



GALWAY BRANCH BIRDWATCH IRELAND

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NUISANCE BIRDS

We all love birds but that is not the case worldwide where some species acquire a nuisance factor way beyond our magpies and gulls, that every summer garner some media coverage here for their apparently aggressive behaviour. On a recent trip to Kenya, I was keeping an eye on the local papers to see what, if any, coverage is given to birds. I was spending some time on the Mombasa coast. My attention was drawn to negative coverage given to two species in the country, one particularly affecting the east coast. The culprit is the Indian House Crow (*Corvus splendens*), not unlike our own hooded crow, if a bit smaller. It is widespread and fearless, aggressive and audacious. It has been responsible for the significant reduction in native species in the area. It also causes a lot of grief to local restaurateurs and tourists. It thrives near humans as it primarily feeds on rubbish – but is partial to any food it can get its beak into, and is not averse to competing with people who commonly dine outdoors.

This crow, as its name suggests, is not native to Africa, but is an Indian species that has spread well beyond the subcontinent. It is thought to have travelled on ships to Africa in the past 100 years. Once localised, its population spreads prodigiously and it is found throughout Kenya, but especially on the coastline. I saw hundreds of them within a relatively small area. They are very clever and noisy. As scavengers, they are on the hunt for leftovers all the time. They also scavenge the beaches and will eat crabs, newborn turtles and other species.

There have been efforts to control the population: one local golf course paid children to collect their eggs for a reward; some restaurants hire people to chase them away from their premises; in Mombasa, they used an imported poison that was very successful in reducing numbers. However, the authorities banned the poison and the bird numbers are back now to their original strength. Some have tried trapping but the clever crows began to recognise the traps and avoided them. The government has been trying to get people to control their rubbish as a deterrent but this has had limited success. It looks for the time being that they are here to stay. See the BBC website <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30782661>.

The other newspaper report related to the effect of the Red-billed Quelea (*Quelea quelea*) on crops. It is a small weaver bird and is the most numerous bird species in the world with breeding colonies involving 30,000 nests per hectare with a hundred on every bush. All birds breed at exactly the same time, with a short incubation period of 9-10 days. It has been described as the 'avian locust' with flocks of 1-10 million birds. Although each bird only weighs an

ounce (30g), when they all swarm together they can genuinely be mistaken for locusts. They can have a devastating effect on farmers' crops (sorghum, wheat, barley, rice, millet) and their nomadic existence means they make short-range migrations in search of rainfall and new growth. They can have a devastating impact on subsistence farming and, consuming up to 50 tonnes of grain a day, can even cause local famine. Efforts to control the population have included blowing up their nesting sites and the spraying of chemicals (e.g., Queletox). The latter led to the destruction of other predators (400 Black Kites on one occasion) that eat dead Queleas, and also posed a risk to humans who gather tonnes of dead birds.

Environmentally, these birds have a positive effect on grass and acacia growth with their vast quantity of nitrogen-rich droppings. It is also food for flesh-eating birds, including eagles, egrets, storks and kites. Tawny Eagles and Maribou Storks often join the Quelea colonies and even lions and leopards do not spurn the bounty of their prodigious numbers. More can be found in this Kenyan press clip: <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/narok/>
Tiny birds that are every farmer's nightmare/
1183318-5215088-18up73/index.html

Aidan O Colmain

WHINCHATS IN THE MEADOWS

In mid-July we walked into an old meadow on the Shannon Callows. This fenceless expanse was shared by several owners, each with an age-old strip of meadow running five hundred metres or so from the lush hedgerow at the top down to the lush riverside Canary-grass at the bottom. We had arrived just at the right time to view the meadow as a thirty-hectare woven carpet of colours. Some strips had been cut in June and these were a uniform bright green, rather garish in the sunshine. The uncut strips were brown, green and straw-coloured with threads of colour. The flat clusters of flowers on each of the Sneezewort plants made a pattern that a carpet maker could easily want to reproduce. And we marvelled at the way our eyes gradually got used to noticing the presence of dark, thin spikes of Purple Moor Grass *Molinia* among the grass tops and flower heads. In these *Molinia* meadows, I always think of the contrast between the humble coexisting Purple Moor Grass here and the dominant swathes and unpleasant tussocks of Purple Moor Grass in the hills.

We stood on the bright green carpet, not wishing to tread on the pristine-looking uncut meadow. Whinchats were the last thing on our mind but it was Whinchats we heard and a Whinchat we saw, perching on a dock flower, bending it only slightly, facing into a fairly stiff breeze. It was a strikingly-plumaged male and it called its *whistle yu-tek, ye tek-tek* alarm call. In a moment we saw why. Up out of the meadow rose three fledged young, appearing slightly truncated with short tail feathers, testing their flying skills by remaining stationary against the stiff breeze before dropping into the safety of the meadow. Shortly afterwards, a similar family scene

was witnessed on the other adjacent uncut strip – two successful family parties of Whinchats in their natal patch of meadow.

It has to be said that these were in Lusmagh, Co. Offaly, but it must also be said that they were in Clonfert Diocese so the birds were ecclesiastically linked to Co. Galway. The same scene could have been witnessed a few miles upstream, just down the road from Clonfert Cathedral, at Bishops Islands where, I am told, more than ten pairs graced the meadows this year. I watched a pair there from the road myself in 2107.

Whinchat is the bird that has most dramatically contracted its range in Ireland and Britain between Bird Atlas surveys (see BTO Map Store on-line). It is said to require 'traditionally managed, invertebrate-rich grasslands with a high number of herbaceous perches', so it is easy to see why the Shannon Callows meadows are attractive. The Callows are now a stronghold having benefitted (until recently) from two decades or more of Corncrake-friendly farming which kept the meadows uncut until well after their final fledging dates in late July. There is ongoing research into the breeding biology of Whinchats on the Callows and it is fervently hoped that differences between the Corncrake and the Whinchat will lead to different outcomes.

Stephen Heery

BIRDS IN POETRY

'The Scribe in the Woods' is an early Irish poem that describes the joy of a scribe working in a forest surrounded by nature and bird song. It is found in the margins of a ninth-century Irish treatise on Latin grammar, which is now in the monastery of St Gall in Switzerland. The early Irish version is interesting in its own right and is followed by translations of it by Maire MacNeill and then Kuno Mayer.

Geraldine Ward

The Scribe in the Woods

Dom-farcaí fídbaide fáil
fom-chain lóid luin, lúad nád céil;
h-úas mo lebrán, ind línech,
fom-chain trírech inna n-én.
Fomm-chain coí menn, medair mass,
hi m-brot glass de dingnaib doss.
Debrath! nom-Choimmdiu-coíma:
caín-scribaimm fo roída ross.

Over me green branches hang
A blackbird leads the loud song
Above my pen-lined booklet
I hear a fluting bird-throwng

The cuckoo pipes a clear call
Its dun cloak hid in deep dell:
Praise to God for his goodness
That in woodland I write well.

Translation: Maire MacNeill



The Scribe

A hedge of trees surrounds me
A blackbird's lay sings to me
Above my lined booklet
The trilling birds chant to me

In a grey mantle from the top of bushes
The cuckoo sings
Verily – may the Lord shield me! –
Well do I write under the greenwood

Translation: Kuno Mayer

BIRDS SEEN AWAY FROM GALWAY

Sometimes I imagine, as I'm walking across Rahasane Turlough, or even along Lough Atalia, seeing something interesting. Something you wouldn't see here in Ireland or, at least, not as a native species.

Earlier this year, I visited three new countries, not something I often do. In February, I visited and hiked the glaciers of the Alps in Italy. In April, I went to Bulgaria and Greece.

Italy was mindblowing, to say the least. Getting up at 6am daily to be out of the hotel was most exciting. By the time you were in your gear and outside, the sun had risen and the views were amazing. Bird-wise, the place sounded dead. You had a few Coal Tits singing, maybe a Robin calling every once in a while. But it ended up being so much more than that. Going up in ski lifts was probably the most exciting part. Not only did you have miles of snow, trees and cliffs behind you but the birds you could see from it, and sometimes hear, were cool. On day one, I had already seen a Golden Eagle. And the number of Alpine Choughs, which are like yellow-legged versions of our own choughs, was amazing, even going up to 100 one time on the peak of Monte Spinale. Monte Spinale itself was one real hotspot for birds. While it might not seem like a lot, for a mountain a number as high as 20 species is good. Interesting birds such as the Snowfinch could be found up there. Snowfinches are birds similar to Snow Buntings, but live on the highest European and Caucasian mountains. Along with the relatively high number of Coal Tits, Crested Tits were also present! These are probably the cutest passerine bird I can think of. They're basically Blue Tits but with a crest. They love that type of habitat, the conifers and mountains.

The biggest surprise I got while on a ski lift in Italy, was in Groste mountain pass. While gliding the lift, from beneath me I heard a 'croakey' sound, somewhat like grouse. I looked down but didn't actually see one. It was great when I saw its outline. The bird was a Rock Ptarmigan, in Scotland just called the Ptarmigan. It's a grouse-type bird that thrives on mountains and snow. I couldn't believe either that I had just heard a male one. I was really happy to see one of the rarer grouse species, and it probably topped the list of most exciting birds seen on the trip. You would have to pinch yourself if you saw any of these in Galway.

Many more species were seen in Bulgaria and Greece. Between them, I saw 124 species over the course of 5 days.

I spent my first day of the trip in Bulgaria's capital, Sofia (София). I arrived midday so I just went around the city parks. From personal experience, and probably others' too, Irish cities just don't tend to have any sort of diversity when it comes to birdlife in cities. It was the polar opposite in Sofia. All kinds of woodpeckers, even a Syrian Woodpecker or two! Even as I was landing, the first two species I noticed were Alpine Swifts and Lesser-spotted Eagles, flying way above head. These eagles are common migrants across Bulgaria - they migrate north every spring - but it was an amazing sight when the most you might see of raptors here in Galway is an occasional Peregrine or Sparrowhawk.

My second day was spent in Greece's best place for birding: Lake Kerkini (Λίμνη Κερκίνη) National Park. To date, according to eBird, the site has seen 259 species. I got up at 4am, just to get to the lake by 8am, but it was worth it. The lake itself accounts for all the species I have seen in Greece; 85 over a span of 7^{1/2} hours. The most notable were probably the pelicans, storks and flamingos. The two species of pelicans were the Great White Pelican and the Dalmation Pelican; while the Great White only passed through, the Dalmation bred there. It accounted for over 500 individuals, about 200 pairs. Thanks to projects like these, the Dalmation Pelican was declared safe from extinction a few years back.

The rest of my week was mostly spent at Plovdiv (Пловдив), Bulgaria's second largest city. Hoopoes, Green Woodpeckers, Little Ringed Plovers and Nightingales practically littered the place. Stranger birds could be seen and heard there, too. From Goshawks to rarities like Long-tailed Ducks (in Bulgaria they're very rare), to Grey-headed Woodpeckers, the rarities were everywhere.

While we may think: "Wow, those birds I'd love to see here!", it's hard to forget how many we actually have here in Ireland and how much the Italians or Bulgarians would love to see them too. The grass is always greener

Sean Walsh

Click on or copy to a search engine the link below to view some of Sean's photographs.

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/boRimvfsDBC1a3eD6>

CLIMATE CHANGE

Check out this fascinating site by copying the following link on to Chrome, Firefox or Safari or go to the web site. It shows the predicted coastline in 2050 - some huge losses of land in Connemara and Galway city, and it looks like a lot of Oranmore, Clarinbridge village and Tawin Island might be in danger of being under water or more flood-prone than today.

Thanks to Dermot Breen for the link.

https://coastal.climatecentral.org/map/7/-6.2452/53.3362/?theme=sea_level_rise&map_type=coastal_dem_comparison&elevation_model=coastal_dem&forecast_year=2050&pathway=rcp45&percent_ile=p50&return_level=return_level_1&slr_model=kopp_2014

BIRDS IN COUNTIES GALWAY AND MAYO

Continuation from the last issue:

Irish Jay *Garrulus glandarius hibernicus*

In Co. Galway, in the east of which it appeared at the end of the last century, it has spread and increased rapidly, though with less rapidity in the west and north-west. It had reached Mount Bellew in 1917 and appeared in the vicinity of Galway City at the end of 1941. It is gradually spreading up the eastern shores of Lough Corrib where, in Clydagh Wood near Headford, it appeared in the winter of 1942, had increased in 1943 and probably bred. The head-keeper at Ashford near Cong saw one or two there in 1941 and 1942 but was of the opinion that they did not breed. There is no information of Jays west of Lough Corrib. Sir Denis Bernard informed me in 1945 that it was still absent from his woods at Castle Hackett near Tuam. It has evidently appeared as a straggler in Co. Mayo where there is no evidence of breeding. Two are said to have been shot at Castle MacGarrett near Claremorris early summer of 1942. They have not bred or been seen there since. One is said to have been killed in the woods near Foxford between 1938 and 1941.

To be continued.

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YOUNG BIRDWATCHERS FROM WAY BACK



Recently, I came across this photo in an old album. It dates from 1982 when the Galway branch had an active young bird watchers group. The photo was taken at the Martello Tower near the Flaggy Shore.

I am standing on the left – younger readers might think I have a phone to my ear but, of course, in 1982 mobile phones were non-existent! Health and safety regulations were hardly much in it either - the young enthusiasts were just bundled into cars and piled on to each other's knees etc. as, like mobiles, seat belts had not then arrived, at least not in the legal sense. Hard to believe! But my recollection is that it was a great and enjoyable outing. Eoin Ryan and his brother were active young members of the group then and today. Eoin brings his young son along to Tom Cuffe's Nimmo's Pier outings – it is good to see such continuity.

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