



LOCAL MATTERS

Not a lot to report on this front. The summer has passed off quietly and uneventfully birdwise but we can look forward to the resumption of Nimmo's Pier outings and I-WeBS counts, including those of Inner Galway Bay and lower Lough Corrib. All going well, our first Nimmo's Pier outing will be on Saturday September 2nd at 10.30am.

Regretfully, however, another season commences without Galway having a formal branch but it is beyond my ability to put that right. It must await an imitative by others.

PURPLE SANDPIPER

Some birds are extroverts, either using their brightly coloured plumage or loud calls to draw our attention. Others are more modest, keeping themselves to themselves. Despite its colourful name, the Purple Sandpiper firmly belongs to the latter camp.

Purple Sandpipers make their home on the very edges of land and sea, where waves break constantly over seaweed covered rocks. Their name makes them sound more exotic than they really are: it refers to a purplish sheen on their back and breast feathers, which you can only make out in good light or when the birds are moulting into breeding plumage. But Purple Sandpipers are almost exclusively autumn and winter visitors to Ireland, so the usual impression we get is of a rather dumpy, greyish-brown wader with short legs.

The Purple Sandpiper's drab plumage makes complete sense when you see them in their winter home, as it enables them to be camouflaged perfectly against the dark, slippery rocks. They are easy to overlook, mainly because being quiet and confiding; they will often let you approach quite close before shuffling off. The best way to find them is to scan through a flock of the more colourful and active turnstones with which they often associate.

When you do finally get a close look at the Purple Sandpiper, it is the subtle features, such as the yellow base to the bill and the white smudge near the eye, that stand out. They also have a pale belly and yellowish legs.

These wintering sandpipers come from much further north in Scandinavia or even Canada but this subtle and unassuming wader is also a rare breeding bird in remote Scotland. Since the late 1970s a tiny population, usually ranging between one and five pairs a year, has nested on the high tops of Scottish mountains, in remote, almost inaccessible sites more than 1,000 metres above sea level.

From: ***Tweet of the Day*** – Brett Westwood and Stephen Moss. Kind permission acknowledged.

NS Note: I have seen Purple Sandpipers on the shore along the Salthill golf course prom. extension and at a site about 7km west of Spiddal – a red-marked 'Burial Ground' on the No. 45 Discovery map, just beyond 'An Poitín Stíl'.

LOUGH RUSHEEN SANCTUARY

Lough Rusheen Sanctuary, or the Small Wood, is a 3-acre property generously donated about 20 years ago to BirdWatch by the O Malley family. Local BirdWatch members have since striven to maintain and improve it to benefit its birds and the local environment. One recent project was undertaken by Pdraig Keirns and his Volunteer Conservation Group; they developed a small freshwater pond along the path into the Small Wood. This complemented the otherwise seawater/marine aspect of the site. In this they received the support and help of Pat Costello who has been a long-time enthusiast and 'guardian' of the site. This year he spotted a pair of Moorhens who successfully reared a family there. Well done and thanks to all concerned.

SAILING TO AN ISLAND

Most birdwatchers, especially those who take it seriously, are likely to have at least one or two significant and memorable birding experiences. With the passage of time these events often take on a memory and recollection that can be quite out of proportion to the experience and happenings of the actual event. But such is life! Mine concerns an island experience.

The Galway branch of the then Irish Wildbird Conservancy was founded in about 1970 by Martin Byrnes, Fr Brendan Dillon OP and Eily O Connor. Around 1975, the late Tony Wilde got involved and in 1976 I became secretary. When proposing me, Tony mentioned that a big plus was not necessarily a knowledge of birds but that I had a phone line to my house! Just think of that dear reader! In those days, you could wait three or four years for a home phone landline. Tony's arrival gave the branch a more scientific edge – we started to count and evaluate bird populations in addition to just observing and enjoying them. He also had a ringer's licence which added a more serious level to our activities.

So, circa July 1978, an outing to High Island was planned to ring breeding Manx Shearwaters and Storm Petrels. High Island is well out to sea off Cleggan and at that time it was owned by Richard Murphy, the poet, who very kindly gave the necessary permission. The island was uninhabited and devoid of anything except some old mining shafts, monastic remains and a tiny 'abode' tucked away in the rocky slope.

My recollection is that four of us went on the trip: Tony, Joe Hynes, Gerard Duane and myself. We gathered at Cleggan in the late afternoon of a Friday to be conveyed to the island by a local trawler. Even at this stage, the boat's skipper was doubtful of the weather and uneasy about the safety and practicality of setting out at all. However, we eventually set off together with tents, food and the bulky and awkward bird netting gear. Already the sea was choppy and anything but calm. The journey out took more than an hour, as I recall.

Arriving was one thing, landing was quite another. High Island has no landing points such as they are generally thought to be: the boat pulled along a forty-five-degree sloping rock ledge while moving up and down on a ten or fifteen-foot swell – like an ever-moving lift but one totally without health and safety features; at the highest point of the lift you had to jump onto the rock face, hold tight and scramble to the top. Those ashore then took off the equipment. Achieving all of this successfully was a memorable achievement in its own right.



With the passage of forty or so years the sequence of events has become something of a blur. Between one thing and another we arrived later than scheduled and the optimum time for carrying out the whole venture was weeks later than it should have been. Our base was at the one room miners' hut which Richard Murphy had made habitable in a very basic way and nearby was one of the few flat areas on the island where we could pitch tents. However, the main and indeed only objective was to ring birds, specifically Manx Shearwaters and Storm Petrels. Both these species only come ashore at dark and mainly on near moonless nights so this ringing exercise is strictly a night time - indeed an all-night - task. With dusk already happening, we put aside setting up arrangements, dumped everything in the miners' hut and proceeded to the ringing site at the other end of the island near the monastic remains.

Mist net ringing, for those readers unfamiliar with it, involves erecting very fine nets on poles in the flight paths of the target birds which then become entangled in the nets and can be taken from them; each bird is then put into a small cloth holding bag and duly 'processed'. This consists of weighing, measuring, sexing and then affixing a unique numbered metal ring to the leg. The bird is then released. The whole exercise should take under half an hour at most – ideally less. Ringing is a very skilful undertaking, requiring training and a licence.

We were barely set up when it got dark and the birds started to come ashore. Manx Shearwaters and Storm Petrels share a similar oceanic character but differ in many other respects. Both are members of their respective 'families' of Shearwaters and Petrels. The Manx is large while the 'Stormie' is a small, diminutive bird. Both are ungainly and awkward on land and it is for this reason that they only come ashore at night, to avoid predators – principally the larger gulls. The call of the Manx Shearwater in particular, once heard, is memorable for life; it is unearthly and weird. Press ctrl and click or copy the following link to a search engine and hopefully you will hear what I mean.

<http://sounds.bl.uk/Environment/British-wildlife-recordings/022M-W1CDR0001409-0800V0>

So, as we awaited these birds we were surrounded by them as they made for their nests. The Shearwaters used old rabbit burrows or had made their own while the Storm Petrels used the stone walls of the old monastic ruins or any similar walls. Soon, birds were being caught in the nets and the actual ringing could start. It is all a bit of a memory blur to me as obviously most of the work was done by Tony who was the only one with experience – the rest of us just carried out instructions and helped in any way we could. However, suffice to say that many birds were ringed and as these birds are very long lived – up to 50 years – one can imagine and hope that some of those birds ringed on that occasion are still voyaging on the oceans and returning annually to High Island.

By the morning of the Saturday we were sleep-deprived and exhausted, not helped by the total deterioration of the weather. For an oceanic small island such as High Island bad weather is hugely magnified – the whole place seemed to shake and rock throughout as an Atlantic storm descended upon it. We, the sole and temporary inhabitants, began to wonder and speculate if our stay would be more than 'temporary' – would the boat be able to make a return pick-up? We took refuge in the small hut and abandoned tenting efforts. At times, we were enduring rather than enjoying!

In short breaks between the squalls, we explored the island, in particular listening out for the Storm Petrels as they 'purred' deep down in their stony nest. The Petrel's call is somewhat quieter and lower key than that of the Manx – not quite so unearthly. Again, I have copied a link - I hope it will work: <http://sounds.bl.uk/Environment/British-wildlife-recordings/022M-W1CDR0001409-0600V0>

Other birdwatching was sparse and low key; I recall a Peregrine perched on a rocky point but, that apart, I have no recollection of anything in particular. There was no ringing on the Saturday night as the gale force winds ruled out putting up the nets. So, in the end our final time there was spent in routine coping and, I have to say, wondering if the boat would return to bring us back to the 'mainland'. Fortunately, it did and on the Sunday afternoon its arrival brought our memorable trip to an end.

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Note: 'Sailing to an Island' is the title of one of Richard Murphy's poems.

ROYAL TERN TWITCH AUGUST 2016

I received news from a birder that a Royal Tern had turned up on Beale strand in Co. Kerry; I instantly began panicking about how to get to see it, because this was a mega rare bird. I rang my grandad (Dave Branagh) to tell him about the news and he said that he would make arrangements. As I waited for a call from grandad, I rang a few birders who were going for the tern and asked them had they seen it and where exactly it was - a few birders told me they were watching it close on the beach. This made me even more excited as I was adamant to see this tern! At around 5:00pm I received a call from grandad saying that he would be arriving at my house that night with our good birding friend and stay at my house, aiming to depart to Kerry at around 3:25 in the morning! So, I went to bed and woke up at 3am and met grandad and our friend in the kitchen, enjoying an early morning breakfast!!! It was a bit earlier than my usual breakfast time!! I had a coffee to keep me awake and some toast. We departed for Kerry at 03:25am and, at around 6:00am, when we arrived there were a few English birders on site who were searching for the tern but had no luck. So, we had a look through the tern roost and still saw no sign of the Royal. An English birder came over and we asked him could he text us if he saw the bird; he said "no problem" and continued to the car park. We waited about 20 minutes and I got a text saying that the tern was showing well on the other beach, so grandad, our friend and I grabbed our scopes and sprinted to the car as fast as we could! We got in the car and drove to the beach. We arrived at the beach and ran up it and we saw a flying tern flock pass by and he shouted that the Royal Tern had flown. I was sickened! So, our friend, grandad and I continued to another beach. I was walking along the sand looking around when our friend shouted "I HAVE THE TERN!". I sprinted over to him, looked in his scope and there it was - the ROYAL TERN. We rang birders and they all came and watched the bird. At the end of the day there were about 40 birders, mostly English birders, present!! I will never forget that day.

Dylan Storey Branagh

Dylan is a pupil in the junior cycle of Presentation College Headford and is one of our keenest young birdwatchers.

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