



LOCAL MATTERS

Most of our activities are winding down as we get to the less active summer period. Our Nimmo's Pier outings over the past months have been a great success with up to 40 attending, and those who made it to the final fixture on May 6th were fortunate to get unusual Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper and Shelduck, proving that you never know what can turn up on any of the Saturdays. Tom Cuffe has proposed an end of season outing to Rusheen Bay in June – await notice. While summer is indeed a quieter period, do have a look at the article on the European Breeding Atlas and consider reporting any and all evidence of breeding you see while out and about. Records for the 50km square (29UNV2) would be particularly valuable. This square is in a line just east of Galway City north to Claremorris and over to Ballinasloe; nearly all of east Galway. Good birdwatching to all during the summer months.

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CUCKOO

The sound is unmistakable. A percussive, double-note call immediately tells you that the best known of our summer visitors is back: the Cuckoo. Finding the bird is another matter; for such a large bird Cuckoos can be surprisingly shy, and that call can carry further than you think. Eventually, you catch a glimpse of a steel-grey bird, with long wings and tail and a distinctive horizontal posture, bouncing back and forth as it bestows that famous sound on the spring-time air.

The Cuckoo is a paradox. Few other birds are so familiar, and yet so rarely seen. It is as much part of our countryside as dog roses and cow parsley, and is ingrained in all our minds as the harbinger of the coming season.

An anonymous thirteenth-century poem that begins 'Sumer is ycomen in, loude sing the cuckoo' is a testament to this, and to this mysterious bird's unique sound. No wonder William Wordsworth wrote: 'Shall I call the bird, or but a wondering voice?'. Cuckoos are indeed great wanderers. Far from being 'ours' they are really Africa's birds, spending well over half the year there and only gracing us with a brief visit each year. In fact, until recently their winter quarters, and the long journey they make to get there, remained a mystery.

New technology, in the form of tiny tracking devices attached to the Cuckoos, has allowed scientists to follow the flight path as they head south through Europe, across the Mediterranean Sea and the vast Sahara Desert, to the dense equatorial forests where they spend the winter.

To our ancestors, who believed that the Cuckoo turned into a Sparrowhawk each autumn, this would have come as a surprise. That ancient belief is not as silly as it sounds, given that the Cuckoo and the Sparrowhawk are roughly the same size, share the same greyish plumage, barred underparts and long tails, and have the same low, direct flight.

After wintering in the African forests, the Cuckoo's migratory urge propels it northward, to arrive back in these islands in the middle of April – a welcome sign that spring is well and truly here. Our ancestors held 'Cuckoo fairs' to celebrate their return, something we would find hard to do now as the species is declining fast. The long running custom of people writing letters to the newspapers when they hear the first Cuckoo of the year is now in danger of coming to an end, as many people never hear the Cuckoo nowadays.

Despite its decline, most people are still familiar with the call of the male, but how many of us have heard that of the female: a bubbling sound sometimes likened to 'bathwater gurgling down the plughole'?

Female Cuckoos famously lay their eggs in the nests of smaller songbirds: Meadow Pipits and Dunnocks are the main hosts. Almost a century ago, pioneering film-makers Oliver Pike and Edgar Chance managed to capture unique footage of a Cuckoo placing her eggs in the nests of Meadow Pipits – and revealed that a single Cuckoo female can lay as many as 25 eggs in a single season, one in each nest.

Bald and blind, the young Cuckoo may look helpless, but it is hardwired to eject any other eggs or chicks from the nest. Begging frantically for food from the unwitting foster parents, it imitates the sound made by their own young – only much more loudly. By the time it is ready to fledge, it is so huge that it appears to be wearing the nest rather than sitting in it.

Most extraordinary of all, the newly fledged young Cuckoo then migrates all the way to the heart of Africa – a distance of 4,000 miles – without ever meeting its own parents.

By kind permission from *Tweet of the Day* by Brent Westwood & Stephen Moss (John Murray).

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THE MOST REGAL MELODY IN AFRICA

The iconic sound of Africa bushveld is neither the din of Cicadas or the distant beat of some ancient drum. Some have argued that it is the scream of the African Fish Eagle as it soars overhead, though the counter argument has been that this majestic creature sounds like a Herring Gull. It is even proposed that the deep resonance of a male lion, as he uses the inversion layer of a cool night to proclaim his

domain, is the purest sound of the bundu. All are certainly evocative, but the real sound of the bushveld belongs to the incessant *cooing* and *doeing* of its doves and pigeons. During my most recent trip to Jo'burg, I noticed a marked increase in the numbers of Columbidae in the suburbs. Undoubtedly, the proliferation of mature and veteran trees in the gardens of the area provides them with ample roosts and resources. Many species more associated with bushland now readily inhabit the Highveld area, once a grassland expanse but now considered one of the world's most extensive urban woodlands. South Africa has 15 species in total, but three species contribute significantly toward the chorus of the typical Jo'burg suburb: Cape Turtle Dove, Red-eyed Dove and Laughing Dove. On occasion, I have come across flightless squabs of these birds in my parents-in-law's garden. Having returned them to the nests that the poor retches have fallen from (prior to the dog getting hold of them), it amazes me how there are any doves or pigeons in South Africa at all owing to the rickety nature of the typical Columbidae homestead. More recently, the numbers of the Speckled Pigeon and African Olive Pigeon have increased in and around the city with both making for impressive sights (worth a Google). It will be interesting to see if some of the more bushveld specific birds, such as the wonderful Emerald-spotted Wooddove or the African Mourning Dove, will make the move to the city over the coming years. Part of me hopes that those two birds of the bundu stay put so I can enjoy them more within the context of the wild. Either way, the bass section of Africa's orchestra is in pretty good condition; even if they only ever seem to get solos at the most ungodly times of the day.

John Carey

EUROPEAN BREEDING BIRD ATLAS

BirdWatch Ireland is appealing to all birdwatchers across Ireland to send in their summer bird sightings to help with a landmark project. The [European Breeding Bird Atlas](#) (EBBA2) project started small but with big ambitions: to collect data from more than 50 countries, and to cover 500 breeding species and more than 5,000 50-km squares.

Unfortunately, Ireland, along with the UK, completed its latest breeding bird atlas in 2007-11, years that fall outside the time-frame of the current European Breeding Bird Atlas, 2013 to 2017. France and Germany are in a similar position. Therefore, our latest information will be a little out-of-date, and relying solely on it could bias European measures of distribution and change since the first European Breeding Bird Atlas, carried out in 1985-1988.



Fortunately, we can use data from several ongoing schemes, including our annual Countryside Bird Survey and BirdTrack, where breeding is often confirmed or suspected. However, there will still be many gaps to fill. “The European Breeding Bird Atlas is looking for evidence of breeding for all bird species present in just over fifty 50-km squares on the island of Ireland,” said BirdWatch Ireland’s Brian Caffrey. “As always with projects such as this, the more remote parts of the midlands and the west will prove the most challenging to cover.”

There are just over 50 of these 50-km squares on the island of Ireland, and as one of the larger counties in Ireland, Galway has seven 50-km squares to be covered and we need to ensure that we have a complete list of species, along with breeding evidence, for each 50-km square. We are asking anyone who can help to enter their breeding bird sightings, giving levels of breeding evidence, to [BirdTrack](#).

Furthermore, the BTO has just launched a new web-based tool for filling the gaps: <http://bit.ly/2oCnDk>. The tool compares these results against our atlas data to see what is still missing - you can help fill these gaps by logging records with breeding evidence in [BirdTrack](#). And don't forget to enter your sightings from birdwatching trips elsewhere in Europe.

A great starting point would be to have a look at your old summer records (2013-2016) in BirdTrack and enter levels of breeding evidence where they are missing. Joe Foley from Cork did just this:

‘By simply going back along my Bird Track submissions, and updating breeding status where, e.g., I had recorded chicks, I was able to upgrade Shelduck, Coot, Moorhen and Chiffchaff to Confirmed in 29UNT2 - I’m sure most of the Irish BirdTrack subscribers could better that...’.

The second European Breeding Bird Atlas (EBBA2) is coordinated by the European Bird Census Council. For more information, contact me at bcaffrey@birdwatchireland.ie.

Brian Caffrey

Note: For those unfamiliar with BirdTrack or not involved, you can always pass on breeding evidence of the birds you see in any part of Co. Galway to Brian or to neiljsharkey@gmail.com. All that is needed is species, date, breeding detail and location. Breeding detail would typically be: singing bird, pair, carrying food, nest & young. Brian’s link gives you access to either of the main two Co. Galway 50-km squares and by clicking on either one you can then print off the status list and see the species that ideally need confirmed breeding, i.e. young birds on nest or flying.

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SMART WAGTAIL

Many of us find coping with those maddening revolving entrance doors a challenge but not this clever local Pied Wagtail:

Last Monday afternoon, I was sitting in the foyer of a hospital in Galway, watching the people coming in through the revolving door.

To my surprise, a Wagtail walked in the door, flew around the foyer for a bit, picked up a few crumbs and then flew back to the revolving door.

The bird landed on the ground. When it was appropriate, it walked through the revolving door, and out the other side to the path outside, and confidently flew off.

He knew well how to manage a revolving door!

Thanks to Claire Connelly

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P.S. Assuming this was at UCH, I saw this bird bring in her young and feed it in the foyer, before together flying up to a high ledge and going out the door again. **Marianne ten Cate**

TWITE INFLUX

This winter has seen an unprecedented influx of Twite into Counties Galway and Clare. Until recently, the only regular spot for Twite in Galway was the Nimmo’s Pier area. These birds haven’t been seen in the area now since 2009. However, the species suffers from much misidentification so I would suggest that a lot of the recent and even some old records, especially from the summer months, are dubious. I have been sent a few photos of claimed ‘twite’ seen here in the summer and all, without fail, were juvenile Linnets.

This winter, we have had several records of flocks along the coastline, many of which have been photographed by reliable birders leaving no doubt as to their identification. I have listed these 2016-17 winter records to date:

- 8, Loop Head, Co. Clare, 5th November.
- 1, Clahane, Co. Clare, 8th November. 4, 1st December.
- 17, Aughinish, Co. Clare, 30th November. 35, 3rd December.
- 1, Inishark, Co. Galway, 23rd November.
- 2, Tawin Island, Co. Galway, 23rd November.
- 5, Murlach, Ballyconneely, Co. Galway, 29th November.
- 67, Coral Strand, Ballyconneely, Co. Galway, 6th December.
- 1, An Cuan Mor, near Spiddal, Co. Galway, 25th March.

The flock of 67 is one of my own records and is a spectacular number for this part of the world. The best previous modern record was 24 seen very close by on 24th March 2015.

Twite were historically a breeding species in Galway, with breeding reported on the bog lough islands, Inishbofin, Inishark, the Aran Islands (a few recent winter records from Inis Oírr and Inis Meáin) and Carraroe. There are a few other outliers from the 1968 -1972 Atlas and even from the most recent Bird Atlas, including inland breeding records, but I do have questions about some of these records, especially the more recent possible breeding records.

Twite are now only found breeding in the extreme north-west of Mayo and west Donegal with a total population of probably no more than 100 pairs. This species is in extreme danger of becoming extinct here. Much like the now extinct Corn Bunting the Twite is a typical LBJ - little brown job. Unfortunately, most non-birders have never heard of a Twite before. A recent Twite prescription in the GLAS agri-environmental scheme has been started which aims to address this decline in the handful of areas that still hold the species.

Most Irish Twite don’t seem to move very far from the breeding grounds and I don’t think any of the Clare or Galway birds are Irish; they are more likely to be Scottish. There have been recoveries of Scottish birds (Islay, Mull of Kintyre) wintering in Ireland, according to Derek McLoughlin. Derek undertook a PhD on the species from 2005-2009. He wrote a great piece on the species for Birdwatch Ireland which is worth checking out in the link below:

<http://www.birdwatchireland.ie/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=WYdDTCXTrRw=&tabid=999>

Dermot Breen