



## CAIRDE EANLAITH ÉIREANN GALWAY

[www.birdwatchgalway.org](http://www.birdwatchgalway.org)

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY

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Issue No. 92 – February 2016

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### LOCAL MATTERS

The main characteristic of the winter so far has been the inclement weather. Incessant rain, floods and wind have prevailed week after week. Two efforts to do the November Galway Bay count had to be called off and the December Nimmo's Pier outing had to be cancelled. On the plus side, both the January Galway Bay count and the Nimmo's outing took place.

In December and January members took part in the third Non-estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS III). It takes place every nine years and aims to count the waterbirds of open, rocky or sandy coast away from estuaries. It was organised by Helen Boland from BWI I-WeBS Office and Marianne ten Cate in Co. Galway. Co. Galway had one of the largest numbers of sectors of which 68 were designated as priority. Thanks to a good response from Galway birdwatchers, all but one of the priority sectors were covered, plus quite a number of the others. Bird numbers recorded per sector varied from none to several hundreds. The terrain and consistently awful weather made counting and coverage a huge challenge, so well done to all who took part.

The next **Nimmos Pier outing** will be on **Saturday March 5<sup>th</sup> at 10.30am** and the final Galway Bay Count is scheduled for Saturday March 12<sup>th</sup> – to take part contact Chris Peppiatt at [chris.peppiatt@iol.ie](mailto:chris.peppiatt@iol.ie).

NS

### OWLS

What is it about owls that is so captivating? I'm sure one part of the allure is that array of night noises which passes for owl communication. Frequently, we have Barn Owls land on our bedroom roof, where they delight in waking us with a coarse, breathy hiss that sounds like something concocted for a zombie out of the crypt in the old Hammer Horror film. Earhh! Even better is Tawny Owl song, which has begun this week and is the earliest marker of winter's breakdown. It reminds me in one specific sense of its diurnal twin, the cockerel's dawn clarion. They both arc across the sky and fall towards you out of some indeterminate space. Owl sounds are a language purified of all visual nuance and gesture, they are intense on the ear and impenetrable to our understanding. Like flashes of lightening in a night storm that manage paradoxically to make the darkness clearer but more unfathomable.

The other thing about owls is their binocular vision. On the head you see only a single iris at any one time. Owls seem to watch us as much as we look at them. It is the piercing glare of equals; a mutual pondering of otherness and similarity. Even when their eyes are shut in that bizarre loveheart-shaped facial disc, they seem to compel us.

Recently, I was in Kildinda in northern Serbia, where up to 750 Long-eared Owls – part of this species' largest concentration on the planet – roost every night in the town's main street. By the ATM next to our hotel, there were 23 in one tree, and along the fence of the infant's school I counted 30. At dawn, the entire town was caught in sun-lit hoar frost and as the residents strolled to work or their lessons, that thread through the parallel worlds of these night birds, the owls were utterly indifferent, their eyelids

squeezed tight like closed shutters, holding aloof from the human community and stopping up in the darkness of their dreams - all that gloriously unknowable magic of their lives.

Mark Cocker

I gratefully acknowledge Mark's permission to use this piece. NS

### TWO CONTRASTING OUTCOMES IN EAST GALWAY

In 2015, two contrasting bird events at my house occurred that will stay in my memory. One filled me with mild horror and the other filled us with sheer joy. The first involved Jackdaws. A pair had nested for many years deep in the false chimney of our cottage and their conversational chatter could be heard, deceptively distant-sounding, in the room with the blocked-up fireplace. Early last year, I reluctantly put one of those black conical cages over the chimney pot to prevent further nesting. Throughout April, the pair continued to pile an enormous quantity of sticks and debris on the flat concrete surrounding the chimney pot, the slightest wind blowing it off and into the roof valley, whence it had to be continually cleared. Their breeding cycle had started and it ended with my finding a cream-coloured, grey and brown speckled egg in the rose-bed beneath the gutter. That completed the mild horror.

The second event involved Mistle Thrushes. Toward the end of the above tragedy, a pair swooped down to our hundred-year old apple tree. One of the birds, watched by the other, settled itself in the bare cradle formed by the leafless shoots radiating upwards from the abrupt and gnarled end of a long-broken branch, three metres off the ground and eight metres from the kitchen window. A few days later they started the nest and as the buds were swelling, at the beginning of May, the sitting bird's brown-grey back blended with the grey-brown bark, and its mate was perched at a great height in the distance, watching. Later, the view with binoculars through the kitchen window was like an impossible thousand-piece jig-saw of green leaves and pink and white blossoms with one clue as to where to start – the eye of the bird was visible, surprisingly large, with the white reflection that is present in every living eye. A well-placed nest; if I could see the eye then the bird could watch me. This breeding cycle went like clockwork. If I was working in the garden, the feeding bird would sweep low round the corner of the house to enter the nest on what it thought was the blind side of the tree. One day, at the end of May, we left the house for twelve hours and when we returned the crowded fledglings were no longer there and there was no sign of a struggle. Recently, I took the sodden nest down and had difficulty separating white, flat nylon thread from the cradle around whose bars it had been thoroughly entwined.

Stephen Heery

### WHOSE BIRD?

Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae* (Salvadori 1899)  
(Alt. Cape Verde Petrel or Gongon)

Leonardo Fea (1853-1903) was an Italian explorer, zoologist, painter and naturalist. Fea, who was an assistant at the Natural History Museum in Genoa, liked exploring far off and little-known countries. In 1898, he visited the Cape Verde Islands; at about 600km from Senegal they were not as challenging to visit as some of his other destinations. He had already made an expedition to Burma (now Myanmar). He was a friend of Salvadori, who first described the petrel from a specimen collected by Fea on the Cape Verdes.

From *Whose Bird?* by Bo Beoland & Michael Watkins (Helm 2002).

### MERLINS – THEIR STATUS IN IRELAND

Merlin surveying can elicit all the emotions birdwatching has to offer, from exhilarating highs to soul-destroying lows, usually only the latter. If it is appropriate to label a bird as 'crafty', then this perfectly describes our smallest falcon. A long day in a remote bog searching for this elusive raptor typically ends in exhaustion, wet feet, damper spirits, and riddled with midge bites, but without so much as a glimpse of a Merlin. Such memories are short-lived though if fool-hardy persistence is eventually rewarded with sight of a Merlin. Frustration quickly changes to admiration in those rare moments when the true character of this predator is witnessed, with incredible agility on the wing in relentless pursuit of its quarry, or ferociously defending its nest from much larger assailants with nimble and fearless confidence; this diminutive raptor commands respect. Galway is regarded as a national stronghold for Merlin. A quick glance at the Breeding Atlas indicates that the west of the county in particular is one of the most important areas for breeding Merlin. Breeding pairs have also been recorded in areas of raised bog in the north east of the county, in upland areas around the Slieve Aughtys in the south, and the pockets of suitable un-enclosed land and raised bog scattered in between are likely to hold at least a few pairs. Arriving at a figure for the county would involve more than a little guess work. Even in the Connemara Bog Complex Special Protected Area (SPA) which is designated with Merlin as a species of Special Conservation Interest, the number of pairs within and the trends of the local population are not known. The lack of information on basic aspects of Merlin ecology is an issue across the country and one which limits effective conservation for the species. Recent efforts in Connemara through the local National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) rangers and BirdWatch Ireland are attempting to address some of the knowledge gaps, and although slow going, this monitoring work is helping to gradually develop a much needed understanding of breeding Merlin both locally and nationally.

**Status** By the same traits which make them so intriguing and elusive Merlin also tend to fly beneath the radar when it comes to prioritising research and conservation resources so they are generally over-



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looked in favour of the less 'challenging' birds of prey. The raptor landscape in Ireland has changed dramatically over the past twenty years, with many positives, such as the recovery and return of several birds of prey. However, one aspect which has changed little is our knowledge of Merlin. There has been no national census of them in Ireland and most assessments of the status of Merlin typically employ the terminology 'unknown data'. Monitoring of discrete populations has provided some information on their nesting ecology and short-term regional trends; however, in the absence of a systematic survey and targeted monitoring, a robust population estimate and overview of the status and conservation requirements of the population is lacking. Breeding range declines of 8% and 49% over the past 20 and 40 years, as recorded by the bird atlases, have been the primary source to categorise Merlin as an Amber-listed *Bird of Conservation Concern in Ireland*. However, due to difficulties in effectively assessing the population, multi-species surveys such as the bird atlases are not likely to provide an accurate representation of Merlin status and trends. As an Annex I species on the European Birds Directive, Merlin are a national conservation priority for which there is a requirement to ensure the protection of the population. Six SPAs have been identified with Merlin as a Special Conservation Interest in upland areas thought to be strongholds for the population; however, the importance of the SPA network for Merlin and how they are performing is not known. What is clear is that in order to understand the requirement for conservation action and to develop an appropriate management strategy for Merlin, it is necessary to first gain an insight in their Irish status and the factors which impact the breeding population, all of which remain knowledge gaps.

**Conservation concerns** As with a range of other upland bird species, the land-use changes and intensification of agriculture which have altered upland areas over recent decades are likely to have impacted breeding Merlin. As an open-country predator which specialises on small open-country birds, Merlin may be especially vulnerable to the loss or degradation of suitable open habitats. Alongside a substantial reduction in heather cover, widespread afforestation in the Irish uplands has given rise to concerns for Merlin populations. The relationship between Merlin and commercial forest plantation is complex, however, as plantation forests can provide opportunities for nesting while at the same time limiting the availability and suitability of habitats for foraging. In Britain, where Merlin have been more comprehensively monitored, there is conflicting evidence as to the impacts of afforestation on their populations. In Ireland, afforestation has progressed at one of the fastest rates in Europe, and has been primarily concentrated in upland habitats. As a result, Merlin are now likely to predominantly occur in forested landscapes in Ireland and key to developing an effective conservation strategy will be understanding the impacts of afforestation as well as forest management activities on Merlin populations.

**Survey and monitoring** A range of tactics can be employed to locate breeding Merlin, all of which require effort and patience. When surveying in suitable habitat, you are acutely aware that a sharp pair of eyes is likely to be observing your struggles

from a discrete vantage point. One of the best survey methods is searching not directly for the birds themselves but for the *plucking* remains of their prey. Although Merlin will take moths, their main prey is small birds such as Meadow Pipits and Skylarks which are generally caught after high speed, and sometimes quite drawn out and exhaustive *tail-chases*. After a successful capture, Merlin will take their prey to a prominent look-out, such as a boulder or hummock, where prey will be plucked before being consumed or delivered to the nest to feed voracious chicks. Investigating potential plucking perches can reveal evidence of recent kills and indicate the presence of Merlin in the area. However, a pilot Merlin survey showed that the effectiveness of this survey technique varies between sites, as extensive searches of known breeding territories have revealed little or no signs of Merlin. It was hoped that the pilot survey undertaken by BirdWatch Ireland and the NPWS in 2010 would be a pre-cursor to a national census. However, contrasting assessments of Merlin occupancy and breeding status in the same areas by different teams of experienced surveyors highlighted that a national census for Merlin could not be carried out in the same manner as for Hen Harrier and Peregrine which involved a large volunteer network, and that a different approach would be required.

In recent years monitoring efforts have focused on Connemara where Merlin nest on densely wooded islands on the many lakes scattered throughout the vast areas of bog. Covered in Oak, Yew, Holly, dense mosses and ferns, these tiny remnants of natural woodland are in stark contrast to the swathes of non-native coniferous monocultures which dominate large parts of this landscape. Although the nesting preference of Connemara Merlin makes survey work marginally easier than searching for pairs in extensive forest plantations, it presents its own unique set of challenges. Traipsing across the bog in a wetsuit with fins hanging over shoulders on a hot summer day garners strange looks from farmers and walkers but has proven to be the most suitable attire for effective surveying. In an attempt to increase the efficiency of monitoring, some novel survey techniques have also been trialled in Connemara, including broadcasting Merlin calls and using a decoy to try and elicit a response from resident birds, both of which had limited success. Artificial nest baskets, which have been successful in other parts of the Merlin's range, have been placed at suitable sites across Connemara, with thirty-three baskets installed to date, but true to character, Merlin have not shown interest, with the baskets proving to be more appealing for Long-eared Owls!

**New Research** Although there have been few published studies on Merlin in Ireland, over the years a small number of dedicated fieldworkers have devoted significant energy to gathering information on local Merlin populations in different areas of the country. In collaboration with these surveyors, Bird-Watch Ireland and University College Cork collated available information which for the first time provides a broad overview of long-term breeding trends and habitat use of Merlin in Ireland extending over the past thirty years. Analysis of over 340 breeding attempts monitored since the early 1980s shows that Merlin breeding trends have remained relatively stable over this period, with Connemara recording

one of the highest productivity rates in the country with 1.8 young fledged per breeding attempt. Traditionally, Merlin nested on the ground in heather moorland in Ireland. However, this study confirms ground nesting is now exceptionally rare, with only a single pair recorded in moorland with all others nesting in trees, the vast majority of which were in conifer plantations. The lack of suitable heather cover is likely to influence nest site choice, but despite the fact that Merlin showed a strong selection for forest plantations for nesting, a positive selection for moors and heathland, peat bogs and natural grasslands within breeding territories also demonstrates the importance of these open habitats. As well as providing information on the landscape and habitat requirements for Merlin in Ireland, the findings on nesting preference also highlight the fact that Merlin are vulnerable to disturbance from forest management operations, and this study now provides the necessary information to develop the required mitigation. Although this study represents positive progress towards a better understanding of Merlin in Ireland, it is a case of 'a little done, a lot more to do' and it is hoped that the monitoring work in Connemara will be at the forefront of increasing our knowledge and bringing the necessary attention to this enigmatic falcon.

Research on Merlin breeding ecology and habitat use was undertaken as part of the 'Avian Diversity and Afforestation Planning Tools' project at University College Cork and BirdWatch Ireland, which was funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in Ireland. Dermot Breen, Aonghus O'Donnell and Irene O'Brien of NPWS and John Lusby of BirdWatch Ireland undertake the monitoring work in Connemara. Particular thanks to Larry Toal and David Norriss who provided data from their Merlin monitoring spanning over thirty years.

**John Lusby**

### [A REVIEW OF CO GALWAY BIRDS IN 2015](#)

The year 2015 held quite a mixed bag for County Galway. While it was on the whole a quiet year for a lot of groups of species, it did produce one national first in the form of a Hudsonian Godwit which was first discovered near Ballyconneely in July and later seen on Inishmore in September by the visiting Punk-birders. There were other new additions to the county list including Richard's Pipit, Raddes's Warbler, Arctic Warbler and Melodious Warbler.

2015 started off with some of the usual suspects, namely the regular Forster's Tern which moves widely around Galway Bay. What is presumed to be the same bird, it was first recorded on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2003. Wildfowl noteworthy species included a male American Wigeon at Belclare Turlough in January. Intriguingly, a hybrid present at the same time resembled a Eurasian Wigeon by Baikar Teal. Both species overlap in their breeding range so the question is, did this duck come from a wild mixed pair in Siberia or was it the result of captive breeding? Other long stayers included a Great White Egret on the south east side of Lough Corrib which resided there for most of the year. Another Great White Egret showed up at Rahasane Turlough during the autumn. Another highlight of the winter came in the form of a



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white-phase Gyr Falcon. This highly charismatic bird of prey was spotted on Inishbofin in February and allowed close observation as it busily ate a Rabbit! It was seen again briefly nearly two months later. Although there were small numbers of Iceland and Ring-billed Gulls seen early in the year, no rare gulls were noted, not even a Kumlien's Gull.

The spring delivered a few good birds. One of the strangest records was a Wilson's Storm Petrel seen on 21<sup>st</sup> April from the R.V. Celtic Explorer, 60 nautical miles WSW of Slyne Head. This is probably the first record of this species in Ireland during the month of April. What has now become to be a somewhat regular occurrence, Dotterel were again seen on the Slyne Head, in the Ballyconneely area. What started out with a flock of four birds, increased to six and finally eight birds during late April. It just goes to show we must have small numbers of Dotterel regularly travelling up along the west of Ireland. It is amazing to think how these small groups manage to find one another on passage. To top it all, two juveniles showed up in exactly the same spot in September. One of these juveniles sadly met its end here as it was captured and eaten by a Peregrine. This highlights the natural perils that migrant birds have to contend with on their journeys. Ireland experienced a good spring influx of Hoopoes and Galway shared in this by receiving two or three different birds. The only other spring migrants of note were a Bee-eater briefly at Roundstone, a Tree Pipit on Inishark and a Marsh Harrier on Lough Corrib.

The summer was typically rather quiet although there were two very noteworthy birds seen. First, a Franklin's Gull was seen in Rusheen Bay very briefly in June. One was seen shortly afterwards in Northern Ireland which may have been the same individual. The second was the Hudsonian Godwit discovered near Ballyconneely in July. This bird, which also only put in a very brief stay, was the first of the species ever seen in Ireland. The same bird was seen out on Inishmore in September. A write-up of this record appeared in the previous Galway Newsletter. There were also two Long-tailed Skuas recorded during June, one of which was apparently sitting in the middle of the golf course at Ballyconneely and reasonably approachable to passing golfers. Another very good sighting was that of Galway's second ever Red-rumped Swallow seen over High Island, coincidentally where the second Long-tailed Skua was.

Autumn yielded a mixed bag. Waders, in particular Nearctic species, were very low in numbers. Just five Pectoral Sandpipers and a single American Golden Plover were recorded. No American waders were recorded at Rahasane Turlough for the first time in a long while. Muckrush by Lough Corrib produced a few nice scarce migrants in August which included two Wood Sandpipers, Green Sandpiper, at least 20 Ruff and 5 Black Terns. Two Little Stint were seen during the autumn but amazingly just a single Curlew Sandpiper was seen. This species is normally more frequent here than the former species. The autumn fared better for passerines, however, especially for warblers. Galway's first Arctic and Raddes's Warblers were discovered on Inishbofin, both found by Anthony McGeehan. Hot on the heels of the first county Arctic Warbler, a second bird was found on Inishmore. A Melodious Warbler on Inishmore was also a new warbler species for the county. To finish

up on the warbler front, single Siberian Chiffchaffs were found at Slyne Head and Inishbofin. There was a good selection of scarce passerines reported in the county during the autumn which included Pied Flycatcher, 2 Common Rosefinch, Tree Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, 2 Ring Ouzel, Turtle Dove, Lesser Whitethroat, Garden Warbler, 2 Reed Warbler, 3 Black Redstart, Whinchat and Lapland Bunting. It was also a reasonable year for Yellow-browed Warblers. At least 29 individuals were noted over the period of 16<sup>th</sup> September to 2<sup>nd</sup> November at the following locations: Inis Oirr, Inishmore, Slyne Head and Inishbofin.

The remainder of the year was rather quiet, with an overwintering adult summer Sabine's Gull, several Grey Phalaropes and a single Little Auk the best of a poor bunch.

**Dermot Breen**