



BRANCH AFFAIRS

In the midst of summer season there is not a lot to report. We still await an imitative or indeed something approaching a 'Lourdes' style miracle – or should it be Mayo's 'Knock!' – to get a committee on the road – but let's leave it at that and get on with enjoying the summer. For your diary you might like to note that Tom Cuffe is leading an An Taisce birdwatching event on August 23rd 11.30-2pm at the Galway City Council's park at Rusheen Bay off the road to Barna. Our Nimmos Pier 1st Saturday-of-the-month outings will resume on Saturday 6th Sept at the usual time, 10.30am. September also heralds the resumption of I-WeBS counts.

SWIFTS IN GALWAY

Most of us can recognise Swifts and we associate them rather than with the countryside more with towns, where they fly hither and thither high over the streetscape in screaming groups. We all seem to agree, too, that, at least anecdotally, their numbers have declined. Many say that their numbers in Galway City and elsewhere are only a pale shadow of what they were in years gone by. More accurately, the recent Atlas of Birds of Britain & Ireland records a 26% decline over the past 40 years and further reports a decrease of 48% in their numbers over the past 10 years. The decline seems confined to Ireland, particularly the west – in the UK numbers over the 40 year period have been quite steady,

During the past summer, Michael Davis and Aonghus O Donnell, in Galway City, have been taking this atlas fund of knowledge a step further. In recent months, Michael has spent many hours surveying Swift numbers and movements around the city. He and Aonghus covered the city in sectors and found swifts mainly confined to the city centre, with a smaller number in the suburbs. Michael advises that overall numbers in Galway City are low – under 150 birds in total. He has also located many of their city nesting sites. Swifts nest in spaces under roofs and in nooks and crannies in old buildings which they enter at high speed! Alas, well insulated aperture-free modern buildings are not Swift-friendly! The total refurbishment of the old Grammar School on College Road –

one of their former strongholds – is typical of what is happening, sadly,

Swifts pair for life and can live up to 20 years. To build a nest they catch bits of stuff from the air – feathers and leaves – and they stick them together to make a 'cosy' nest. They lay 2 or 3 eggs which hatch after about 18 days. The chicks are fed with balls of insects which, in flight, the adults collect in a big pouch under the beak. The chicks stop eating and lose weight before they leave the nest, otherwise they could not fly – they seem to know all about the dangers of obesity! On average, Swifts fly about 500 miles a day and during an average life can fly a truly remarkable 2 million miles.

Michael's interest and information is due to his teaming up with a group based in Co. Mayo who have taken up the plight of the declining Swift population and already have done remarkable work on Swift conservation in that county; great credit is due to them. In June, Michael took part in a Swift seminar held by this group in Castlebar. You can look them up in swiftconservationireland.blogspot.ie and also in actionforswifts.blogspot.ie.

However, there is a limit to what one or two persons can do for our Swifts in Galway, so we suggest that anyone interested in joining up with Michael to do a more thorough survey of Galway Swifts next spring, contact any one of us and then we can also look into options to improve nesting sites.

We will send a reminder and a plan of action in good time for the 2015 breeding season.

NS/AOD/MD

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER

The desk where I site my laptop, which produces this newsletter, looks out through a small window onto a grassy space or glade surrounded by ash and other trees. In mid-June, through the window, I began to notice a small grey-brown bird with an upright stance constantly darting from its perch, a dead ash tree branch. To my excitement, I quickly identified it as a Spotted Flycatcher and it's sallies and darting around this tree-lined space delighted me for the weeks following.

Around the same time I had been making an inventory of my all too numerous bird books and this drew my attention to one I had quite

forgotten - *Birds of the Wayside and Woodland* by T.A. Coward, published in 1936. This book is old-fashioned in its format, with wonderful colour plates, and its outstanding feature is the descriptions of each bird species. These are much more 'poetic' and detailed than those of modern bird guides. The following is an extract of its description of the Spotted Flycatcher which, as you can appreciate, is currently my favourite bird:

The spotted Flycatcher is one of the last of the summer visitors to arrive. It is often absent until early May.

Many birds capture flying insects, but none so adroitly as the Spotted Flycatcher. Its grey-brown plumage is inconspicuous and it is not really spotted; it is, too, a silent bird, yet its neat upright figure, perched on a post, railing or dead branch is noticeable. One of its names is 'Post Bird' another 'Old Man' probably from this upright pose. Its short aerial sallies attract the eye; sometimes it swoops obliquely with unerring aim upon some insect flying below, but usually, after many smart twists and turns, it cuts short the career of a dodger. Then, as a rule, it returns to its observation post, though often it will have two look-outs to which it flies in turns. Naturally the look-out is best where the space in front is open; thus the Flycatcher frequents the border of a lawn, the outskirts of a wood or edge of a clearing or the branches of a willow or alder overhanging a stream. The call 'sit' or 'sit-chic' is not loud, but is more frequently noticed than its slight low song in May and June, a few repeated soft notes.

The upper parts of the adult bird birds are hair-brown with dark brown stripes on the crown; the under parts are greyish white but the flanks and breast are darker brown, and on the latter there are noticeable striations. The bill is brown, the legs black and the irides dark brown.

What a great description – modern bird guide editors should take note! I hope to include some more of these wonderful species descriptions in future issues.

NS

THE COUNTY GALWAY LIST

The Galway County list (all wild bird species which have been recorded to date in the county) currently stands at 310 species with two species pending. 15 species have been added



since 2010. Nine of these 15 were added in the bumper year of 2012 with three each in 2011 and 2010. The breakdown of additions to the county list over the last number of decades is as follows:

2000's	22	1940s	5
1990's	18	1930s	4
1980's	10	1920s	6
1970's	11	1910s	7
1960's	9	1900s	4
1950's	8		

Prior to 2012, the highest number of additions in a given year was seven in 2008, followed by five in 2007 and 1927, four in 1990 and three on a minimum of nine occasions (1995, 1977, 1971, 1957, 1907, 1893, 1890, 1887 and 1835). Many years go without additions, 2013 being the most recent one, followed by 2003, 2002 and 2001 which were all without additional records. No decade has been without addition since the 1820's but gaps of six years occurred on two occasions in the last century, from 1900 to 1905 and from 1921 to 1926. Surprisingly, late additions include Ring-billed Gull in 1983 (no. 248); Slavonian Grebe and Mediterranean Gull in 1981 (no.'s 247 and 246 respectively); Little Egret in 1965 (no. 230) and Collared Dove in 1959 (no. 224).

The ten most recent additions to the list are:

310	American Coot
309	Olive-backed Pipit
308	Dusky Warbler
307	Woodchat Shrike
306	Blyth's Reed Warbler
305	Belted Kingfisher
304	Eastern Kingbird
303	Ortolan Bunting
302	Arctic Redpoll
301	Red-throated Pipit
300	Pallid Harrier

Of the last 20 additions (2005-2013) to the Irish list five (and a sixth pending) have been from Galway – a record only bettered by Cork.

Aonghus O Donail

CLONFERT WOOD

If you stand admiring the Romanesque doorway at Clonfert Cathedral in east Galway in spring and summer you cannot ignore the birdsong that comes from the wood behind you; and the reverse is obviously true. The wood itself, which used to be a wooded ornamental garden, is cathedral in nature and the birdsong benefits

from its acoustics. We had the best Dawn Chorus morning I have known, there some years ago. It was attended by twenty or so people who, after the occasion, remembered the gradual twenty minute build-up of sound from the first bird that the classic chorus gives.

An avenue of 150-year old yew trees forms the cross of a nave and transepts, and a number of pillars of old sycamore and beech with gnarled natural sculptures on their trunks spread a canopy twenty metres high. In 1999, I carried out a bird survey of the 3.1 ha wood using Common Bird Census (CBC) methods, which allow a good estimation of numbers of territories held by the birds. Eighteen species held forty-two territories. Since then I have often visited the wood, not least on my way back from one of my Common Bird Survey (CBS) squares every year, and it has not diminished in its bird performances. Common garden birds seem to be in their primal habitat. Male blackbirds chase each other from territorial boundaries high up in the canopy; a great tit carries food into a round hole half way up an old sycamore; and the goldcrest's gold crest stands out among the dark green yew conifers. The space between the trees allows good views of birds, not least of a spotted flycatcher with space to pounce. Blackcaps back then, before their recent spread into hedgerows, were a woodland bird and here they still frequent the tangled patches of cherry laurel that reach the canopy in one section of the wood, one of its 'traditional' habitats in estate gardens; a habitat that may account for the good density of the blackcap's rival (or companion) in song — the song thrush. In October 2013, a tornado passed through the wood uprooting some trees and, more interestingly, breaking the branches off the tops of others. This effect, thankfully, was felt only along a 20m or so wide transect and the majority of the wood was left unscathed. However, along this transect the wood now looks very inviting to any of the first great spotted woodpeckers that will eventually make it over the Shannon.

Stephen Heery

WHOSE BIRD? – BEWICK'S SWAN

The Bewick's Swan, the slightly smaller relation of the Whooper Swan, was once a common

winter visitor to Ireland but now is a rarity, more or less confined to the Wexford Slobs. The Bird Atlas states that it has declined by 90% in the past 40 years. But who was Bewick?

Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) was an English ornithologist and engraver; the best known illustrator of his generation. His fine woodcuts of mammals, birds and rural scenes made woodcutting an art form. He never saw America but most natural historians, including Audubon, knew Bewick's works. Audubon met the elderly Bewick on his first trip to England in 1827 and honoured Bewick in naming after him a new wren, which he had shot in Louisiana 17 years before. Audubon wrote 'A complete Englishman full of life and energy though now seventy-four, very witty and clever, better acquainted with America than most of his country-men, and an honour to England.' And '...Thomas Bewick is a son of Nature. Nature alone reared him under her peaceful care, and he in gratitude of heart has copied one department of her works that must stand unrivalled forever'. This latter reference is of course to Bewick's woodcuts of British birds. Shortly before he died, Bewick paid a visit to Audubon and encountered another visitor, William Swainson. It was an informal gathering of the three greatest natural history artists of their age.

From *Whose Bird* by Bo Beoland and Michael Watkins - Helm (2003)

INCHQUIN HEADFORD

Inchquin is a Lough Corrib island near Headford. It is connected to the mainland by a long causeway which makes for an ideal walk, with water and land in view from all directions. It is my habit to walk or cycle it, if not daily, at least several times a week – thus making it, by any definition, my 'local patch. At first sight it does not seem to teem with birds but patience and careful observation gradually reveal them.

Summer brings Common Gulls, breeding on rocky islets, Common Sandpipers and the occasional Common Scoter. In winter, there are Great Northern Divers, Lapwing and Golden Plover. This year, I have recorded 50 species.

On May 11th, Gordon D'Arcy launched a splendid bird identification sign, organised by the Headford Environmental Group with funding from Galway County Council's Local Agenda scheme. It lists and shows many of the birds you may see, together with information on the island. It is a great addition to the area; would that every local patch had such a facility. Well done Headford and the Environmental Group.

BirdWatch Galway (Branch of BirdWatch Ireland) 2nd Quarter 2014

QUARTERLY BIRD REPORT COMPILED BY CHRIS PEPIATT

DATE OF ISSUE: 2nd February 2015

5th April: Pacific Diver, Kilcolgan Point, Tawin (Paul Troake). (1)
6th April: 2 Arctic Skua & 6 Long-tailed Duck, Kilcolgan Point, Tawin (Dermot Breen & Aonghus O'Donaill).
6th April: Great White Egret, Renmore Lagoon, Galway city (Anne Gaughan). (2)
7th April: Great White Egret, again present, Lough Atalia, Galway city.
10th April: 2-1st Win. Iceland Gull, Cleggan (Dermot Breen).
11th April: Ad. Forster's Tern, again present, Loughnahulla Bay, Tawin. (3)
11th April: 31 Long-tailed Duck, Kilcolgan Point, Tawin (Paul Troake).
12th April: Little Tern, Bearna Pier (Cathal Forkan).
14th April: Cuckoo, Old Town, Moycullen (Steve Bierley).
18th April: 3 Whimbrel, Kilcaimin (Paul Troake).
18th April: 19 White Wagtail, Tawin (Paul Troake).
18th April: Grasshopper Warbler, Kilgevrin, Nr. Milltown (Chris Peppiatt).
19th April: Common Sandpiper, Lough Corrib, Nr. Headford (Eamonn Delaney).
20th April: Corncrake, Inishbofin (Sam Julian-Grace).
21st April: House Martin, Kilcaimin (Paul Troake).
24th April: Common Tern, Nimmo's Pier, Galway city (Tom Cuffe).
26th April: Hawfinch, Inishbofin (Paddy Joe King). (4)
26th April: Swift, Bearna Pier (Cathal Forkan).
26th April: Sedge Warbler, Lough Inch, Bearna (Cathal Forkan).
27th April: 2-1st Win. Glaucous Gull, Inishbofin ferry (Anthony McGeehan & Dermot Breen).
28th April: Roseate Tern, Rusheen Bay, Galway city (Aonghus O'Donaill).
1st May: Sedge Warbler, NUI Galway campus, Galway city (Paul Troake).
2nd May: Fem. Hawfinch, Mainistir, Inishmore (Sally Flaherty).
3rd May: Corncrake, Inishbofin (Fiona Kearney).
4th May: Drake Garganey, Ahapouleen turlough, Maree, Oranmore (Paul Troake).
5th May: 235 Whimbrel, roost flock, Fiddaun Island (Paul Troake).
7th May: 11 Arctic Tern & 3 Arctic Skua, Bearna (Paul Troake).
24th May: Turtle Dove, Mainistir, Inishmore (Daniel O'Connell).
25th May: 2 Common Scoter, Ballincurry Bay, Lough Corrib (Edmond van Estrik).
25th May: Yellowhammer, Killeenhugh (Paul Troake). (5)
26th May: Peregrine, Kilonan Harbour, Inishmore (Fianna MacGinley & Paul Smith).
27th May: Quail, 2 (Ad. & 1st yr.) Mediterranean Gull & 11 Great Northern Diver, Island Eddy (Paul Troake).
28th May: Turtle Dove, Inishark (Dermot Breen).
1st June: Common Buzzard, Cregg Castle, Corrandulla (Pete Tyndall).
6th June: Poss. American Golden Plover, over Mervue, Galway city (Neil Ellis).
8th June: Iceland Gull, Inishbofin (Manus Curran).
9th June: 2-1st Sum. Mediterranean Gull, Coranroo Bay (Paul Troake).
9th June: Great Skua, 10 House Martin & 2 Swift, Inishbofin (Manus Curran).
15th June: Ad. Rose-coloured Starling, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan). (6)
16th June: Fem. Marsh Harrier, Lough Inch, Bearna (Cathal Forkan).
17th June: Male Common Rosefinch, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan & Aonghus O'Donaill).
18th June: 2 Spotted Flycatcher, Menlo, Galway city (Aonghus O'Donaill).
26th June: Spotted Flycatcher, Cloghballymore (Paul Troake).
27th June: Spotted Flycatcher, Ballinahinch Castle (Miryam & Michael Harris).

28th June: 2 Roseate Tern, Mutton Island, Galway city (Marcin Pisula).
30th June: Spotted Flycatcher, Ellagh, Headford (Neil Sharkey).
30th June: Twite & Corncrake, Inishbofin (Adrian Gilmore).

NOTES:

(1) The first Irish Pacific Diver was recorded near here in 2010; possibly the same bird returning?

(2) This bird was also seen on the 7th of April at nearby Lough Atalia.

(3) The long-staying Forster's Tern (eleventh winter) from the first quarter of 2014 was again present and was also specifically reported in summer plumage on the 9th of June at a tern colony in Coranroo Bay.

(4) This bird had a damaged/deformed bill and was a different bird from that which was recorded on the 2nd of May at Inishmore.

(5) A Yellowhammer was also present at the same site on the 19th of June.

(6) This Rose-coloured starling was also recorded on the 16th, the 17th and the 20th of June.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Pacific Diver, Great White Egret, Garganey, poss. American Golden Plover, long-staying Forster's Tern, 3 Roseate Tern, Quail, 2 Turtle Dove, 2 Hawfinch, Rose-coloured Starling, Common Rosefinch, Twite.

First Spring migrants: Arctic Skua (6th April), Little Tern (12th April), Cuckoo (14th April), Whimbrel (18th April), White Wagtail (18th April), Grasshopper Warbler (18th April), Common Sandpiper (19th April), Corncrake (20th April), House Martin (21st April), Common Tern (24th April), Swift (26th April), Sedge Warbler (26th April), Roseate Tern (28th April), Garganey (4th May), Arctic Tern (7th May), Turtle Dove (24th May), Quail (27th May), Great Skua (9th June), Marsh Harrier (16th June), Spotted Flycatcher (18th June).