



BIRDWATCH GALWAY BRANCH

For all details and to go on the notice lists of the Galway Branch, please contact chairman Colin Heaslip at csheaslip@gmail.com.

WHOSE BIRD - KUMLIEN

Kumlien's (Iceland) Gull *Larus glaucoides kumlieni* (Brewster, 1883).

Thure Ludwig Theodor Kumlien (1819-1888) was a Swedish naturalist who later settled in America. He lived in Wisconsin and collected specimens and bird eggs on his own land. He also acted as a collecting agent for various European museums, including the Natural History Museum in Stockholm. In 1867, he became Professor of Natural Science at Albion College and in 1883 Curator of the Milwaukee Public Museum in Wisconsin. He co-wrote *The History of American Birds*. His son Ludwig (1883-1902) also collaborated with N. Hollister and with him wrote 'The Birds of Wisconsin' which was published in 1903 in the *Bulletin of the Wisconsin Natural Society*.

Ludwig Kumlien joined the Howgates Arctic Expedition from 1777 to 1778 as a zoologist, and between 1879 and 1891 he worked for the United States Government and contributed to *North American Food Fishes*. From 1891 until his death, Ludwig Kumlien was professor of Natural Science and Physics at Milton College.

This sub-species of the Iceland Gull is a strong candidate for species status.

From: *Whose Bird* – Bo Beolens & Michael Watkins (Helm, 2003).

NS

BUCKET LIST (Mai Po Marshes)

Hi Neil,

Hope you are well. Here is another 'China' snippet for the *Galway Newsletter*.

Over the recent Chinese New Year Holiday (February 5th, Year of the Pig) I managed to cross the border from mainland China (Shenzhen) into the Hong Kong New Territories. There I visited the WWF Reserve on Mai Po Marshes. I can honestly say it was a bucket list experience for me, although I was only armed with a micky-mouse mobile phone (camera) and an even worse pair of binoculars.

Mai Po is a Ramsar site managed by the WWF and entry seems to be highly restricted. Outsiders can normally only enter in small guided group tours, so I felt honoured to be allowed to wander around by myself, thanks to my fellowship with the RSPB.

It was blissfully peaceful after the hustle and bustle of Shenzhen during Chinese Spring Festival. I spent five hours wandering around the lagoons, mudflats, reedbeds and mangroves, alone all of the time except towards the end when I found seven of bird-watchers in one of the hides close to the entrance.

Chinese birdwatchers are serious twitchers. They carry cameras with large telescopic lenses under one arm, and with the other hand they haul a wheeled suitcase full of equipment. When I was leaving and handing back my entry permits and WWF tag, the girl asked had I seen anything special; my response was "it was all special to me".

There were lots of Avocets and I was delighted to see them. They brought back memories of my first volunteering experience with the RSPB on Havergate

Island. I remember the hard and lumpy pillows and mattress, the door of the wooden cabin swinging open when the wind blew, and being woken by the hares walking on the shingle. One of my duties was to turn the soil on the islands in the lagoons; apparently, Avocets like turned soil when it comes to selecting nest sites. The memories made me ponder my strange affiliation with birds, almost like being reunited with family, and ask myself where I get my unusual sense of direction from.

Perhaps one of the main birds at Mai Po is the Black-faced Spoonbill, an endangered species. It was curious to see them on one bank of a large lagoon, while the opposite bank was occupied by Great and Little Egrets. Why do some birds segregate like this? The ducks, on the other hand, did not seem to mind mingling. Shovelers and Wigeon, just like at home, flocked together, although the Tufties were in deeper water. I still find it amusing to travel so far and see so many species that also frequent Ireland.

The mud flats showed similar grouping, one bank above the water was black with cormorants, another brown with waders, yet another white with gulls. The groups were all too far away from me to identify with my binoculars but Greenshank and Redshank were present. The best part about the mudflats was that they were literally crawling with mudskippers with their bulging eyes and dorsal fins like Chinese junks. Although there is concern about pollution in Shenzhen Bay, the mudskipper population, a flagship species, would suggest that it is doing okay. I also enjoyed the red-coloured Fiddler Crabs, with their one over-sized claw, always scuttling down burrows in the mud with each step I took.

Another delight was to be swarmed by False Tiger Moths as I walked through the mangroves. They look like butterflies, but seem to prefer resting on the underside of leaves instead of on the upper sunny side. It reminded me of scenes in movies from India and Africa.

Ma Po also has Bitterns. Not far into the reserve, I had heard an unusual call which made me wonder if it might be a Bittern. Back at the apartment, I YouTube'd videos of Bitterns booming, but this did not help. Perhaps it was just frogs, but it would have had to be very large frogs. I'm awaiting a response to my query from the reserve manager who approved my visit. Back home, I had spent a fortnight on Leighton Moss Reserve, also noted for Bitterns, but never saw or heard one.

At Mai Po, I saw two Chinese workers spraying the reedbeds. I always worry when I see local people spraying, but I assume the managers know what they are doing. On Leighton Moss, my daily job was also strimming the reedbeds; to control sedimentation and curtail plant succession. There, the only hazard was walking into a deer rut and going waist deep in water and your waders flooding ... followed by a head cold. Here in China I would not fancy the job. Although the only snake to cross my path was a Rat Snake, Mai Po is also reported to have Kraits and Cobras (but maybe that information is circulated as part of the protection strategy).

Mai Po made me recall the Iron Curtain and how the demilitarised zone acted as a wildlife haven. Today, although Hong Kong and the New Territories have been returned to mainland China, the border fencing, high and topped with layers of razor wire,

still exists. This "Frontier Closed Area" has, no doubt, acted to the benefit of local wildlife. I may only have seen 10% of what it had to offer a starving soul, but to see entire trees and hedgerows covered in white, like an Irish hoarfrost, was enough to satiate my spirit.

Regards and Happy New Year,
Frank Murphy

Note – Frank later advised that the 'Bittern' was in fact a Greater Coucal.

NS

TWEET OF THE DAY – GOLDCREST

Goldcrests can be tantalizing birds, at times merely a whisper of sound from deep within blankets of hedges or conifer needles, but sometimes appearing so close that you don't even need binoculars. Its high-pitched call and pulsing ventriloquial song make the tiny goldcrest hard, or sometimes downright impossible, to detect and its size doesn't help. Goldcrests are by a whisker our smallest bird, roughly nine centimetres long and weighing just five grams – the same as an A4 sheet of paper.

These scraps of feathers are fidgety midgets, constantly on the move, as they inspect leaves and twigs for invertebrates. If two Goldcrests meet, you might see them raise their fiery crown-feathers in courting display or threat – an unexpected flash of colour on a bird that is mainly olive green. The crests of males have an orange centre while those of females have yellow ones.

Goldcrests build their nests out of spider webs, moss and feathers among the leaves of conifers – from huge plantations to single trees in suburban gardens – often weaving the structure to the very end of a branch to keep the eggs and chicks as safe as possible. Throughout the spring and summer, males sing their rhythmic song in such a high pitch that many of us find it harder to hear as we get older.

In October and November, their sharp needling calls can be heard anywhere, including gardens, woods and even coastal sand dunes. This is because at this time of year large numbers of Goldcrests pour into Ireland from continental Europe, especially Scandinavia. The journey they make across the North Sea was once considered impossible for such tiny birds. Because they arrived around the same times as wintering Woodcocks, some people believed that they travelled on the waders' backs and so the tiny Goldcrest became known as the 'Woodcock pilot'.

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

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THE OTHER TWEET OF THE DAY

Brett and Stephen's book takes its inspiration from the original 'Tweet' being broadcast on BBC Radio 4 at 5.58am every morning at the start of their day. It's a short but always fascinating account of a particular species by well-know ornithologists or the like. For those who quail the thought of being up at that early hour it can be heard also via the BBC R4 web site.

NS



A LIST OF THE BIRDS IN THE COUNTIES GALWAY AND MAYO

This is to continue my setting down aspects of the late Major Ruttledge's 1950s listing of Galway and Mayo birds. Can I say again that it is not done to provide records, data or information – I leave that to those more knowledgeable such as Aonghus O Dónail, Chris Peppiatt, Dermot Breen and Joe Hobbs – but more to provide readers with a flavour of past birdwatching and recording: so different to what we are used to nowadays. It reflects another era when sightings were recorded and exchanged almost entirely by letters or postcards and when the background of observers was so much different.

The order of birds used by Ruttledge predates that which we are familiar with. Present-day listings are mainly based on the evolution of birds, starting with species perceived to be at the lower end of evolution and moving upwards to the most advanced species in evolutionary terms. Those with a long involvement in birds and with older guides will be most familiar with the sequence originated by and named after Dutch ornithologist Karl Vous, which starts with divers and ends with passerines, buntings. However, about ten years ago this was changed quite a bit – I'm not sure of the reasons or by whom. Perhaps someone of a more scientific bent could do a newsletter article on the whole subject. There are indeed many listing options as far as I know.

The listing sequence used by Major Ruttledge is an older one which starts with corvids and ends with waterbirds. I have no idea what the reasoning behind this was. The same listing is used in the first bird book I had in the 1940s – *The Observer Book of British Birds*. As an aside and digression, this book had only every second page of the birds in colour, one bird in colour the next in black and white; the reason, I believe, was printing restrictions during or just after WW II. As a result, in those days I could recognise some birds better than others depending on the *Observer* illustration option!

When I finally get to Ruttledge's listings of birds in Galway and Mayo, bear in mind that, because of the author's Co. Mayo abode, there is something of a record bias towards that county.

NS

BIRD RACING IN GALWAY AND AFAR

Tell someone you are taking part in a bird race and you will no doubt be met with a series of questions trying to figure out whether you will be competing against your opponents while on the back of an Ostrich or perhaps releasing a duck and a chicken out of the traps at the same time to find out which is faster (... it's the chicken). In this case, bird racing refers to teams of birders (usually 3 or 4 people per car) pitted against each other to try and see as many species as possible within a defined area and within a certain timeframe. In the USA, these are often referred to as 'Big Days' and take place over a 24-hour period at a state level. A fantastic chapter is dedicated to this in Ken Kaufman's book *Kingbird Highway* (a must read). The European day-list record was set on 6th May 2017 when a bird race team recorded no less than 230 species in Catalonia. A week prior to this, another team set a 'green' day list record with 176 species recorded in the same region by traveling on foot alone!

The Irish take on bird racing usually involves events held in January, a perfect excuse to start your year list with a bang. The short winter days mean that our bird races tend to last 10 hours or so. County-level events are held annually in Dublin and Wicklow, while larger counties, such as Cork, break theirs up into more manageable units. The longest running bird race in Ireland (30+ years) is held at Great Island in Cork Harbour and the more recently established West Cork Bird Race runs from Clonakilty to Rosscarbery and out to Galley Head. A score of 100+ species is expected to put you in with a shout of winning, with the highest total recorded by a single team being 110 on a Dublin Bird Race and the highest overall day total of 120 species recorded by all teams taking part.

What purpose does bird racing serve? Pure craic as a social event but also a good test of your knowledge of the county birds and where best to find them. Logistics is everything and in planning your bird race day you'll begin to ask yourself the following: Where is best at dawn when songbirds are most active? Where is best in the evening for roosting geese, raptors or maybe an owl? How will tide times work out at various sites? Are there any rare or scarce species around that might bump up the tallies? What petrol station on our route does the best coffee?!

Making sure you get most (or all!) of the expected common species is the key to success on a bird race day but there will always be a bird that doesn't play ball on the day. Greenfinch may elude you, or that nice looking patch of woodland just didn't produce a Treecreeper and where is the Dipper that was sat on that exact rock in this stream only yesterday? Adding rare or scarce species to your list will take you the extra mile so it's always worth being aware of what is around at the time (via bird news websites) and keeping an open mind about what could show up.

A series of spring season bird races have been held in Galway at various intervals over the past 25 years or so, the totals for which were supplied by Neil Sharkey and presented here as follows:

20th May 1995: 92 species recorded by one team of four observers.

27th April 2003: 87 species by one team of three observers.

8th April 2006: 114 species recorded by four teams totalling ten observers.

1st April 2007: 97 species recorded by two teams totalling five observers.

8th April 2008: 76 species recorded by two teams (a part-day bird race only due to very bad weather).

Across these five race dates, a total of 130 species was recorded, including all the expected common species for the time of year plus rarities like American Herring Gull and scarce species such as Black-throated Diver, Velvet Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Curlew Sandpiper, Arctic Skua, Ring-billed Gull, Glaucous Gull and Iceland Gull. Effort was also made to record species that are more difficult to see due to their limited distribution or special habitat requirements like Red Grouse, Woodcock, Stock Dove, Long-eared Owl and Crossbill. Even Nightjar was recorded during the 1995 race, a bird that is now seemingly on the brink of extinction as a breeding species in Ireland!

Bird races that were held in the first half of April recorded a greater variety of lingering winter birds such as Whooper Swan, Greenland White-fronted Goose and Scaup while those held towards the end of April and May stood a better chance of connecting with summer migrants that tend to arrive a little later such as Swift and Whitethroat. Perhaps, a mid-April bird race in future might provide the best potential for maximising the county day list.

More recent bird race style efforts in the county have taken place as part of eBird Global Big Day, a synchronised worldwide effort to get as many people as possible out recording birds during a 24-hour period. In 2018 this took place on the 5th May, with over 30,500 participants logging 79,000 checklists resulting in 7,026 species of bird recorded in a single day! An amazing feat of citizen science.

Six dedicated birders took part in eBird Global Big Day around Galway, adding 27 checklists with a total of 73 species recorded (out of 134 seen in Ireland that day). Jeff Harding (who was visiting Ireland from Oregon) spent the morning on Inishbofin adding Lapwing, Common Sandpiper, Wheatear and Fulmar to the county tallies plus Great Skua, Gannet and Guillemot on the ferry journey back to Cleggan. The monthly BirdWatch Ireland Galway Branch outing at Nimmo's Pier and out to Mutton Island causeway was also held that morning – Sean Walsh submitted checklists which included some late-staying Light-bellied Brent Geese, a trio of terns (Common, Arctic and Sandwich), Great Northern Diver, a suite of waders and some Manx Shearwaters out in the bay. Ian O'Connor and Andrew Power travelled to various sites further afield, adding Greylag Goose and Tufted Duck at Curraghmore, Lough Corrib, and an Iceland Gull at Oranmore. A flock of eleven Whimbrel at Loughrea was a nice addition there by Sibeal Regan. Swallow, House Martin and Sand Martin completed the set of hirundines while plenty of singing Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs, Sedge Warblers and Blackcaps ensured that most of the expected summer migrants were accounted for.

Previous county bird races in spring have shown that with a few more observers and some targeting of tricky species, day list totals into the 90s and even over 100 are possible. With that in mind, I would like to invite Galway birders to take part in the upcoming **2019 eBird Global Big Day** event which will take place on Saturday 4th May. Perhaps this could be used as a date for another Galway County Spring Bird Race, adding more effort and sightings to the worldwide event taking place that day.

For those interested in getting involved but who don't have the time to chase birds around the county all day, fear not: all effort is welcome. No matter if it is a random sighting of a Buzzard or Kestrel while driving down the motorway or a ten-minute count of birds in your garden, all records will be gratefully received. For more information on how to take part, see

<https://ebird.org/news/global-big-day-4-may-2019>
or get in touch with me by e-mail niallkeogh@hotmail.com.

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