



GALWAY BRANCH BIRDWATCH IRELAND

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CUCKOO

While working on an entirely different project, which in the National Library entails trawling through the *Nationalist*, the local newspaper of my native Clonmel during the Second World War era, I came across the following poem in its edition of 6th May 1939. I have no idea who Mr Murphy, the author, is and, given the date, he is in all likelihood long deceased. However, I think it worthwhile to give it an eightieth-year reprint, hopefully with his blessing - heavenly or earthly.

Cuckoo

Just over by the brook – Oh!
No that's no filthy rook Oh!
It has truly come at last
And my listening time is past.
Cuckoo

It has really found a nook – Oh!
I must write the date in my book Oh!
Now he'll take a little rest
Ere he searches for a nest.
Cuckoo

Both the workman and the duke – Oh!
Come to listen and to look Oh!
This the whole year's sweetest song
Though we shall not hear it long.
Cuckoo

When the hay's made by hook or
crook – Oh!
And the corn is in the stook Oh!
Then we turn the spuds to root
But our little guest is mute.
Cuckoo

E.W.M. Murphy – Clonmel 1939

THREE LARGE BIRDS AT REDMOUNT HILL

In January, the silhouette of a bird near the top of a lofty, lonely, ageing, somewhat decrepit ash tree two hundred and fifty metres away resolved itself, through binoculars, into a male peregrine. Its yellow legs and white breast were clear in the sunshine and its black 'moustache' seemed evident, although the image was shaken by the wind. It was relaxed, preening and looking around. The backdrop to this tree was a fawn-coloured field of Glas wild bird cover seed crop for finches. Indeed, not so long ago I had watched two separate, restless flocks of greenfinches and chaffinches. They were all equally dark birds at that distance but their respective yellow and white wing bars named them for me. They would settle on the seed heads for less than a minute before wheeling away to the wood close by for safety. This wood is a favourite place for wood pigeons and as I watched there was always at least one bird dashing to or from the wood past the raptor on the tree.

And as I watched, the peregrine's relaxed pose changed, it looked back and slipped off its perch as two buzzards glided towards the tree. Only one buzzard stayed and while it remained on the branch, the displaced bird's image remained in my mind such that the peregrine had looked so much slimmer and smaller. The peregrine circled the tree a couple of times and disappeared into the canopy of an old oak tree on the edge of the wood.

This wood is not only a favourite place of wood pigeons and flocks of finches but also of resident ravens. Ravens are invariably seen here. In April, during a CBS transect, I had heard one 'showing its spring feelings' (as the *Collins Field Guide* puts it) from within the canopy of that same oak. It was a short, uneven, rapid fire sound, between a click and a knock, ventriloquially projected towards me so that it seemed near enough to be a few bars of contemporary music on stage.

NS In February, a female peregrine, bulkier and browner than the male, sat on the same ash tree and then flew over to a small clump of Scots pine, one of several shelterbelts in this rather old-fashioned scene of large, pastoral fields on the lower slopes of Redmount Hill, seven kilometres from the River Shannon. These clumps of trees are favoured by both the buzzard and the raven and indeed a bulky mass of twigs in two of them could have belonged to either or both.

Stephen Heery 17/05/19

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER

The desk where I site my laptop, which produces this newsletter, affords a view through a small window on to a grassy space or glade surrounded by ash and other trees. In mid-June, through the window I began to notice a small grey bird with an upright stance constantly darting from its perch on a dead ash tree branch. To my excitement I quickly identified it as a Spotted Flycatcher and its sallies and darting around the tree-lined space delighted me for the weeks following.

Around the same time, I had been compiling a listing/archive of my all too numerous bird books and this drew my attention to one I had quite forgotten about. It is *Birds of the Wayside and Woodland* by T.A. Coward, published in 1936. This book is old-fashioned in its format, with wonderful colour plates, but its real feature is its description of each bird species. This is very detailed and much more 'poetic' than what modern bird guides offer.

The following is an extract of its description of the Spotted Flycatcher which, as you can appreciate, is currently my most favourite bird.

The Spotted Flycatcher is one of the last of the summer visitors to arrive. It is often absent until early May.

Many birds capture flying insects, but none so adroitly as the Spotted Flycatcher. Its grey-brown plumage is inconspicuous and it is not really spotted; it is, too, a silent bird, yet its neat upright figure, perched on a post, railing or dead branch is noticeable. One of its names is 'Post Bird', another 'Old Man', probably from this upright pose.

Its short aerial sallies attract the eye; sometimes it swoops obliquely with unerring aim upon some insect flying below, but usually, after many smart twists and turns, it cuts short the career of a dodger. Then, as a rule, it returns to its observation post, though often it will have two look-outs to which it flies in turns. Naturally the look-out is best where the

space in front is open; thus, the Flycatcher frequents the border of a lawn, the outskirts of a wood or edge of a clearing or the branches of a willow or alder overhanging a stream. The call 'sit' or 'sit-chic' is not loud, but is more frequently noticed than its slight low song in May and June, a few repeated soft notes. The upper parts of the adult bird are hair-brown with darker brown stripes on the crown; the under parts are greyish white but the flanks and breast are sandy brown, and on the latter there are noticeable striations. The bill is brown, the legs black and the irises dark brown.

What a great description – modern guides should study! I hope to include some more of these wonderful descriptions in future issues.

NS

BIRDTRACK UPDATES

When it was launched in 2004, the initial focus of BirdTrack was to track the arrival and departure of summer visitors such as Cuckoo and Swift, as well as wintering birds like Redwing. The system has undergone a number of updates to widen the scope of the project, and it is now possible to log sightings from around the world at any time of year.

The most recent updates also included some much-needed work in the background to make the system more flexible and easier to maintain, as well as a major change to the taxonomy. While most of the changes are in the background, there are some noticeable changes to the front page as well. This includes new widgets to view BirdTrack data, and updates to already existing features. This includes the online graphs where it is now possible to view data at county level and compare multiple years. There are still more features we are planning to add in the near future so do visit BirdTrack regularly.

Stephen McAvoys

Thanks to Stephen – the controller of BirdTrack - for this update. For those not fully familiar with BirdTrack I just add a little more information.

BirdTrack is the ideal site to record your bird sightings and to see other birdwatchers' records and sightings in your general area.

You register and then use the phone app or laptop to record your sightings and also to see what other birds may be about. This can apply both locally or when abroad.

The more of us who use it, the more useful and informative it becomes. In doing so you are also adding to the overall data bank of information on our birds which is so necessary for their future survival and well being. So, I would urge as many as possible to explore it and then use it to submit their records.

NS

LETTERMULLEN BIRDING

The morning of April 29, I flung my patio doors open, just because I could, Storm Hannah having gone through. I checked the roof slates for damage, drank a cup of Joe (Daniels), and listened to the haunting wavering call of the Whimbrel: a sort of wind instrument accompaniment to the Great-Spotted Woodpecker's drums - play them together, it's like they're jamming. Honest.

I can remember my father taking me out onto the North Norfolk marshes as a youngster and him saying "Whimbrel". I couldn't see any. Where? He pointed up in the sky. I still couldn't see any.



"Calling", he said. I could identify all the birds in my field guide from the plates, but identifying birds just from the sounds they made?

That was long ago. I learned to listen, never to my father's level, but sufficient for today, alerted by loud calling, to note a flock of 20 Whimbrel fly in to my coastal fields here on Leitir Mealláin, my home of a year and two weeks now.

The Whimbrel moved down towards the edge of the bay, where they probed in the Sea Pink-adorned short turf growing between lichen-clad rocks in the camouflage of greys of a London Plane tree trunk; the land here an almost impossibly complex sequence of peninsulas that shrink as they twist left and right, eventually finishing at the olive-brown tideline of exposed wrack.

As I scanned through the flock, I noticed one Whimbrel bearing coloured plastic rings on both tibiae, red over lime green. Who to report 'a double red over lime' to? The Irish Cocktail Authority? The sensible answer, to the Icelandic Wader Study Group, bore a response within the hour. Yes, it was their bird, caught and ringed on the nest as an adult in 2009, with a series of sightings up until 2013 and then nothing until today, six years later.

One minute you're watching a wild bird, as anonymous as the rest of its companions. Next minute, you know the co-ordinates of its nest location in agricultural Fliotshlid, southern Iceland; moments in its life history as recorded by people in other countries who share your interest in birds. The six people copied in on the e-mail cared about this bird in some way; that it was still out there six years after the previous sighting; that I'd reported it. It even had its own codename: RL-RL. A bit dull. I preferred 'Double red over lime'.

It was a birding buzz in a location that could produce something extraordinary but, in all likelihood, won't. I came here not knowing really what to expect other than on my initial visit I had without doubt discovered the eight most likely fields in Ireland to host an October Grey-Cheeked Thrush, or even a Veery on a good day. So, last autumn's failure to produce anything more than half a dozen Redwings was met with a deal of head-scratching. How had the red-carpet Yanks failed to turn up? It was inexplicable.

Cover here is largely non-existent other than bushes encircling houses whose occupants, understandably, will not want me looking at their property through binoculars. On Shetland they're pretty used to birders; autumn bird migration brings in valuable tourism income, but here garden birding makes me feel uncomfortable; these are my neighbours. An opening gambit of "Hello, I'm Sean, can I look in your shrubs?" might cause consternation, fracas, apocalypse. The local people have welcomed me into the community - why rock the boat?

Birding here naturally focuses on the coast and sea then. Great Northern Divers take their time coming into their finery, my sort of bird: why do a job in a day when you can make it last months? Black Guillemot in summer plumage, like an avian Mark Rothko. A drake Red-breasted Merganser slides from a hitherto unknown inlet. Common Sandpipers wave taunt like their Purple cousins, unrecorded so far. Last summer I managed to swim up close to an exposed 'reef' before two adult Mediterranean Gulls flew off; many birders' favourite gull.

While ostensibly a favourable location for sea watching, last year was hard work, particularly in rough weather. The only viable shelter overlooks someone's house; relationships and trust need to be built and these things can't always be rushed. Manx

Shearwater groups continuously stream west out of Galway Bay on summer evenings, at the rate of 2,000 an hour off Ceann Gólaím on one occasion. Counter-intuitively, the best seabirds were seen in flat calm conditions. European Storm Petrel was seen just offshore on three occasions, tracing its aimless patterns like a bored teenager on a bicycle. Leach's Petrel was seen once, though my best view was of one that took five minutes picking its way through the windsurfers just off Silver Strand.

Back on dry land, birds that I once associated with childhood camping trips to the seaside had become 'garden' birds: Meadow Pipit ("Eep-eep-eep"); Stonechat ("Swi? Jack!"); the perhaps under-appreciated Linnet; a Wheatear on migration.

Willow Warbler seems to herald summer here, the cheerful melody a common sound on any decent walk; perhaps a candidate for the bird that most people "don't know" when in fact they do, at least its song anyway. I think people underestimate their bird knowledge. As I looked for geese this winter a local stopped to talk: the geese were on that island last winter, the other one the previous year. Eider bred on that one once, he said, and the Shags have moved to a more remote island. He knew what a Manx Shearwater was. Of the seemingly infinite reasons I like birds, even just talking to someone who wouldn't identify himself as a birdwatcher carries value; two strangers breaking the ice.

As I write, a sad postscript arrives from Iceland: the nest location area is under threat from development for summer houses. 'Progress' eh? It's hard to stomach the rate of decline of all curlew species globally. Ireland without curlews would, to me, be insufficiently Irish. They were here long before us.

Sean McCann

BIRDS IN COUNTIES GALWAY AND MAYO

This newsletter sees the start of the actual species list of Major Rutledge's book after the introduction parts set out in previous issues. As I have said before, they start with corvid or crow species, using an old scientific listing now long out of use.

Raven. *Corvus corax corax* L. Resident. Breeds plentifully on the cliffs of the north Mayo coast, Achill, Clare Island. Inland it breeds in the higher grounds such as those north to Clew Bay, in the Maumtrasna Mountains and is particularly numerous in the Erriff valley. I have seen nests in cliffs near Oldhead. In Galway it nests on the larger islands such as those of Aran, Inishbofin and Inishark but I did not find it on High Island in 1943. Common in the 'Twelve Bens' where they have been increasing since 1938, as is the case in other ranges in Connemara. Nowadays not found breeding away from coastal or mountainous regions, but wanders from these over lowland districts. In January, I have seen a bird 20 miles from the nearest breeding resort.

Hooded Crow. *Corvus corone cornix* L. Resident common, breeding in trees, bushes and on cliffs. Increasing. In 1938 has decreased in Connemara where there was an active campaign against them, but has again increased. Parties may be met with on marine islands, but usually only a pair or two on such. In autumn and winter, I have counted twenty and twenty-five together, and once in October fifty.

Carrion Crow. *Corvus corone corone* L. There is only one record for County Mayo. A pair bred in that county in 1890 and young birds from this nest were

sent to Blaire-Knox. In Co. Galway one was seen by Col. A. E. Lascelles at a range of less than fifteen yards at Renvyle on May 2nd 1917.

Rook. *Corvus frugilegus frugeiegus* L. Resident and very common. Numerous as far west as the shores of Clew Bay where at Oldhead there is an enormous rookery. In other districts breeds as far west as trees extend. Not recorded as breeding on Achill by Ussher, but is said to have bred there during the present century. One pair nested Dugort 1906 (J. Walpole-Bard *in litt.*). Not found by Fitter in 1939 in Achill and in March 1944 I found none there. I have failed to find it in the Mullet in summer though a pair nested there in 1933 (Mrs Bingham *in litt.*). A flock of 36 was seen by Mrs Bingham during the great drought of July 1921 and were considered unusual. I noticed three on Clare Island on April 25th 1945 but they did not breed there. In severe winters there is a great increase in coastal districts.

Jackdaw. *Corvus monedula spermologus*. V.

Resident and very common, even on the seaboard where they nest in ruined buildings such as coast-guard stations. Plentiful even on the Mullet. Breeds Achill Island and a very few nest on Gorumna Island, Co. Galway, being noticeable there in winter.

Magpie. *Pica pica pica* L. Resident and ever increasing. Plentiful throughout Connemara; not uncommon around Belmullet; a few breed on the Mullet and on Achill Island. Even in the desolate expanse of the bog of Erris it inhabits and nests in any valley where there are a few stunted bushes. In such places my brother has found the nest, in dwarf willow bushes, five feet above the boggy ground. The magpie has recently returned to the Aran Islands from which it had been absent for thirty or forty years (Dr J. O'Brien *in litt.* 1943). In 1945 I found a pair breeding at Kilmurvey, Inishmore. Visits Inishere occasionally but does not breed. Formerly bred Inishmaan now absent.

To be continued in a following issue. NS