



CAIRDE EANLAITH ÉIREANN – BIRDWATCH IRELAND

www.birdwatchireland.ie & www.birdwatchgalway.org

NEWSLETTER (26th year) – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY

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An occasion newsletter
issued in support of the
Galway Branch of BirdWatch
Ireland.

FROM THE CHAIR, DECEMBER 2018 – WHAT KIND OF YEAR IT HAS BEEN

I welcome you all to the December Issue of the Birdwatch Ireland Galway Newsletter. It's that time of year to look back and take stock. We have had a year of successful and well-varied events. In February we re-established a formal committee for Galway; from there we made strides in implementing ideas for a wide variety of events highlighting different topics ranging from International Dawn Chorus Day events in Portumna and Galway City, talks on marine plastic impacts on the environment; Barn Owls in Ireland; Birdwatching in Galway; and wildlife film-making in Ireland. I'm delighted to say, all these events were extremely well attended and, more importantly, well received. I'd like to thank all our speakers who gave their time and expertise in giving these talks: Chris Peppiatt, Niall Keogh, João Frias, Ian O'Connor, John Lusby, Tom Cuffe and Eoin Warner. Thanks also to Gary Kendellen of Galway Atlantaquaria for hosting our Marine Plastics talk. BirdWatch Ireland HQ took a stall at the Galway Christmas Market this year for a week. I would like to express my thanks to our members who volunteered to be with Darren Ellis on the stall; raising awareness of conservation efforts and funds to support these efforts is a vital part of BirdWatch Ireland's work.



BirdWatch Ireland at Galway Christmas Market

We hope to continue hosting events that highlight such work at national and local levels in the coming year. BirdWatch Ireland is dedicated to gathering and disseminating data on the status of our birds. Ireland hosts some of the largest portions of global populations of birds during various stages of the year, such as Greenland White-fronted Geese – the logo of Birdwatch Ireland. About half of the species' population, 10-12,000 individuals, spend the winter in Ireland and summer in Greenland. Ireland plays an important role in hosting globally significant populations of migratory birds in both summer and winter. It's perhaps most evident during winter when we observe large flocks of waders, geese and swans arriving to our shores. Light-bellied Brent geese undertake a 4,500km migration from the Canadian arctic tundra, take a quick rest in Iceland, then finish their journey landing along our very own coastline. As you can imagine, they are quite hungry when they get here and therefore it's vital the favourable conservation conditions of the habitats that support such species are upheld all year round – not as a case of out of sight, out of mind.

It is heartening to find a marked increase in public awareness campaigns highlighting downward trends in biodiversity and climate change through mass-media coverage and multi-national companies making serious changes to business practices to benefit the environment. Recently, the World Wildlife Fund published *The Living Planet Report 2018* (see https://wwf.panda.org/knowledge_hub/all_publication/living_planet_report_2018/). This important report has shown our wildlife populations on a global scale have dropped by 60% within the last 40 years! The report states “we are the first generation that has a clear picture of the value of nature and the enormous impact we have on it. We may also be the last generation that can act to reverse this trend. From now until 2020 will be a decisive moment in history.” It's never too late to start doing something, though the hourglass has been going longer than some people were aware. Even small changes at home, sustained over a long time, may be more impactful than well-intentioned yet dramatic lifestyle changes, akin to new-year's resolutions that never last long. Something as simple as swapping plastic bottles and cups for re-usable cups is of tremendous benefit by limiting the amount of plastics entering our environment. As Kermit the frog once said “It's not easy being green”. But these days it's getting easier to be! The report also found that 90% of seabirds have plastics in their stomachs, compared with 5% in 1960. A point that was made all too real during our Marine Plastics in Ireland talk earlier this year showcasing the devastating impacts this is having on our seabirds and local ecosystems. BirdLife International, of which BirdWatch Ireland is a partner, contributed to this report with regard to bird species populations.

Data gathered by BirdWatch Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service directly feeds into conservation policies which work to improve our environment, and this cannot happen without the invaluable voluntary efforts by our supporters. From running and racing around lakes and coastlines conducting I-WeBS counts in the depths of winter, to rising with the larks (pun intended!) for the Countryside Bird Survey in spring and even sitting with a cup of tea looking out the back window as part of the Garden Bird Surveys, all these records are utilised to their fullest extent to inform on the status of birdlife in Ireland. So, thank you for that! To learn more or express interest in such surveys follow: <https://www.birdwatchireland.ie/OurWork/Volunteers/surveys/tabid/1217/Default.aspx>. For 2019 we hope to continue supporting these survey efforts and also contribute to more species-specific surveys as they arise, with the help of our members and supporters.

We received numerous well-wishes from neighbouring branches and also suggestions of joint outings in the future – which we will certainly look to do in the coming year. The committee will hold an AGM soon and also gather to prepare the next round of events for the public and our members.

With that in mind, I'd like to express my thanks to our speakers once again, for giving their time and expertise so freely. Thanks also to Neil Sharkey and Marianne ten Cate for maintaining the Newsletter and Nimmo's Pier mailing lists along with helping the new committee find its feet, and Tom Cuffe for continuing to lead the monthly Nimmo's Pier outings.

A sincere thanks to the sitting members of the branch committee, in particular the Branch Officers Bláithín Kennedy (Secretary) and Sean Gavin (Treasurer) who have been invaluable in running the branch this year.

Colin Heaslip

WHOSE BIRD - HUMBOLDT

Humboldt Penguin *Spheniscus humboldti* (Meyen 1834), Humboldt's Sapphire *Hylocharis humboldti* (Bourcier & Miulsant 1852).

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1850) was a Prussian naturalist, explorer and politician. He explored in South America from 1799 until around 1805, collecting thousands of specimens, mapping, and studying natural phenomena. The trip took in parts of Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and Mexico. In 1829, he made a journey of similarly epic proportions ranging from the Urals east to Siberia. He was also a patron of the Agassiz. Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* was inspirational to later travellers in the tropics such as Darwin and Wallace. His most famous writing was the five-volume work *The Cosmos* published between 1845 and 1862. Humboldt did research in many other fields, including astronomy, forestry and mineralogy. The *Humboldt Current* that runs south to north just west of South America was named after him.

From *Whose Bird* - Beolens & Watkins (Helm) NS

HIRUNDINES – TALES FROM THE EAST

House martins are not a common sight here but on September 4th at 9am there were seventy or more house martins flying over and around my house in Lawrencetown. Two pairs had accepted the invitation to build a nest under the apices of each of my two neighbours' spacious houses, eighty metres apart. One of the invitations was very recent, only having been completed in January. These two vacated nests were the focus of the birds, on what I could only assume was food. Every few seconds a bird would fly up to the nest, stall and fall back into the air to dash about with the swarm. As I watched for ten minutes, I don't know how many individuals got their turn at the pickings but if they were to have a chance at all they just had to keep flying, some to rush low over the garden, others wheeling in the air. The alternative would be an orderly line on the telegraph wires, each bird waiting its turn to fly up for an invertebrate morsel but this is not what birds do. A few martins did settle on the telegraph wire and they looked decidedly Andy Capp next to the impeccably dressed swallows. Fifteen minutes later they were gone, though they were still in the vicinity the next day.

One or two pairs of swallows nest each year in the rafters of our turf shed and two well-built quarter spherical mud-nest cups remain intact, one metre apart, throughout the winter to remind us to anticipate their return next spring, unthinkable that they would not suddenly be seen swooping through the open door one day in April. This year, a wren quietly built a nest inside one of the cups well before the arrival of the swallows. A surprisingly robust affair



of grass and moss with a conspicuous flag of orange wood-shaving hanging proprietorially outside. That nest produced four fully-fledged young wrens by 31st May. A swallow refurbished the other nest and lined it with soft downy feathers set neatly in concentric rings of grass stalks, but for the first time that I can remember no young were produced. In fact, there was no sign of eggs ever having been laid, only a fragment of a hen's egg that presumably came with the feathers.

Stephen Heery 1/10/2018

ROCK PIPIT - FIRST OF A SERIES

To deal with the rigours of living on our coasts a bird needs to be tough. A rocky coastline may provide a breeding fortress but, battered by wind and waves, it is one of the harshest and most challenging environments of all. Many birds breeding here are true seabirds such as petrels and shearwaters, along with more coastal species such as gulls. But there is one, often unsung, bird that braves these conditions throughout the year: the Rock Pipit.

Rock Pipits are closely related to Meadow Pipits, but are more robust. Between a House Sparrow and a Starling in size, they are easy to miss as they bob across seaweed-covered rocks or alight on wave-battered overhangs, well camouflaged by their smoky plumage. Even their legs are dark grey, so it is often easier to pick up their short breathless whistle as they fly between boulders; for such a high-pitched call, it carries above the loudest winter breakers. The Rock Pipit's distribution clings to our rocky coasts, especially in the west.

In August, Rock Pipits often travel *en famille* as they probe with their fledglings for insects and small crustaceans among the flotsam and jetsam. They are especially fond of the tiny sand hoppers that leap into the air like manic flies whenever you turn over a clump of seaweed.

Usually, each pair has two broods of chicks, so some birds can still be in the nest in August, huddled together in the shelter of a rocky niche, or hidden by a cushion of Thrift or Sea Campion, while holiday-makers cavort unaware on the nearby beach. Most birds will spend the year in this type of habitat but some Rock Pipits do occasional turn up in gravel pits and reservoirs.

From *Tweet of the Day* by Brett Westwood & Stephen Moss – by kind permission.

NS

INNER GALWAY BAY SPA COUNT

The Galway branch has carried out regular counts in inner Galway Bay (from Silver Strand, Bearna around to beyond Ballyvaughan) since 1976. These counts are usually held in November, January and March. The counts provide the only regular site monitoring for wintering birds in the inner bay and provide population information for 18 of the 20 special conservation interest species of the Inner Galway Bay Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds. In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to find enough volunteers for these counts. The count area is split up into four sections, which are further sub-divided into subsections. In order to count one

section, we need one volunteer car (normally with a minimum of two volunteers and a maximum of five) with at least one telescope. Therefore, four cars and a minimum of eight volunteers are needed for a count. To take part in a count a volunteer would need their own pair of binoculars and proper outdoor footwear and clothing. With the count in its current form it can take one carload of volunteers up to 6 or 7 hours to count a section. It is hoped that new volunteers will come forward to help to ensure the continuation of the count. More optimistically, it is also hoped that, if enough additional volunteers come forward, it may be possible to increase the number of sections in the count (while keeping all the current sub-sections) so that we may be able to cover the area with, say, six cars instead of four. This would mean that the count time per volunteer group could be decreased (ideally to four hours instead of six or seven), thus making the count less onerous for volunteers and keeping the count to a period of two hours on either side of low tide. If you might be interested in taking part, please contact me: chris.peppiatt@iol.ie or 086-3125356.

Chris Peppiatt

BIRDS IN POETRY

*Among the dwellings framed by birds
In field or forest with nice care,
Is none that with the little Wren's
In smugness may compare.*

William Wordsworth

The Wren is a living adage to the saying that size is not everything; the diminutive Wren is a most determined and impressive singer and his boisterous and full-throated warbling song can be heard loudly across the seasons. His song is shrill and delivered with great gusto.

One of our smallest birds, the Wren spends most of its time on or near the ground. A sociable creature, it rests in groups and is often found in gardens, woodland undergrowth or thickets beside ditches and streams. In spring, the male uses plant stalks, twigs and moss to build a number of nests. The female takes her pick and the new home is finished inside with soft hair and feathers.

From 'A year in Birdsong' 2018 calendar by Madeleine Floyd

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INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK AND WORLD OF MAJOR RUTLEDGE (CONTINUED)

Below is a continuation of my project for readers to read and appreciate the late Major R.F. Rutledge's publication *A List of the Birds of the Counties Galway and Mayo*. Commenced in the last issue, I now continue his introduction. In the next issue, I will start with the species records and status. Remember, all the references and data are pre-1950.

Introduction continued:

"The number and variety of birds in Galway and Mayo is not comparable with the more eastern counties in spite of the fact that there is a good variety of habitat. Great woodlands are scarce and many of the larger ones have been cut down or

appreciably reduced since the breakup of the large estates around 1925 and, more recently, during the years of World War II. In some areas, afforestation on a large scale has taken place and there are extensive tracts of young conifers. These do not, however, seem conducive to a prolific bird-life. The vast tracts of bog and moorland are singularly poor in bird-life. The large lakes and their islands, often wooded, support a fair variety of species. The coasts, where they are precipitous, have, in the breeding season, a teeming population and on the low-lying shores, which include Killala Bay, Blacksod Bay, Clew Bay and Galway Bay, there is ample ground for hosts of waders, gulls and other swimming birds. Some of the marine islands are notable for their colonies of Storm Petrels. 'Turloughs' form a feature of both counties. These 'winter lakes' are in reality flooded areas often not many inches deep which in summer are dry or limited to a few pools. On or beside these, swans, geese and several kinds of waders are occasionally numerous. They are noted resorts for surface-feeding ducks as well as some of the diving ducks.

The area and type of country is approximately as follows:

	Galway	Mayo
Total acreage	1,467,660	1,333,941
Crops, pasture etc.	778,222	578,270
Bog & mountain	476,757	425,124
Water	77,922	57,940

It had been intended to include a topographical map of each county, but most regrettably present-day exigencies make this impossible. Bartholomew's quarter inch map of Ireland sheet 3 & 4 coloured in contours of altitude cover the area and should be consulted.

There were few residents sufficiently reliable to help by giving their observations but I am especially lucky in that, just prior to his death in 1924, the late W.H. Good of Westport gave me a carefully prepared list of observations in south and west Mayo. I am especially grateful to Mrs I.M. Bingham for a very full list of observations for the Mullet, in which unique peninsula she resided for a number of years. To Mrs Kathleen Gough I am particularly indebted for a similar list for the district around Athenry, Co. Galway and for continually keeping me supplied with information from that county. Among others to whom I am indebted for valuable information or help are the following:

J.S. Barlee; J. Walpole-Bond; E. Brown; Miss Berridge; H. Cronan; Hon. Ethel Dillon; Mrs Crowe, R.A. Eaton; F.J. Ehhinton; Dr A. Farrington; Sean Ford; J.C. Geavey; W. Gibson; I.M. Goodbody; Mrs Humphreys; H.A. Irwin; Rev. J. Jackson; K. Kennedy; Rev. P.G. Kennedy S.J.; S. Marchant; A.G. Mason, A. McIntock; W. Rutledge; C.F. Scroope; J.F. Simms; A.W. Stelfox; J.E.M. Sumner; Mrs Norman Teacher; W.A. Wallace. I must also thank those Lightkeepers who from time to time, stationed on the Connaught coast, have given assistance and information. Other names, some appearing in text, are of those who have passed on or were killed in the recent war.

In addition to the *Birds of Ireland*, Usher and Warren, 1900, and the *Clare Island Survey*, Part 20, Aves, 1912, in the pages of *British Birds*, the *Irish*



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Naturalist, *The Zoologist*, and *The Irish Naturalist's Journal* have been consulted. I have also been permitted to study Ussher's MSS, note-books and letters in the safe keeping of the Irish Academy.

The following is a summary of the more important changes in status since Ussher wrote and in recent years."

To be continued in the next *Newsletter*.

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