galway.

The Raptor Conservation Project has received support and funding from the following bodies in 2013 to undertake this work: Galway County Council, Inagh Valley Trust, Forum Connemara and Comhar na nOileán through the Leader 2007-2013 Programme and has previously received support through the Heritage Council.

**John Lusby
with Dermot Breen & Aonghus O Donail**

BirdWatch Galway (Branch of BirdWatch Ireland) 3rd Quarter 2013

QUARTERLY BIRD REPORT COMPILED BY CHRIS PEPPIATT

DATE OF ISSUE: 12th February 2014

17th July: 1st summer Iceland Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway city (Michael Davis, Lukasz Czajka & Marcin Pisula).

17th July: 3 Mediterranean Gull & Ad. Ring-billed Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway city (Lukasz Czajka & Marcin Pisula).

21st July: 200-300 Sand Martin, Rinnaknock, Lough Corrib (Neil Sharkey).

24th July: Pair White-tailed Eagle, Roundstone Bog (Dermot Breen).

26th July: 2 Mediterranean Gull, Mutton Island, Galway city (Lukasz Czajka).

2nd August: Balearic Shearwater, Baile na hAbhainn (Aonghus O'Donaill).

2nd August: 4 Sooty Shearwater & Arctic Skua, Leaghcarrick Pier, Slyne Head (Dermot Breen).

6th August: Pair White-tailed Eagle, Inagh valley (Dermot Breen).

9th August: Juv. Rose-coloured Starling, Sruthan, Inishmore (Fabrizio Brentini).

10th August: Red-throated Diver, Renvyle (Nadine Röhnert).

10th August: 4 Chough, Gurteen Bay (Rachel Hynes).

15th August: Balearic Shearwater, Inverin/Indreabhán (Aonghus O'Donaill).

19th August: 4 Balearic Shearwater, Cory's Shearwater, 13 Great shearwater, 926 Sooty Shearwater, 2 Sabine's Gull, 6 Storm Petrel & 8 Great Skua, seawatch 12:45-16:30, Inishbofin (Dermot Breen).

21st August: Pomarine Skua & 5 Arctic Skua, Silver Strand, Galway city (Lukasz Czajka).

22nd August: Barn Owl, Cahermacnally, Headford (Martin O'Malley).

24th August: Ruff, Rahasane turlough (Paul Troake).

25th August: Wood Sandpiper, Rahasane turlough (Paul Troake).

27th August: 2 Merlin, Juv. Curlew sandpiper & 2 Chough, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan, Tom Murtagh & Jim Cotter).

31st August: 2 Juv. Curlew Sandpiper, Kilcaimin (Dermot Breen).

31st August: 1 Juv. Little Stint, 52 Dunlin, 21 Black-tailed Godwit, Greenshank, 14 Ringed Plover, 8 Ruff, 133 Snipe, 41 Grey Heron & 116 Little Grebe, Glenamaddy turlough (Dermot Breen).

1st September: 240 Manx Shearwater, 130 Arctic Tern & 6 Arctic Skua, Silver Strand, Galway city (Lukasz Czajka).

1st September: 90 Sandwich Tern & 30 Arctic Tern, Barna (Tom Murtagh).

2nd September: 2nd cal. yr. Male Surf Scoter, Manin Beg strand, Ballyconneely (Dermot Breen).

6th September: 2 Juv. Pectoral Sandpiper, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Aonghus O'Donaill).

8th September: Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Mweenish Island, Nr. Ballinacourty (Paul Troake).

8th September: Curlew Sandpiper, Mweenish Island, Nr. Ballinacourty (Dermot Breen).

8th September: Common Buzzard, Cregg Wood, Corrandulla (Peter Tyndall).

10th September: Juv. Hobby, 16 Little Egret & 15 Black-tailed Godwit, Rahasane turlough (Peter Capsey).

13th September: Ad. Spotted Redshank, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Aonghus O'Donaill).

14th September: Snow Bunting, Inishmore (Dermot Breen).

14th September: Pectoral Sandpiper, Glenamaddy turlough (Graham Mitchell).

15th September: Curlew Sandpiper, Rusheen Bay, Galway city (Aonghus O'Donaill).

15th September: 2 Storm Petrel, Great Skua, Arctic Skua & Little Gull, Silver Strand, Galway city (Aonghus O'Donaill).

15th September: 25 Sooty Shearwater, 9 Leach's Petrel, 4 Storm Petrel, 4 Grey Phalarope, 8 Great Skua, 2 Arctic Skua, Pomarine Skua, 2 Ad. Sabine's Gull & 16 Arctic Tern, seawatch 13:22-19:00, Inishbofin (Dermot Breen).

18th September: Common Buzzard, Loughrea (Dermot Cosgrove).

20th September: Juv. Lesser Yellowlegs, Murlach, Ballyconneely (Miryam & Michael Harris). (1)

20th September: Juv. American Golden Plover, Rahasane turlough (Aonghus O'Donaill). (2)

22nd September: Curlew Sandpiper, 3 Ruff & Black Duck/Mallard hybrid, Rahasane turlough (Dermot Breen).
24th September: Eastern Kingbird, Barred Warbler & Pied Flycatcher, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan). (3)
24th September: 20 Red-breasted Merganser (inc. one leucistic bird), Mannin Bay, Ballyconneely (Miryam & Michael Harris).
24th September: 14 Chough, Dog's Bay (Miryam & Michael Harris).
24th September: 7 Little Egret, Pintail, Sparrowhawk, 170 Golden Plover, 9 Black-tailed Godwit, 3 Ruff & Whimbrel, Rahasane turlough (Peter Capsey).
25th September: Barred Warbler, again present, Inishbofin.
25th September: Blackpoll Warbler, 1-2 Wryneck, Common Rosefinch, Reed Warbler, 4 Whinchat, 2 Pied Flycatcher & 7 Spotted Flycatcher, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan, Mark Stewart, Steve Millar, Lee Gregory, Adrian Webb <i>et al.</i>). (4)
25th September: Corncrake, Inishbofin (Fran O'Connell).
26th September: Lesser Whitethroat, Trident Homes garden, Slyne Head (Aonghus O'Donail).
26th September: Juv. Woodchat Shrike, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan).
26th September: Curlew Sandpiper & Ruff, Omey strand (Dermot Breen).
26th September: 2 (Ad. & Juv.) Dipper, Ballinahinch Castle (Miryam & Michael Harris).
26th September: Peregrine, Oranmore (Martin O'Malley).
28th September: Yellow-browed Warbler, Reed Warbler & Spotted Flycatcher, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan).
28th September: 2 Curlew Sandpiper & Jack Snipe, Inishmore (Dermot Breen).
28th September: 2 Common Buzzard, Claregalway (Jim Glennon). (5)
28th September: Yellow-browed Warbler, Inis Meain (Tony Mee).
29th September: Reed Warbler, Blackcap, 4 Chiffchaff, 10 Goldcrest, Pied Flycatcher & Spotted Flycatcher, Inishmore (Dermot Breen).
29th September: Great White Egret, over Maree, Oranmore (Barry O'Donoghue).
30th September: Yellow-browed Warbler, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan).

NOTES:

- (1) The Lesser Yellowlegs was present until the 26th of September 2013.
- (2) The juvenile American Golden Plover was again present on the 22nd of September and later records indicate that it was present into the fourth quarter of 2013.
- (3) The Eastern Kingbird (second record for the county, country and Western Palearctic after one last Autumn on Inishmore) was seen briefly the next day (25th September; 08:10 AM), but was missed by many visiting birders.
- (4) It was reported that at least one (and possibly two) wryneck were present. These constitute the third (possibly fourth) Co. Galway records. One bird was again present the next day (26th of September).
- (5) A Common Buzzard was also recorded at Claregalway on the 30th of September.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Eastern Kingbird (second Co. Galway record), 1-2 Wryneck (3rd and possibly 4th Co. Galway records), Blackpoll Warbler, Woodchat Shrike (second Co. Galway record), Barred Warbler, 3 Yellow-browed Warbler, Rose-coloured Starling, Surf Scoter, Wood Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, American Golden Plover, 3 Pectoral Sandpiper, Cory's Shearwater, 6 Balearic Shearwater, 13 Great Shearwater, 9 Leach's Petrel, 2 Sabine's Gull, Hobby and Great White Egret.