



CAIRDE EANLAITH ÉIREANN 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.

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LOCAL MATTERS

There is not a whole lot to report. The next Nimmo's Pier outing dates will be **Sat Dec 5th**, **Sat Jan 2nd** and **Sat Feb 6th**. There are Galway Bay counts and a remaining January Corrib count pending. Information from Chris Peppiatt (chris.peppiatt@iol.ie) and Marianne ten Cate (mariannetencate@gmail.com). BirWatch HQ have advised that in December and January there will be a NEWS (Non Estuarine Wetland Survey) survey of all the coastlines not covered normally be I-WeBS. For Co. Galway this is quite a task. Further information on the BirdWatch website.

NS

RINGED PLOVER NESTING IN EAST GALWAY

On 26th May 2015 I heard the notes, saw two birds in the distance and eventually watched a sitting Ringed Plover on Bord na Móna cut away bog at Carta, south of Clonfert (N004202). Four days earlier, a Little Ringed Plover had been seen twelve kilometres away on the Little Brosna but this was an ordinary great Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*.

Ringed Plovers have been known to use this habitat for nesting in neighbouring Offaly since 1997 and a photograph of a nest and eggs just seven kilometres away across the Shannon at Blackwater Bog was published in *Irish Birds* in 1998. But this, as far as I know, is the first proved breeding of Ringed Plover in east Galway, seventy kilometres from its usual coastal and lake habitats in the county, so it is worth a mention.

Long undulating stripes of bog (called 'fields') here have been abandoned by the yellow machinery after the peat it used to mill began to contain too much white shell marl from the base of the bog. Scanning the bog with binoculars, I easily found a white spot at three hundred metres and I walked unseen along the edge of an adjacent field raised above this bird's home to within thirty metres of the nest. The sitting bird was facing me and had its white breast feathers puffed out so that the black band could not be seen. If the bird turned to its left, it looked at brown peat as bare as a beach and piles of white marl, whiter than I have ever seen, from the base of drains dug to prolong the life of the still productive parts of this bog. And green. A carpet of green when seen from a distance, a threadbare carpet when walked over — narrow leaves of arrowgrass made crowded by perspective but solitary on inspection. Scattered flashes of water, greening with thin vegetation, must have looked inviting to Ringed Plovers prospecting for a place to breed.

I returned on 22nd June with Christy Cunniffe of Clonfert and, by a flash of water, a bird alighted close to us to hop on one leg and eventually flop down on its breast with sprawled wings — the last at least a sure sign of chicks close-by.

This place is on my CBS route and I last saw Ringed Plovers here in 2006 but the habitat proved temporary in Bord na Móna's plans that year. Hopefully, nine years later it has a more permanent footing.

Stephen Heery

HUDSONIAN GODWIT – A FIRST IN IRELAND FOR GALWAY

I decided to head down to the Ballyconneely area late on 22nd July to have a quick look around. As I was driving along I saw that the tide was out as I was passing at Inishdawros. This is an area of exposed sand interspersed with seaweed-covered rocky outcrops, with Inishdawros lying about 250 metres off the mainland. Like many other wader sites in Connemara it generally holds very low numbers of waders, even during the height of autumn and winter. I had my first notable bird here only last September in the form of a Curlew Sandpiper.

I wanted to check through the small waders, the Sanderling in particular, hoping to see a colour-ringed bird. There were about 30 Ringed Plover, 12 Dunlin and also an adult Little Tern with two flying juveniles (they breed very close-by on offshore islets). I decided to check one area beyond some rocks when suddenly a large wader flew from my left to the right and dropped behind the rocks. As it passed within 30 metres of me it banked twice as it appeared to land. I didn't have time to raise my binoculars but even with the naked eye I could see that it had entirely black under wing coverts, rusty underparts and a clean white rump offset by a black tail. It could not be anything else but a HUDSONIAN GODWIT!!! My heart rate instantly sky-rocketed. I just prayed that it would stay still for a record shot. As I peeked my head over the rock, a few Redshank and Greenshank exploded off, calling as they went. Not what I needed. Thankfully there it was standing on the water's edge. It almost looked a big summer plumaged dowitcher species for a split second.

I watched and photographed the bird for about 20 minutes before it got up and flew in a big arc around the strand but quickly appeared to land into amongst more seaweed rocks. There was no sign of it for 30 minutes. I then checked the original spot and, much to my relief, it was back again. I ran back to the van to get my tripod and scope and, thankfully, it was still in the same spot on my return. After only 10 minutes, it got up again and disappeared into the same spot it had last disappeared into. The tide was now rapidly rising and I had to head back to the mainland side of the strand before being completely cut off. Around the same time, a family with a dog in tow walked through the area I saw it land in and I never saw the bird after this. Unfortunately, no one managed to get on site quick enough to see the bird, not even the twitchers from Galway city, Dublin, Wexford, Cork or Kerry.



This will be the first record of this species if accepted by the Irish Rare Bird Committee. An adult female was seen in Somerset in the UK this April/May, the first there in 32 years (only two previous records).

The Galway bird seems to be an adult male, so obviously it is a different individual. The species is relatively rare on a global scale, with a total population estimated at only 70,000 birds. 'Hudwits' breed in small pockets in Alaska, North-west Territories and along the southern shoreline of Hudson Bay in Manitoba and Ontario. They are relatively rare on migration in the USA and they cover huge distances when migrating south.

I assumed it quickly left Galway and continued on its southward push, maybe all the way to South Africa where they have turned up previously. However, on 15th September, while on a stag party/bird-finding trip, the English group of birders collectively known as 'the Punkbirders' amazingly found an adult Hudsonian Godwit on Inishmore. It remained on the island for three days, giving most twitchers a second chance to see the species. The bird was far more advanced into its winter plumage, which made comparison with the Inishdawros individual difficult, but it is widely assumed to be the same bird. Both sites are only 35km apart as the 'Hudwit' flies so the chance of the first and second ever records turning up within that distance and within 56 days of each other would probably be small.

Dermot Breen

CLIMATE CHANGE AND OUR BIRDS

We would be forgiven for thinking that the terms Global Warming and Climate Change and general concern about change, including that affecting our birds, only appeared on our horizon little more than twenty years or so ago, although I personally feel that the term Global Warming is totally inappropriate as it is full of contradictions and prone to misuse and that we should stick with Climate Change or even Present Day Man-made Climate Change if that is not too awkward a term.

However, concern with climate and mankind's relationship with our habitat and earth is age-old, reflecting the fact that climate change has been with us for tens of thousands of years. This extract from Virginia C. Holmgren's *Bird Walk through the Bible* shows that it is an age old concern.

The prophets of the Old Testament had a grim warning to give of a land laid waste by God's wrath in punishment for sinful ways. More than once they preached of a land laid bare, fit only for birds used to a desolate terrain: the Owl and the Ostrich, the Marabou, Bittern and Raven.

But grimmer still was the prophecy that one day there would be places with no birds at all! No birds, no beasts – only stillness and death, "I cannot hold my peace" Jeremiah calls out in horror at a vision of a world without form or sunlight, twisted by earthquakes and neither man nor beast left alive (4:19, 23-25).

"No birds, no beasts – all are gone" he repeats the dire omen twice again (9:12; 12:4).

Ezekiel, too, foretold a time of trembling before destruction (chapters 29-39) and Hosea called in vain (4:1-3 for repentance, seeing a land in mourning for the wild things it would never see again. And Zephaniah repeated the death-warning for birds, beasts, fish in the sea, and all mankind.



It is a warning we must give ourselves in this age of pollution, overcrowding and vanishing species – but who can say how many will be ready to listen? Even here in the New World there is already a death count. The last Great Auk died in 1844; the last Spectacled Cormorant in 1858. The year 1875 was the last time anyone saw a Labrador Duck. There have been neither Passenger Pigeon nor Carolina Parakeets since 1914. What species will be the next to vanish? Bald Eagle and Golden Eagle both are threatened, and with them on the danger list are the Peregrine Falcon, Osprey, Hudsonian Godwit, and many more.

It is time for action, not just for the setting aside of vast acreage of wildlife sanctuaries by government decree and the banning of biocide poisons, but for individuals to take their own stand on home ground, making sure that their own backyards, the nearby fields and parks, offer food and a home site for at least a few birds, and shelter in green-growing trees and hedgerows to every winged wanderer that comes by.

Virginia Holmgren – a noted American ornithologist – wrote this in 1972, long before we heard of climate change and all that goes with it. Yet, she was strangely prophetic as indeed was Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* and many others. Virginia refers to 'God's wrath for our sinful ways' – what indeed are our modern equivalent 'sins' in lack of care for the only world and environment that we have?

SAKHALIN

There are some places in the world where it is considered unlikely or even unfortunate that you might end up in the normal run of things. One such place is Sakhalin Island in the Sea of Okhotsk, east of Siberia and north of Japan. Formerly a Russian prison colony, it was visited by Anton Chekhov in 1890 who, as a medical doctor, reviewed the conditions suffered by the 10,000 prisoners living there and the unlucky guards and their families who perforce endured the same environment. This quote is from Chekhov's book *Sakhalin Island* which served as a grim report of his surveys and interviews:

The overcast sky, the sea, on which could be seen not a single sail, and the steep clay shoreline had a forbidding air; the waves pounded dull and melancholy. Stunted, sickly trees looked down from high up on the bank; here, out in the open, each of them fights in isolation a cruel battle with the frosts and cold winds, and during the autumn and winter, through long, dreadful nights, each of them sways restlessly from side to side, bends to the ground and creaks in lamentation, and this lamentation is heard by nobody.

While I am not a proper birder, the opportunity offered by a place on a geophysical survey in the shallow waters east of Sakhalin Island demanded that I bring a bird book; the binoculars were already packed as my focus for the survey would be marine mammals. Armed with a second-hand copy of Harrison's *Seabirds*, rarely consulted prior to this, I joined a ship in Korsakov in the south of Sakhalin. The ship has recently arrived from Wakkanai on the northern tip of Japan but the vagaries of Russian regulations for supernumeraries meant that I had

missed out on that leg of the trip and my lowly status on the vessel as 'not a real seaman' was confirmed.

My additional lowly status as 'not a real birder' was also confirmed before we had even left the dock; the bay was filled with wheeling birds but the light was poor and the birds were uniformly dark in colour and similar in shape and it took a depressingly long time before they resolved themselves into two species, the familiar Sooty Shearwater from home and the double-dark morph of the Fulmar. The Fulmars were to become our constant companion for the survey, always present but only engaging in ship-following when our speed increased to about ten knots. Light-morph birds were occasionally seen with them but more often intermediate morphs. There was considerable gradation in the dark-morph birds too; some were a pigeon-like blue grey, others a scruffy brown with a lot of pale colouring showing through from underneath.

The shearwaters were distributed more patchily and were seen in mixed flocks and rafts with Fulmars, Herring Gulls, Kittiwakes and very dainty Aleutian Terns. These all were regularly harassed by Arctic Skuas operating singly or more often in pairs; they were the only skua species I managed to identify on the trip. The bigger gulls remained aloof, Slaty-backed and Black-tailed (Japanese) Gulls were encountered occasionally in single figures and I saw just one non-breeding Glaucous Gull showing plenty of brown on his plumage.

NS Smaller birds presented bigger challenges. Red-necked Phalaropes eventually proved easy to identify when a flock waited close enough to the boat to be photographed before scattering. Small auks were more camera shy, the most diminutive one encountered was tentatively identified as Crested Auklet on the basis of size and drab colouring. They were encountered singly or in small numbers, oriented themselves away from the vessel and tended to dive at the crucial moment. What turned out to be a Rhinoceros Auklet (probably) was just about identified from a poor photograph taken in low light and at the limits of the lens. Their more demonstrative relation the Tufted Puffin was easier to sort out visually but hard to photograph. They made high-speed passes at quite close range but would then disappear into the murk, not to be seen again for several days and leaving me standing hopefully outside, with camera in hand, freezing. Other birds encountered offshore included Velvet Scoters, Black-throated Divers, Brunnich's and Common Guillemot, and a single Laysan Albatross picked up by one of the Russian observers on the way back to Korsakov. Environmental conditions on the survey were not ideal for bird or whale watching. The waters were cold, as low as 3°C, and the air temperature dipped down to 5°C at night and no more than 14°C during the day, excepting the rare occasions the sun came out. Our biggest enemy was fog which we had often and with great density and persistence. Days at a time were spent in total greyness, with nothing of interest to look at except the forecast for any kind of change in the wind to blow it all away. At least we were saved rough seas but the poor visibility was relentless and gloomy. We were there in July and August which is the best part of the weather window; the seas begin to ice up again at the end of September and stay frozen until as late as June.

We were there to observe whales, and whenever the fog lifted we saw them in numbers. The seas off Sakhalin are the summer feeding ground for the critically endangered Western Gray Whale; the gray whales are abundant on the eastern side from Alaska to Baja California but their genetically distinct Russian cousins only number around 150 animals. We saw them in loose groups of up to twenty animals, usually feeding in less than 50 metres of water. While they are baleen whales, they are also benthic feeders, taking mouthfuls of mud off the bottom and filtering out the invertebrates and bivalves. Great gouts of mud could sometimes be seen in the water when they surfaced.

Even rarer are the North Pacific Right Whale which were also seen by the survey; the sightings were only occasional but were confirmed by photograph. That population is so reduced by whaling and isolated from other right whale populations that it is not expected to survive and recover in the long term. Other cetacean species seen were Minke, Fin, Sperm and Killer Whales, Harbour Porpoises occasionally, and Dall's Porpoises in their thousands while on transit. Spotted Seals, Northern Fur Seals and Steller's Sea Lions were also seen regularly in the area, and often approached the vessel. Salmon were abundant at all times, jumping clear of the water on their way to the rivers to spawn, and to be consumed in great numbers by the Brown Bears on Sakhalin.

The area was highly productive and the birds, fish and mammals encountered were impressively diverse and abundant. No doubt, a more skilled birder would have produced a much longer list than I and would have been able to interpret the local ecology to better effect. While Sakhalin is harsh and unwelcoming to humans, there are still considerable anthropogenic impacts from commercial fishing and the activities of the oil and gas industry, and the environment cannot be considered pristine. Some tours and cruises frequent the area during the summer months so it is by no means closed to the interested naturalist but, while I enjoyed the chance to go and see the place, I don't expect to return, unless banished.

Stephen Comerford

LITTLE GREBES

On the pond beside the 2nd green at Galway Golf Club, a pair of little grebes, having successfully completed one clutch, built a new nest in a small clump of reeds.

They were brooding eggs for a week or so, when a very heavy rainfall raised the level of the pond significantly; the nest was flooded, nothing remained.

They later rebuilt in the same spot and eventually hatched two chicks; I first saw them on Sunday, 6th September. I felt it was very late for the chicks. A few days later, there was just one chick, growing quickly. It was being fed by both parents.

A week or so later, there was only one parent with the chick. The chick was growing fast and diving for food while still chasing its parent for food. Today, Tuesday, 27th October, to finish this piece, I checked the pond. Both birds were there, the chick almost adult size.

Brendan Dunne

BirdWatch Galway (Branch of BirdWatch Ireland) 3rd Quarter 2015

QUARTERLY BIRD REPORT COMPILED BY CHRIS PEPIATT

DATE OF ISSUE: 6th August 2016

4th July: Great White Egret, again present, Muckrush, Lough Corrib. (1)
5th July: Common Buzzard, Ballinasloe (John Gallagher).
9th July: Yellow-legged Gull, Inishmaan (Kevin Cathcart).
14th July: 100 Sandwich Tern, Furbo (Neil Ellis).
14th July: Spotted Flycatcher, Killeeneen (Neil Ellis).
17th July: 2 Sooty Shearwater, 3,800 Manx Shearwater, 11 Storm Petrel, 100 Fulmar, 175 Gannet, 75 Kittiwake, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan).
17th July: Ad. Ring-billed Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway city (Michael Davis). (2)
22nd July: Hudsonian Godwit, Inishdawros, Ballyconneely (Dermot Breen). (3)
28th July: Long-eared Owl, Clonabinna (Sean Halloran).
31st July: Marsh Harrier, Nr. Corrandulla (Neil Sharkey).
6th August: Red-rumped Swallow, High Island (Ashley Bennison).
6th August: 2 Balearic Shearwater, 4 Great Skua, Green Sandpiper & 20 Whimbrel, Slyne Head (Sean Pierce).
8th August: Male Eider, Duck Island, Carna (Sean Pierce).
11th August: Corncrake & 10 Chough, Inishbofin (Fearghas Mac Lochlainn).
12th August: 3 Knot, 3 Sanderling & 4 Whimbrel, Rusheen Bay, Galway city (Cathal Forkan).
14th August: Common Buzzard, Rahasane turlough (Cathal Forkan).
16th August: 3 Corncrake, Lettermuckoo (Ciara Connaola).
16th August: Male Merlin, Tooreen bog, Moyard (Hubert Servignat).
22nd August: Black Tern & 6 Ruff, Angliham, Lough Corrib (Aonghus O'Donaill).
23rd August: 2 Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, 20+ Ruff & ringtail Hen Harrier, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Aonghus O'Donaill, Cathal Forkan & Dermot Breen).
24th August: Imm. Garganey & 3 Ruff, Rahasane turlough (John N Murphy).
24th August: Wood Sandpiper & 2 Pectoral Sandpiper, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Aonghus O'Donaill & Michael Davis).
29th August: 4-5 Black Tern & 20 Ruff, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Aonghus O'Donaill & Cathal Forkan).
29th August: Juv. Little Stint, Rusheen Bay, Galway city (Cathal Forkan). (4)
29th August: Juv. 4 Ruff, 40 Black-tailed Godwit, 2 Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Sandpiper & 3 Swift, Rahasane turlough (Neil Ellis).
31st August: Juv. Peregrine, Rusheen Bay, Galway city (Cathal Forkan).
2nd September: Fem. Peregrine, Shantalla, Galway city (Damien).
3rd September: Ad. Win. Mediterranean Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway city (David O'Keefe).
5th September: 2 Peregrine, Kilcolgan (Martin O'Malley).
5th September: Hen Harrier, Mountross, Lough Corrib (Neil Ellis).
6th September: Barn Owl, Moneymore East, Oranmore (Martin O'Malley).
12th September: Pectoral Sandpiper, Ballyconneely (James Gilroy).
13th September: Arctic Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher & Garden Warbler, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan). (5)
13th September: Spotted Redshank & 2 Kingfisher, Tawnagh West, Nr. Traught (Cathal Forkan).
14th September: 2 Common Rosefinch & Curlew Sandpiper, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan, Dermot Breen & Aonghus O'Donaill).
15th September: Ring Ouzel, Reed Warbler & Tree Pipit, Inishmore (Dan Brown, Richard Moores, Simon Mahood & Robert Martin).
15th September: Pied Flycatcher & Spotted Flycatcher, Slyne Head (Dermot Breen).
16th September: Yellow-browed Warbler, Inishmore (Aonghus O'Donaill).
16th September: Ruff, Inishmore (Hugh Delaney).

16th September: Black Tern, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Cathal Forkan).
16th September: 350 Black-tailed Godwit, Rahasane turlough (Paul Troake).
18th September: 2 Juv. Dotterel, Truska, Ballyconneely (Dermot Breen). (6)
18th September: Kingfisher, Portumna (David Nayer).
19th September: Spotted Redshank, Rusheen Bay, Galway city (Cathal Forkan).
21st September: 2 Pectoral Sandpiper, Truska, Ballyconneely (Dermot Breen).
23rd September: Pied Flycatcher & Spotted Flycatcher, Slyne Head (Dermot Breen).
26th September: 2 Grey Phalarope, Rossaveal to Inishmore Ferry (Dermot Breen).
26th September: Snow Bunting, Diamond Hill, Connemara National Park, Letterfrack (Joe Lennon).
26th September: 3 Ruff & Peregrine, Rahasane turlough (Neil Ellis).
28th September: Common Buzzard, Kilcolgan (Hubert Servignat).
28th September: Long-eared Owl, Williamstown (Mick Wright).
29th September: Yellow Wagtail & Fem. Hen Harrier, Truska, Ballyconneely (Dermot Breen).

NOTES:

- (1) Probably the same bird as the one seen in the same area in April 2015.
- (2) This bird was also present at Nimmo's Pier on the 28th of July 2015.
- (3) A Hudsonian Godwit, in all probability the same bird, was seen at Kilmurvey, Inishmore, on the 15th-17th September 2015.
- (4) A juvenile Little Stint, possibly the same bird, was also present at Rusheen Bay on the 31st of August 2015.
- (5) The Arctic Warbler was also present on the 14th of September 2015.
- (6) These two Dotterel were again present at Truska on the 21st of September 2015.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Hudsonian Godwit, Red-rumped Swallow, Arctic Warbler, Yellow-legged Gull, 2 Balearic Shearwater, 2 Wood Sandpiper, 4-5 Pectoral Sandpiper, 2 Dotterel, Yellow-browed Warbler, Tree Pipit, 2 Pied Flycatcher & 2 Common Rosefinch, as well as the long-staying Great White Egret.