



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.

Distributed by e mail only

LOCAL MATTERS

May could be said to mark the conclusion of the Galway birdwatching year as our part of the world is best for birds in the winter months. The past quarter saw the usual I-WeBS, including Lough Corrib and Galway Bay, counts and members also rallied round to do the Non-estuarine Waterbirds Survey (NEWS) which takes place approximately every decade. Most counts took place in awful weather conditions of wind, huge rainfall and flooding. Great credit is due to those who ventured forth.

The Nimmo's Pier outings continued, although the weather caused at least one cancellation. Special thanks are due to Tom Cuffe, to Brendan Dunne and Cathal Forkan, and to all who came along. The list of birds seen over the season as compiled by Brendan (helped by Sean Walsh) is attached.

Readers who peruse the *Newsletter* may notice that this issue is the 93rd effort. Longevity and health allowing, I am aiming to get to the 100th edition, at least. However, since the formal branch ceased to exist a few years ago, getting content for the *Newsletter* has become more difficult. This is not at all to take from those who unfailingly provide items and articles, year after year. However, a wider network of contributors would greatly help. About 400 people are receiving the *Newsletter* and even an extra five per cent involvement response would be wonderful. Offering suggestions for new ideas and format would also be greatly appreciated and received with many thanks.

NS

A VIST TO PALM COAST FLORIDA

On 4 February 2016, I flew into Jacksonville in the north-east of Florida for a family visit. Approaching the airport, we flew through a raging thunderstorm and heavy rain; certainly not what I had expected the weather to be. Night-time temperatures dropped as low as just above freezing and day-time temperatures only got into the teens during the second week of my visit. Needless to say, I hardly saw any butterflies and spring seemed to be slow-coming, just like it was here in Ireland. The main aim of my trip was to spend time with the family, including two very young granddaughters, so birdwatching was not high on the agenda. Still, there was a programme of activities to please young and old awaiting me and I had the use of a pair of binoculars on most of our outings.

The first birds I encountered on the river flowing along the estate that was 'home' for two weeks were Osprey and a Ring-billed Gull while a flock of noisy American Crows roamed the gardens nearby. The crows were completely

black (inc. bill and feet) but the evening sunlight brought out a lovely purple sheen on them. Ring-billed Gulls turned out to be very common and made me think of the outing I was missing at Nimmo's Pier.

The next day, we visited Fort Matanzas, built in the 18th century by the Spanish to ward off the English who were trying to get a foothold at St Augustine. The fort was built of coquina, a local sedimentary shellstone. True to my family's tradition, I brought a small piece of it home with me. The mortar used was lime from burned oyster shells. Obviously, the area was very rich in shell deposits. As at most places of interest we visited, a bird list was available; of the 53 abundant and common species found here in spring I spotted nine: Brown Pelican, Northern Harrier, Wood Stork, Snowy and Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Fish Crow, European Starling and Gray Catbird. The first was definitely the most common waterbird in the area, the latter was to me the most exotic as it was the first of the Thrashers (also called 'mimic thrushes') I was to encounter. Looking down onto the inlet I also spotted a Leatherback Turtle slowly moving around the boat that had brought us to the fort. A week later, on the beach of the Matanzas River, I saw a Bonaparte's Gull, a 1st winter Glaucous Gull (which was so unperturbed by people that the children approached it to within a meter), a Red-necked Grebe, a few Ruddy Turnstones (some already getting into their summer plumage) and, on a beach terrace, a flock of Boot-tailed Grackles, very large, very cheeky, iridescent 'blackbirds' which tried to eat off visitors' plates. Here, I have to admit that my list of sightings contains mostly big, brightly-coloured birds and that most of the smaller (song) birds escaped me in the dense foliage of the local 'hammock' vegetation.

The etymology of the term 'hammock' is obscure. Dictionaries usually give it as an archaic form of hummock although 'hammock' appeared in print earlier than 'hummock', e.g. in English in the 1550s as a nautical term for a mound of trees seen on the horizon. Hardwood hammocks in north-east Florida have a mixture of deciduous and evergreen trees. Among these, the hydric hammocks, also known as lowland oak hammocks, grow on soils that are poorly drained or that have high water tables, subject to occasional flooding. They are usually found on gentle slopes just above coastal swamps and marshes, with, in Florida, concentrations along the upper St John's River on the Atlantic coast of the north-east; this was the type of vegetation encroaching on my temporary home – an interesting back garden, but rich in musquitos.

The Washington Oaks Gardens State Park, covering 425 acres of a mix of beach, coastal scrub, (hydric) oak hammock and tidal marsh, was named after a surveyor called George Washington who, in 1845, married the daughter of Spanish General Jose Mariano Hernandez – the owner of a large estate which he bought in 1818. The estate changed hands and in 1964 it was donated to the State of Florida by the Young family. Now, about 21 acres of it have been designated on the National Register of Historic Places. Of the 28 common bird species found there, I identified some Sanderling, a Sharp-shinned Hawk, a Merlin and a Northern Cardinal, as well as some species I had seen previously. Needless to say, the cardinal was the most colourful treat, thanks to its all-red plumage hard to miss in the undergrowth.

During the next couple of days, I added an American Robin (a true *Turdus*), House Sparrows, a Little Blue Heron, a party of Black Vultures (scavenging on the side of the road) and two Cooper's Hawks mating in the top of a tree at a supermarket! They, at least, thought spring had arrived.

I did not bring binoculars to Orlando, not expecting to have time or occasion to see birds at either the airport or Disneyland. But we saw a pair of Mallard swimming in the moat around the iconic castle, spotted a mysterious species of giant dancing duck – and met Tinkerbell!

The Alligator Farm in St Augustine had some exotic birds on display but I refrained from noting down captive Toucans and parrots. In the trees outside the enclosures there were 'wild' Roseate Spoonbills displaying in preparation of the breeding season and around the ponds there were White and Glossy Ibis, and Little Blue and Yellow-crowned Night Heron. On the way home, a Sandwich Tern put in a (familiar) appearance.

The last few birds to add to the list were a Double-crested Cormorant (a species seen once in Galway Bay, smaller than our European Cormorant and the most common in the east of North America), an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*, sometimes called 'Sparrow Hawk!') and a Scrub Jay; this 'Florida Jay' is confined in range (and diminishing) - a crestless jay with tan and light blue plumage without any white markings, frequenting low oak scrub (as in the hammock vegetation). A couple of Canada Geese along the motorway back to Jacksonville Airport completed my sightings.

Many thanks to my lovely, thoughtful hosts, and the friends who lent me guide books to the birds of Eastern America.

Marianne ten Cate



SYMPATHY

On behalf of birdwatchers from Galway and further afield, I express our sympathy to Tom Cuffe on the death of his mother Dorothy and to Deirdre Comerford on the death of her husband Henry. Henry was an expert on conservation legislation and his lectures, advice and books on the interpretation of Irish wildlife legislation, fisheries legislation and environmental law made major contributions to the safeguarding of Ireland's birds and other wildlife. In so many ways he gave a lifelong support to conservation matters, particularly in the Galway area.

NS

SWIFT NEST BOXES IN HEADFORD

The breeding population of the Common Swift in the West of Ireland has declined by almost 50% in the last 20 years, mainly due to the loss of nest sites caused by renovation or demolition of buildings in our towns where swift have been nesting. This destruction of nest sites has not been done intentionally but because of a lack of awareness of swift nesting requirements and the lack of any recording system to show which buildings are being used by swifts in our towns.

The Headford Environment Group have recently erected nest boxes for swifts on the old convent building in Headford town, now owned by the Health Service as a Care Centre. The aim of putting up nest boxes in the town is to raise awareness and to provide nest sites. The project was realised with funds obtained from the Heritage Council by Lynda Huxley of Swift Conservation Mayo.

The nest boxes erected in Headford will provide nest sites for new nesters, *i.e.* birds that do not yet have a nest site but are looking for one. To help the birds find these nest boxes, we will be playing attraction calls from May to August each year (the months when the swifts come to Ireland to breed) until they have found the boxes and bred in them.

It may take up to three years for the swifts to start breeding in these boxes so in the meantime you can watch the swifts nesting in the same type of nest box at GMIT Mayo Campus in Castlebar by using the following link: <http://www.gmit.ie/mayo-campus/swift-live-streaming>

A few swifts nest close to Headford town in nearby Ross Errilly friary and in Kinlough Castle. Swift nests are not visible to the human eye because they are always located inside cavities under roofs or in holes in walls. Swifts are extremely faithful to their nesting sites; the castle and the friary may have been home to nesting swifts for possibly hundreds of years. The lifespan of a swift can be up to 20 years.

If you would like to learn more about the swift you can visit www.swiftconservation.ie.

Lynda Huxley



Swift nest boxes at the Old Convent Headford

BIRDS – THEIR NAMES AND OTHER NOT TOO SERIOUS TRIVIA

“The most unimportant aspect of birdwatching is, of course, the birds themselves. Before contemplating some of the less dull specimens, consider the extremely complex business of names.

The traditional or common names for most birds originated in country folklor - in the case of waterbirds sometimes created by fishermen; the booming Bittern suffered most at their hands, coming away with names such as Bottle Bump, Bog Blutter and Bull o' the Bog.

Birds' habits and appearances have always been predominant factors in the naming of species, for example the 'Heather Bleat' for the Snipe. Others are onomatopoeic (Cuckoo, for instance) or commemorative, defining forever the first discoverer of a bird.

Scientific names consist generally of two or three parts:

1. the genus or generic name,
2. the species or scientific or specific, and if you are a really unlucky bird
3. a sub-species or sub-specific name.

When all two (or three) are the same, it suggests that what you've got is a pretty typical example of a pretty typical species of a certain genus. Try using *Troglodytes troglodytes troglodytes* – the Wren – the longest scientific name for our second smallest bird. For those students of Latin and Greek, the derivation of some scientific names is puzzling, because the

genders or constructions are frequently incorrect. This is because people who, in history, have been responsible for naming were all bluffers. Perhaps the easiest scientific name to memorise is *Puffinus puffinus puffinus*. But don't be fooled into thinking that this bird is a Puffin, it's not even an atypical Puffin. It's a Manx Shearwater: a slim-winged, gull type bird, brown above, with a narrow, less than colourful beak. (Anything less like a Puffin you couldn't find in a hurry.) However, the 19th century birder who first extracted a Manx Shearwater from a burrow and ringed it thought it was a Puffin chick, and thus recorded it for all time.

If you think the Puffinus saga is extraordinary, consider the Swedish naturalist largely responsible for the entire scientific naming procedure. (He did not actually name the birds, though; he cribbed most of it from Pliny and we all know what happened to him.) First, his name was Carl von Linne but he became famous only when he was known as Linnaeus. Secondly, this naturalist - intelligent though he was - actually thought ducks and drakes were separate species and gave them separate names. Someone beloved of all list makers is K.H. Voous whose 1977 list has been adopted by most ornithological associations as the standard order for listing birds. (Why he couldn't put them all in alphabetical order is a wonder most birdwatchers learn to live with.) But changes from time to time ensure that mastering the list is one we all continue to struggle with. The Stone Curlew is now proposed to change to the Northern Thick-knee, Dunnock (or Hedge Sparrow) to the Hedge Accenter and other word splits – Woodlark to Wood Lark - and so it goes.”

From Steven Sonsino, *Bluffers Guide to Birdwatching*. Ravette Books.

NS

WHIMBRELS

As I write this, it is the height of the Whimbrel passage period. These wonderful Curlew-like but different birds flood up through Ireland from late April and May on their way to their Iceland summer breeding habitat. We in the west are especially lucky as they appear to particularly favour the line of the western lakes – Corrib, Mask, and Conn - as they fly north. How do you recognise them? Well, here is a descriptive cameo from my favourite 1930s *Birds of the Wayside and Woodland*:

Whimbrel Numenius phaeopus phaeopus

Apart from the Orkneys, Shetlands and a few of the Outer Hebrides the Whimbrel is a summer passage visitor to England and Ireland.



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The Whimbrel is often called the 'Jack Curlew' Jack being a diminutive; it differs from the larger Curlew in having a shorter less curved bill and in its much darker crown with narrow streaks, but it has two broad bands divided by a median narrow buff stripe. 'May-bird' is one of its popular names for its arrival is expected in this month. 'Titteral' is a name derived from its distinctive rippling or tittering call, and from the notion that the notes are always uttered seven times in succession it is called the 'Seven Whistler'. Return migration begins in July and continues until October. When travelling, small flocks of Whimbrel often adopt the line of V-shaped formation; the flight is steady and straight, but the wing-beats quicker than those of the heavier Curlew. Low rock shores are as much frequented as mud flats; the brown bird, often almost invisible in the tangles, it feels with its bill amongst the weed for molluscs and crustaceans.

From T.A. Coward, *Birds of the wayside and woodland – a pocket guide* (Frederick Warne & Co., 1936).

NS

BirdWatch Ireland, Galway branch

First Saturdays' - 'Winter' 2015/16

Nimmo's Pier, 10.30, for 1 hour approx.

(Compiled by Brendan Dunne, who missed 4 of 8 outings)

Total Species :	62	5 Sep.	3 Oct.	7 Nov.	5 Dec.	2 Jan.	6 Feb.	5 Mar.	2 Apr.	7 May	Days seen
People per outing	16							19	12	14	
Nearest Low tide to 10.30	16.56	15.30	08.11	06.22	16.50	09.33	08.17	07.20	12.03		
Species per outing	29	0	31		32	23	26	30	41		
Great northern diver						●	●	●	●	●	5
Little grebe						●					1
Great crested grebe						●		●			2
Gannet	●								●		2
Cormorant	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	7
Shag	●		●		●	●		●	●	●	6
Little egret			●							●	2
Grey heron	●		●		●			●	●	●	5
Mute swan	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	7
Brent goose			●		●	●		●			4
Shelduck										●	1
Mallard	●		●			●		●	●	●	5
Wigeon			●		●		●	●			4
Teal					●						1
Red-breasted merganser			●		●	●				●	4
Sparrowhawk	●										1
Peregrine								●	●		2
Oystercatcher	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	7
Ringed plover										●	1
Knot								●			1
Turnstone	●		●		●		●	●	●	●	6
Dunlin	●						●	●			3
Redshank	●		●		●	●		●			5
Greenshank								●			1
Bar-tailed godwit	●		●		●	●	●	●		●	6
Curlew			●		●		●	●			3
Snipe						●				●	2
Black-headed gull	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	7
Common gull	●		●		●		●		●	●	5
Mediterranean gull						●					1
Herring gull	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	7
Ring-billed gull	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	5
Lesser black-backed gull	●								●	●	3
Great black-backed gull	●		●		●	●		●	●	●	6
Glaucous gull								●	●		2
Iceland gull							●	●		●	3
Sandwich tern	●		●						●		3
Common tern										●	1
Arctic tern										●	1
Guillemot						●					1
Rock dove			●								1
Feral pigeon	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	7
Woodpigeon	●									●	2
Swift										●	1
Skylark	●		●			●		●			4
Sand martin										●	1
Swallow	●									●	2
House martin										●	1
Rock pipit	●					●		●	●	●	5
Meadow pipit			●					●	●	●	4

Pied wagtail	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	7
Grey wagtail									●	1
Blackbird			●						●	2
Jackdaw	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	7
Rook	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	7
Hooded crow	●		●		●	●	●	●	●	7
Starling	●		●		●	●		●	●	6
House sparrow								●	●	2
Linnet									●	1
Goldfinch									●	1
Greenfinch					●	●			●	3
Reed bunting			●							1

* November, January & February Records **Thanks** to Sean Walsh

** December cancelled due to imminent arrival of **Storm Desmond**.

(I missed October, November, January, February)