



LOCAL MATTERS

I would like to mention a number of matters.

Firstly, the main content of this (99th) *Newsletter* emphasises the 'near and afar' worldwide aspect of birds. Marianne ten Cate's concluding* article on Lower Lough Corrib birds and their records marks an important milestone for the bird populations of this site – one of the most important in Ireland. Then, in total contrast, there is Frank Murphy's fascinating account of birdlife in China. I am most grateful to both of them for these really interesting contributions.

Secondly, the re-establishment of a formal Bird-Watch Galway branch and committee has been on the menu but unfulfilled for far too long. The feeling of those of us who were involved for a long, and perhaps overlong, time is that there should be a completely fresh start with new people and those like myself and other past committee members should fade into the background! Recently, a suggestion was made by Colin Heaslip, one of our 'Nimmo's' birdwatchers. He would like people with an interest in setting up a meeting to create a branch committee to contact him at csheaslip@gmail.com. This is a very positive suggestion and hopefully will be successful.

Thirdly the next issue of this *Newsletter* will be the 100th such: 25 years of quarterly issues! It would be nice to mark it with some extra 'celebratory' content. Ideally, contributions should be on aspects of the writers' experiences and involvement with birds and birdwatching over the years. But, any 'bird' content will be most welcome. Anything from twenty words (!) to 250 plus would be very much appreciated.

Finally, we continue with the usual events: Nimmo's Pier outings, really well and enthusiastically attended (well done Tom), Inner Galway Bay counts organised by Chris Peppiatt (contact Chris at chris.peppiatt@iol.ie if interested in taking part) and Lower Corrib counts organised by Marianne ten Cate (contact her at mariannetencate@gmail.com).

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*Part 1 of Marianne's Corrib article, *A historical overview*, appeared in the 96th (February 2017) issue.

LETTER FROM CHINA

Hi Neil,

Thank you for continuing to forward the local *Newsletter* from Galway. I have been in China three years now, starting my fourth.

Out here, I was amazed to see Blackbirds, Great Tits, Magpies, Pheasants, Grey Herons, Sandpipers, Snipe, Mallard, Teal, Moorhens, Little Grebes and Kestrels just like back home. The Palaearctic, just not Western.

I have not seen any Song thrushes, and get the impression the Blackbirds have inherited something like thrush's repetitive song. I am also under the impression that the Great Tits here are perhaps raising a second family by July, while the ones at home are still struggling to raise their first, and only. The climate here is kinder on wildlife, more bugs to eat; even the butterflies can still be seen flying in December.

The first time I arrived here, an Irish doctor told me there were three reasons you needed an umbrella when walking around campus. The first two were obvious, rain and sunshine. The last less so ... bird poo. I had to wait until my first spring to see the full

effect. Come spring, the trees around the campus are used by at least four species of Heron. We have Black-crowned Night Herons, Chinese Pond Herons, little Egrets and, the last to arrive, Cattle Egrets in golden breeding plumage. Once the colonies are in full swing the avenues around the campus are white with bird droppings. I generally get hit two or three times a year, but take a childlike delight in listening to the girls scream when they get hit. It is strange how the Chinese, like the Europeans, say that being hit by bird droppings is 'good luck' or 'brings good luck'. Where did that idea come from, I wonder.

Pollution is bad here, but wildlife seems to still thrive. I can only imagine how it was before development and industrialisation.

The local Kingfishers are the same as at home. They remain shy but, having said that, this is the first time I have managed to stand and watch one actually fishing, not simply a blue flash flying away. Having mentioned the pollution, the water in the drainage channels can be the colour of fluorescent green, like a highlighting marker. It makes me wonder how the birds actually survive. Yet, even the local people can be seen catching tiny fish and crayfish which they will take home and eat. Many channels are infested with "Apple Snails". Their presence is obvious from their egg laying habits. The eggs are bright red and deposited in clumps above the waterline on the stone wall embankments, on leaves of water plants or dead branches of fallen trees. Their origins are interesting, originally brought into Taiwan from South America to act as a protein supplement in a largely rice based diet. Since then they have spread to the mainland. Nowadays, nobody touches them and a recent publication I saw online stated that they may act as an intermediate host for pathogens that can cause damage to the human brain.

With respect to the birds, the fact that I have never seen anyone out hunting with a gun probably aids their survival. I have seen young boys out with air guns, but many older males may use lethal catapults. In fact, the main reason I knew Snipe were here was because I was watching one when a group of older boys shot a catapult into the reeds and up flew ten. Another oddity: the apartments are not inhabited by House Sparrows, instead we seem to have Tree Sparrows. They can make a racket in the mornings, starting at 4.30 in the summer time, and I regret they are not more musical.

The Swallows here also behave differently: at home, if you clap your hands below a nest, all the chicks will stick their heads out to get food. Here, the chicks are so used to noise, clapping has no effect on them. I noticed on the BBC "Wild China" that traditional rural Chinese let the swallows nest inside their homes. The swallows indicate the time to plant the rice. In the city they also seem quite well tolerated, with nests above shop doors or outdoor displays of cloths. They seem to like the ubiquitous CCTV cameras as well.

Of the Chinese birds, the Crested Myna is quite common. It can be taught to speak Chinese which suggests it may be more intelligent than myself.

I miss the Irish Robin. It has been replaced by the Orange-flanked Bush Robin and the more common Oriental Magpie Robin. I do have a Daurian Redstart living by the apartment block and this reminds me of our Robin. Long-tailed Shrikes seem to be every-

where. The only other Tits I have seen so far, besides the Great Tits, are the Black-throated Tit and the Chinese Penduline Tit.

I have not managed to go to any 'dedicated' bird areas. China is a vast country and travel is time-consuming. Then you need to consider sleeping arrangements; some hotels do not accept foreigners (they need a permit), even those that do can have 'rock-hard' beds. Next comes food: you need it to stay fit and healthy, but local cuisine leaves much to be desired. And then there is the language barrier; it makes it difficult to find a proper guide or information.

When in Yunnan, where I was lucky enough to experience my first dose of food poisoning (lucky in the sense that I never had food poisoning before), I did see a group of Black-necked Cranes in the hills above Shangri La. What struck me most was their sheer size. In Hangzhou there is a tourist highlight called West Lake. Tourist brochures state that it is a good area for Mandarin Ducks, yet last year was the first time I saw them there. I felt sure they had been reintroduced in the run up to the G20 summit. But I could be wrong.

That's it for now, all the best and happy birding.

Regards,

Frank Murphy

TEAL

As you walk across a wetland field, trying not to get your feet too wet, you could be in for a surprise. Hidden in the ditch or channel running alongside you, a flock of birds is getting increasingly agitated, until the moment they can contain themselves no longer. They leap vertically up into the air, calling out as they fly fast into the distance, then land again on an undisturbed area of the wetland. They are Teal and given this typical behaviour, it's not surprising that a group of these diminutive ducks is known as a 'spring'. At just 350 grams (less than one third of the weight of a Mallard), the Teal is our smallest duck, and also one of the most striking-looking.

The drake is a perfect example of beauty in miniature, with a chestnut head and dark, bottle-green mask over his eyes, edged with a thin border of yellow. The body is greyish with wavy markings known as 'vermiculations' (from the Latin for 'worm'), a white stripe just below the wing, and a flash of custard-yellow bordered with black beneath his tail.

The female, as with most ducks, is far plainer, enabling her to incubate her eggs safely out of sight of predators. In flight, both sexes show a flashy emerald-green wing panel known as a 'speculum' from the Latin for 'mirror', because it catches the light. This is a useful way to identify Teal when the males lose their bright plumage during the summer.

In winter, you can find Teal on almost any body of water, from wide-open estuaries to freshwater marshes, dabbling in the shallows. As spring approaches, the males begin to display, raising their tails to show that eye-catching yellow patch. All the while, they whistle softly in a piping chorus that, from a distance, sounds like tiny bells being struck. The sound of the male's call is probably the origin of the word Teal, and, unusually among our common birds, this species is never known by any other name.

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From: *Tweet of the Day* – Brett Westwood & Stephen Moss; permission to publish gratefully acknowledged.



WINTER WATERBIRDS OF LOUGH CORRIB - 2 THE MOST RECENT PAST

As the season for the Irish Wetlands Bird Survey (I-WeBS) counts is underway and the next counts of Lough Corrib are due, this is a good moment to continue the overview of the winter waterbirds of the lake and look at the trends I alluded to in issue no. 96 (February 2017) of this *Quarterly Newsletter*.

The last figures discussed in that issue were culled from *Irish Wetland Bird Survey: waterbird status and distribution 2001/2-2008/9*, compiled by Helen Boland and Olivia Crowe. These showed that the species that met or exceeded the threshold for Lough Corrib to be of international importance for those species during that period were Mute Swan and Pochard while species that met or exceeded the threshold for national importance were Gadwall, Shoveler, Tufted Duck, Coot and Golden Plover.

During the I-WeBS seasons between 2009/10 and 2016/17, Lower Lough Corrib was counted only once rather than twice in three of the seasons, 2009/10, 2014/15 and 2015/16, when the January counts could not be done due to either extreme cold and treacherous road conditions or very high water levels thwarting access to some crucial vantage points.

Yet, during the 2009/10 season, the species composition occurring in internationally and nationally important numbers did not change except for one addition: Little Grebe numbers had been increasing and the 51 Little Grebes counted in November 2009 were more than twice the threshold of 25 for national importance (see 'Irish Wetland Bird Survey: results of waterbird monitoring in Ireland in 2009/10' in *Irish Birds* Vol. 9, No. 2).

The next season, 2010/11, also added one species to the list of nationally important numbers, this time for Moorhen. Needless to say, the number of birds of this species to reach the threshold is very low and was not even given previously. Moorhen do not feature anymore on more recent lists. At the same time, "Pochard numbers at Lough Corrib, their stronghold site in the Republic of Ireland, were especially high in October when compared with January" (*Irish Birds* Vol. 9, No. 3); we counted 15,450. There is another notable parameter in relation to the 2010/11 season: it was the last one during which the total number of birds recorded exceeded 20,000, the threshold for a wetland to qualify as being of international importance on account of the total number of birds recorded. From this season on, it is the number of birds within species that determine whether Lough Corrib is still of international importance; clearly, this marks an end of an era and is a cause of concern.

Fortunately, Mute Swan have continued to frequent Lough Corrib in internationally important numbers (over 110 up to 2013, over 90 since*) with a peak of 297 in November 2014. The relatively low threshold is due to a change of treatment of Mute Swan numbers since 2012 when Wetlands International specified that the Irish Mute Swan population is a discreet resident population with little known emigration or immigration and should be considered as such in an international context; any sites which regularly support numbers in excess of the national threshold (now 90*) will be treated as internationally important. (See Wetlands

International. 2012. *Waterbird Population Estimates*. 5th edition, summary report.) This has resulted in 12 more sites being of international importance solely due to the number of Mute Swans exceeding the Irish national threshold (*Irish Birds* Vol. 9, No. 3 and *Irish Birds* Vol. 9, No. 4). Of course, the same reasoning applies to other discreet national populations of species, too.

The drop in the number of Pochard visiting Lough Corrib in winter has been spectacular: only once were more than 1,000 birds counted and twice no Pochard were seen at all since November 2011. This is in stark contrast to what Clive Hutchinson wrote in 1979, that over 22,000 Pochard had been counted, almost 10% of the north-European population (Hutchinson, 1979, *Irish wetlands and their birds*). That number alone qualified Lough Corrib to be of international importance. Crowe and Holt* comment that "Pochard numbers have declined throughout I-WeBS in the Republic of Ireland. There has been substantial variability in annual totals, which probably reflects difficulties in counting them at key sites such as Lough Corrib."

Tufted Duck have held their own, their number dropping below a thousand only once and their peak of 6,558 recorded in November 2014; this is still only half of the number that would qualify Lough Corrib to be of international importance but safely keeps it of national importance.

Gadwall disappeared nearly completely since 2011 (nil to 19 only) until a peak count of 45 was recorded in Moycullen Bay in November 2016, 25 more than would qualify the lake to be of national importance.

Shoveler showed a similar drop, eight of the counts yielding nil birds; unfortunately, there was no redeeming count, four being the 'peak' and far off the new threshold of 30* for national importance.

Little Grebe numbers have fluctuated a lot between the November 2009 peak of 51 mentioned above and a low number of 4 in November 2012. Discarding those outliers, the average count was 20 birds with four of them meeting the then threshold of 25 birds. In 2013, based on new estimates of the size of this species' population, the threshold came down to 20* and seven counts met this.

The trend of Corrib Coot numbers seems to mirror that of many other wetlands, with ever dropping numbers (Lough Rea being a notable exception in County Galway). While there were still over ten thousand Coot counted up to 2010, numbers dropped steadily down to incredible lows of 236, 178 and 174 from November 2013 till November 2014, even dipping below the new threshold of 220* for national importance. Fortunately, they picked up again to between 1,190 and 3,053 recorded at the most recent counts of 2016 and 2017.

During the 2009/10 I-WeBS season, Golden Plover were still among the three most numerous wader species recorded nationally (Lapwing and Dunlin being the other two). On Lough Corrib Golden Plover numbers met the threshold for national importance (1,700) only four times since - in October 2010 (3,908), in November 2013 (3,724), January 2014 (6,848) and October 2015 (1,833). Even the new threshold of 1,200* does not change that tally.

Interestingly, Lapwing, no longer of national or international importance for Lough Corrib, peaked during the 2013/14 season as well with 1,224 and

2,226 birds for the two counts. Moorhen showed the same peaking, but on a different scale: 15 and 10.

Of course, there are many other waterbird species frequenting Lough Corrib during the winter and not giving these a mention here may be seen as a shortcoming. However, the species that use the lake in internationally or nationally important numbers determine the (ornithological) conservation status of the lake and provide a tool to underpin its importance. All other species are equally important ecologically and aesthetically, and they are just as much part of the Lower Lough Corrib ecosystem as the 'stars of the show', providing birdwatchers with hours of 'work', entertainment and satisfaction.

The reasons for the drop – and rise - in numbers of species are varied. Harsh winters during which many smaller wetlands were frozen left the much larger body of faster-flowing water of Lough Corrib open as a refuge for waterbirds which would normally winter elsewhere. But during those same winters, many surrounding grasslands were too hard for waders to probe for food, reducing their numbers there. The subsequent warmer winters on the European continent may have kept more birds there as there was no urgent need for them to go further west. Some very wet winters limited our access to vantage points for the counting of waterbirds that use the middle of the lake most and, therefore, we may have missed especially high or low numbers that could have influenced the 'number-crunching' (see the comment by Crowe and Holt, mentioned above). In other words, the weather being 'too this' or 'too that' is undoubtedly a factor in the number of birds visiting Lough Corrib in winter.

Other factors include levels of disturbance (fortunately, we had little over the period covered in this article) and water quality. The latter is a topic beyond my ken but research on the water quality of lakes by Dr Cilian Roden and Philip Doddy shows a parallel between the amount of light that reaches the bottom of the lake and the crust on a lake bed. Where a lake is over-enriched, more plankton prevents light from penetrating the water to deeper levels where plants then die and a shortage of food arises for certain waterbirds, e.g. Coot. In parallel, a healthy crust also needs lots of light and over-enrichment causes the crust to collapse. This clear parallel they have established may provide a tool for monitoring what is happening under the water.

And finally, the timing of our November counts may very well influence the results, as some species arrive early and may have dispersed by the time we do the count while other species may arrive late and their true use of Lough Corrib was missed if we did the count too early. Our count dates, having fluctuated between the last week of October and the first two weeks of November, do, therefore, not allow detailed analysis of trends.

However, what we can contribute to I-WeBS remains valuable and is certainly worth the effort, for which each and every counter has always been gratefully acknowledged by the I-WeBS office and the international waterbird monitoring community.

Marianne ten Cate

* See Crowe, O. & Holt, C. 2013. Estimates of waterbird numbers wintering in Ireland, 2006/07-2010/11. *Irish Birds* Vol. 9, No. 4.