



GALWAY BRANCH BIRDWATCH IRELAND

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NIGHTHAWK AND MORE

October 9, morning. The Common Nighthawk twitch was on. Criú: myself, 'Myrtle' (Aonghus) O Donnell skippering, and 'Cans' (Niall) Keogh. The five-hour drive to Ballymena, Co. Antrim, soon passed with the usual variety show of funny birding stories, other birding stories, funny non-birding stories, and then, just at the precise moment when the material has dried up so badly that you have to resort to guessing each other's favourite shape of dried pasta, Niall said: "I just saw it" as we drove past. Aonghus parked up and minutes later we were standing on the grass verge of a busy road staring at a Common Nighthawk perched out in the open on a thin branch about 3 metres up and not much further away than that. We retreated and scoped it from the other side of the road.

For the next five hours, the Nighthawk snoozed on the branch, orientated about 5 o'clock tail to 11 o'clock head, affording as detailed a study of the feather tracts as you could wish for, upperparts cryptic as a moth. The long, well-spaced primaries were of a darkish brown of a female Blackbird; the tertials and greater coverts also; the scapulars and crown emphatically darker brown still. A thin collar around the neck sides was of pale silver, as were flecks to the ear coverts, these pale markings becoming progressively more elaborate through the greater coverts onto the tertials, until reminiscent of the logograms of oriental languages. The silver turned bolder, blotchier, on the darker brown scapulars, creating more of a vivid contrast. The underparts were of thin cuckoo-like alternate, even bars of brown and pale silver. The eye, occasionally opened, was ringed pale that hinted more at gold than silver.

Late afternoon, we took up position along the bank of the River Maine and looked back across the river at the bird which was now facing us. Paidí Cullinan arrived, not before time, as the Nighthawk launched itself airborne about 17:45 and shot up the river a long way, perhaps a kilometre and a half. Was that all we'd get? Thankfully, it returned, roaming and careering around at a surprising pace and variation in height for ten minutes, before settling into a pattern of flying upstream to a weir area and returning downstream again, passing low over the water just feet away to the delight of the score of birders spread along the bank. The flight mode now seemed different, the wingbeats more 'mechanical toy', or butterfly-like, really powered downwards for lift, maybe allowing slower speed? Darkness came quickly, such that you saw less of the bird with each passing minute, views now almost only of the large white patches across the base of the upper primaries. It became a sort of man-versus-bird challenge: how dark could it get before we simply couldn't see it as it flew past. I realised I was grinning broadly. This was the best of all games!

Fifteen or so years earlier, I had spent the week at Yuturi Lodge, five hours by motorised canoe east of the dubiously-named jungle town of Coca, on the Ecuadorian stretch of the Rio Napo. Visits to such places are inherently prone to be considered as lists of successes and failures, as one knows which birds are theoretically 'available', but you cannot see them all in a week and the stay inevitably culminates in a sort of sadistic gameshow: "Let's see what you could have won".

Within the order Caprimulgiformes, which includes Nightjars and Nighthawks, the Potoos have a huge mouth, a sort of cross between a Nightjar's and a Basking Shark's. A Rufous Potoo had been roosting on a particular tree stump that our indigenous guide Jaime (HIGH-MAY) could have walked us straight to, but it must have heard we were coming as it chose that week to roost somewhere else. I'd guess the number of birders that have ever seen one might only be in single figures.

The first blow had been landed even on the three-hour forest trek to get to the camp. I had noticed a pile of neatly stacked timbers to the left of the trail; I thought I'd better not mention it to my dad. On arrival though, I enquired about the timber pile, in Spanish, to the head of the camp, knowing what the answer was going to be: "Se cayó"; he being from where they deliver a performance that includes: "it fell down" and "it" being the well-advertised tower which we had planned to climb to enable us to see over the canopy of the surrounding rainforest, where the spectacular Crested Eagle could sometimes be seen. Well, at least it wasn't going to fall down while we were up it. "What's up?", my dad wondered. "Er, well, you know that canopy tower ...".

Triumph came in the shape of a Black-necked Red-Cotinga, my dad's most wanted bird, on about day 6, cutting it fine. My dad couldn't see it stationary in the sub-canopy (his stress levels were way off-the-scale) but Jaime macheted a sapling, pointed it towards the bird and dragged my dad alongside him to look down the length of sapling. "Got it!"

Another time, Jaime sat us down in the forest right next to a raiding party of millions of army ants. Mental! We waited for the attendant ant birds to appear. To excited whispering, a Reddish-winged Bare-Eye arrived, its presence given away by its scolding churrs, the gaudy male black, fringed white, with a slab of bright red of a bare ocular 'ring'.

On the final day, after canoeing back to camp, I slumped onto the river bank where I spent 15 minutes failing to get my wellies off. The humidity had devoured my last drop of energy. A pulsating woofing from the forest was either a Spectacled Owl or a hidden Rolf Harris on a wobbleboard. Then a Sand-coloured Nighthawk appeared, flying along the river, then another, then dozens, hundreds. I counted about 400 in all.

Never did get those wellies off.

Sean McCann

MISTLE THRUSH

As a howling gale sweeps across the open countryside, it's hard to imagine that any bird would choose to sing when it could be hunkering down, taking shelter from the wind. But one species is still belting out its wild, skirling song, defying the worst of the

weather. It is the Mistle Thrush, also known, appropriately, as the 'Stormcock'.

Mistle Thrushes are one of the earliest birds to begin singing in the New Year, long before the spring has even hinted at its arrival. They perch on the top of the tallest tree they can find, from where they deliver a performance that includes the rich fruity tones of the Blackbird, mixed with repeated phrases more reminiscent of the smaller Song Thrush.

There's a lot of confusion regarding our two resident thrushes but the Mistle Thrush is easy to pick out by its much larger size and paler plumage, more greyish than the warmer brown tones of the Song Thrush. Its flight appears rather laboured, as it progresses with a series of short flaps followed by a slight dip on closed wings, giving the bird a bouncing motion. You'll often hear them call as they fly, with a loud rattle – rather like a comb being scraped across a piece of wood or an old-fashioned football rattle. If you can see the white tips of its outer tail-feathers, that should clinch the identification.

For most of the year Mistle Thrushes are solitary or in pairs, but from mid-summer into early autumn bands of them roam the countryside, feeding on open pastures, moors or playing fields. These are family groups, which have joined up with one another after breeding, but will separate before winter arrives. In autumn, Mistle Thrushes live up to their name by jealously standing guard over clumps of mistletoe or other berried vegetation. The males we hear singing hold large territories with tall trees where they nest and areas of open parkland or grassland where they can search for worms and other invertebrates. They usually build their beautifully woven nest in the fork of a tree, but they will sometimes choose stranger places.

Tweet of the Day, Brett Westwood & Stephen Moss
Permission kindly granted. **NS**

BIRDS IN POETRY

Passage of years has greatly cut back my birdwatching but each year I still compile an annual 'Ireland list' which usually gets me something over 100 species. Not all that impressive, as any keen birdwatcher would say, but it keeps up an interest. The same keen birdwatchers would tell you that it's easy to get the first 80 or 90 species and after that it grows at a much slower pace as the least common birds prove elusive. Every year, one of my hard-to-get species is a local Kingfisher, usually to be seen, with patience and persistence, at one of the bridges on the Black River that flows into Lough Corrib at Inchiquin, NW of Headford. Last year, it eluded me right through into August. Then, when out cycling with grandchild Louis, over from England, I finally ticked it. It must have struck a chord with Louis as just recently he recorded it in poetry and sent the following on to me.

NS

At Sliabh Rua (Counting a Kingfisher)

Act one at the first Bridge

[The Bicycled Watchers cycle enbicycled, and then stop and then watch, bicycles beside themselves.]



We'll stop here (for a moment)
There's a kingfisher here, very rarely.
This spot is no good to him who needs branches
He passes along regardless, rarely.
You could stand all day; I'd need to be lucky to see him,
You'd need to be lucky to see him.
he's keener eyes than us now.

This, the Black River,
coursing red, coursing mountain.

Between the acts: small dogs warn, ward, onwards, away

Then it's: Act two, at the second bridge

[The Bicycled Watchers cycle enbicycled, and then stop
and then watch, bicycles beside themselves

and

from foliage multifoliate, blue bird multiplumate – plumage
in multitudes, blue blue feathers.]

There

Why does he stay above the water, not land?
Nature, a water bird.

Blue along, blew along, emerging jot
Blue bird on THE black river IN a red place,
Colour in shade in colour – it is that it's like
(painting).

It's August; august blue bird in August,
Blue bird in our bird-brains, blue orb bright in the black
mind-dark like Earth,
Blue orb in space, full-fluid and motion and flapping and
flying through and over, in and on:
Eternal nested line.

After (at Inish Ui Cuinn)

Here before?
There are many Sandmartins here,

See low on the water.

Sandmartins, distant cousin of the Swallow.

Louis Allen

MY SPECIAL COLLARED DOVES

In the Newsletter issue 89, 2015, I wrote about a pair of Collared Doves I'd habituated in early 2014. One was snatched by a Sparrow Hawk that autumn, the other disappeared for about two weeks, then returned – end of the piece.

After a while coming for seed on its own, it brought a new partner. The new one was very nervous initially, but 'came around'. The following spring, I managed to sex the pair – I saw them mating on my balcony railing. The newcomer was the male. They had distinctive behaviours – he would come close, pick about six or seven seeds, then turn, walk a bit away and do two tight clockwise circles, return and do the same again and again; she would come close and stay, picking all the time. I named him The Twirler, her My Girl!

They nested in ivy on the back wall of my garden. Magpies, nesting in a tree 20 meters away, put an end to that – I saw it happen. They tried again in the ivy, lost that – I suspect the magpies. Shortly afterwards they nested in a Cordyline closer to the

house, hatched at least one, possibly two chicks but Hooded Crows got the chick(s) when close to fledging – I saw that happen.

The pair still came looking for food. I'd open a curtain in the morning, within seconds they'd be close by looking at me. If I was pottering about in the garden, they'd be on a branch or fence close by, watching, sometimes on the ground walking after me! I'd sit somewhere, put seed on the ground near my feet and they would come down immediately.

The next couple of years were somewhat similar – nesting, losing some, fledging one or two chicks, me feeding them more or less 'on request'. They had me well trained.

In 2016, I noticed them carrying twigs towards the back of my next-door neighbour's house. It took a while to discover where they were going. (You can't go to the end of your garden and train binoculars on your neighbour's house!) Eventually, I saw they were nesting on a security light over the back door, under A-shaped eaves. Jackdaws raided that – I saw that. They then tried a fork in a small tree at the end of the neighbour's garden. To me it was very open, buds were barely opening. They lost that. Next, they nested in a 'gone mad' laurel shrub in my garden.

One day, at my front garden gate – about 60 meters away – talking to a neighbour, he said: "What's that?", pointing at the ground. It was a clean, white, half eggshell; I said: "Collared Dove size". One hatched! Next day, I saw a dove leaving the nest site with something white in its beak. I tracked it, it dropped it near my front gate – another half shell – two hatched. Both were fledged and brought to me for food – a fantastic feeling.

One day, and the next few, The Twirler arrived on his own – this set me to wonder! My Lady arrived, on her own, plumage very untidy. I put down seed, she picked rapidly; after about 20 picks she shook her head and the seed went everywhere. She repeated this a couple of more times. I put a dish of water in front of her – same reaction. She was very sick. I thought: "old age" as I'd 'known' her for six years. The next day I looked around my front door and, eventually saw her huddled on the ground next to some ornamental stones close by the door. I thought I'd put her in a fork in a nearby tree. I gently picked her up, she screeched – I can only describe it as 'in agony'. I put her down in her spot and left. I checked on her every 10 minutes or so for over half an hour. The last time I checked, there was a fly walking on her beak. My Girl was dead, 22 November, 2016.

I dug a deep hole in a flowerbed in the back garden, buried her, put a concrete block on top, to make it difficult for anything to dig her up; nothing did. Shed a couple of tears. Normally, I'd put dead birds in the compost bin, but I couldn't do it this time – she was special.

In a later issue of *Wings* there was an article on the collapse of greenfinch numbers. It explained Trichomonosis symptoms in detail and its usual hosts. My bird was a classic example.

At the time of typing, March 2020, The Twirler still comes around and so do, I suspect, some of their offspring with mates, looking for food. I feed them, but it's not the same.

Brendan Dunne

BIRDS IN COUNTIES GALWAY AND MAYO

Major R.F. Ruttledge. Pub. c. 1949

Continued

Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* (L.)

Resident. Breeds on precipitous marine islands in both counties. Considerable decrease early in the century but since about 1930 has increased again and is now not uncommon on the coast. There are no suitable mainland cliffs on the Galway coasts but it breeds plentifully on Inishmore, Inishbofin and Inishark. I found one pair on High Island in 1943. A few breed on Inishmaan. On Inishbofin it has recently increased considerably between 1932 and 1943. There is evidence that it nested in the Maamturk Mountains, in two places as late as 1940. A Chough was seen in the Maam Valley in autumn about 1939. In County Mayo its chief strongholds are Clare Island, Inishturk and, since 1932, Achill Island. It seems absent from the cliffs of north and north-west Mayo. In 1923 and 1924, a pair nested at Bingham Castle on the Mullet but were driven out by Hooded Crows. Since then, it has been found on a ruin elsewhere in the locality. Towards the end of the breeding season flocks may be seen; these increase in July when twenty to twenty-five together is not unusual. In July I have counted flocks number 52 and 72, on islands off Galway and Mayo respectively.

Starling. *Sturnus vulgaris vulgaris* (L.) Resident.

Abundant as a breeding species in the eastern portions of both counties. In comparison it becomes scarce west of the Connaught lakes. A few breed in Connemara although this evidently was not so in Ussher's time (*Birds of Ireland*, Ussher and Warren, p. 79), in which district one does not see many until July. Large flocks occur in such desolate places as Carna, Letter Mullen and as far west as Slyne Head; the numbers there in no way compare with the hordes that frequent Belmullet, in Co. Mayo, from mid-July. Breeds on the Mullet. Considered uncommon in summer west of Old Head (W.A. Wallace) but a very few breed in Louisburgh. I have not found it on the marine islands off Mayo in summer, though it occurs in winter, especially on Clare Island from November to March but does not breed (P. McMahon). Proof of breeding on Achill is lacking, though a few were said to have done so formerly (*Clare Island Survey, Aves*, p.19); not resident on Inishbofin (though Ussher found it breeding on cliffs there in 1911) nor Inishark. I have seen many on the Aran Islands in June where it is probably breeding, having being recorded as doing so before 1890. Immense flocks occur in winter. Roosts preferably in reedbeds, even in well wooded districts. I found that those frequenting Achill Island in winter roost in caves and cliffs on Inishgalloon.

Rose-coloured Starling. *Pastor roseus* (L.)

One was shot near Foxford on November 5th 1899 (*Birds of Ireland*, Ussher and Warren, p. 407). One seen on the Mullet July 30th 1908 (*Field*, Jan 8th 1910). One seen also in Belmullet June 1937 (*Irish Nat. Jour.*, Vol VII, p. 187). One was shot in August 1837 on the Aran Islands. One, evidently an adult, was seen at Kilonan August 10th 1937 (*Br. Birds* Vol. XXXI, p. 149).