



CAIRDE EANLAITH NA GAILLIMHE BIRDWATCH GALWAY

www.birdwatchgalway.org
QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY
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This is a local forum newsletter –
contributions and comments are
most welcome.
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BRANCH MATTERS

Occasionally, in *Branch Matters*, I refer to the BirdWatch Ireland Headquarters and the staff working there. And, to be honest, the picture in my mind then tends to be of the office in Kilcoole, County Wicklow. And when you look for a BirdWatch address in *Wings* that is the only address given. Therefore, we tend to forget that there is another, equally vibrant BirdWatch office in Banagher, County Offaly. Redressing the balance the staff in Banagher organised a very successful open day in June to celebrate the wildlife of the Shannon callows. An open house for the people of Banagher has been an annual event for quite a while but the invitation to this open day was extended to all members of BirdWatch Ireland and the general public, young and old. In the morning there were activities for the younger visitors, in the afternoon and evening there were activities appealing to all.

Sixteen Galway members travelled to Banagher and enjoyed the hospitality and expertise of the Banagher staff. There were displays of the various research projects run from the Banagher office and a shop with educational and garden goodies. Most of the afternoon was taken up with a field trip to the callows where mid-lands expert ecologist and BirdWatch Galway member Stephen Heery took us on a botanical tour of the meadows where BirdWatch tries to attract breeding waders. It was extremely informative to be shown the close link between the vegetation and its management and the birds which avail of it. Apart from the regular scrub- and field birds we saw large numbers of Swifts overhead and pairs of Reed Buntings and Whinchats. Unfortunately, the rough terrain was not suitable for those less able to walk through the high vegetation -something BirdWatch will have to keep in mind when inviting people onto their properties.

The two very interesting talks in the evening, one on BirdWatch conservation policies and projects in general by Head of Conservation Dr. Alan Lauder and one on Corncrakes and other waders by Dr. Anita Donaghy, were very well attended by local people and visitors from further afield. The late visit to the callows did not yield the hoped-for sound of corncrakes. They are very few and far between this summer.

From a Galway Branch point of view, it was nice to see some new faces on the bus and also some other members joining us in Banagher. Trips like this offer a great opportunity to get to know fellow Branch members and learn from each other so I hope that everybody feels free to join us on future trips.

Marianne ten Cate

GALWAY STOAT SURVEY

A search for stoats is underway in County Galway this summer. Thanks to funding from the Heritage Council, the Vincent Wildlife Trust is running a pilot

study using hair tubes placed along hedgerows to see if stoats will be detected. Hair tubes are a remote sampling technique that can detect mammals by attracting them to an open cylinder containing bait fixed within. Fur from mammals that enter the tube is collected on sticky areas inside and the hair is then analysed in a laboratory to determine the species. So far the appeal for volunteers to help with this work has been excellent, particularly from BirdWatch Ireland members. Since June, 200 tubes have been deployed throughout the county and it is hoped that 300 more will be placed out before the end of the project in October. To date 33 hair samples have been analysed by Waterford Institute of Technology and of these, five are definitely those of the Irish stoat. The Irish stoat (*Mustela erminea hibernica*) is an endemic sub-species, occurring only in Ireland and on the Isle of Man. Although many people in Ireland call this small, highly successful predator a weasel, there are no weasels in Ireland. For such a small animal rarely seen by humans, there is a wealth of folklore surrounding it, much of which is richly described in James Fairley's *An Irish Beast Book*. Anyone wishing to take part in this study can contact Kate Mc Aney at katemcanev@vwt.org.uk or on 086 8308849. All materials are supplied, as well as an training DVD. Even if you cannot take part in the actual fieldwork, please report any visual sightings or past records of stoats in the county.

Kate McAney

FINAL YEAR

Believe it or not we are entering in to the final year of the Bird Atlas. However it is not too late to get involved. Roving records will be particularly important this year and there is a special plea to record Yellowhammer sightings. For further information go to www.birdatlas.net or contact Brian Caffrey at bcaffrey@birdwatchireland.ie

SLYNE HEAD – A HIDDEN GEM

Slyne "Head" which lies three kilometres off the Galway coastline is actually an archipelago and not a headland in the technical sense. I had the good fortune of visiting these special islands on three occasions during this summer undertaking tern surveys. Access to the islands can be difficult due their remoteness, regular rough weather and treacherous sounds between the groups of small rocky islets. Oileán Imill the westernmost island is unusual in the fact that it has two lighthouses and these can be seen from far and wide from most spots along the West coast of Galway. They give a good indication of how far out West it is. The main lighthouse has been automated and unmanned since 1990.

Oileán Imill has been the site of a large Arctic Tern colony in the recent past. 324 pairs were recorded here during the last All Ireland Tern Survey in 1995. During our time out there we only

encountered 34 pairs. Worryingly we didn't manage to locate the missing birds anywhere along the South Connemara coastline during our survey. On our last visit there we came across a Peregrine, a few Great Black-backed Gull nests with tern eggs scattered around the immediate area and even an old Snowy Owl pellet. The last species has a special history with the island. Four birds including adults and juveniles were all seen/caught/obtained here during the summer of 1946. This would strongly suggest that a pair bred in the immediate area during that summer.

The Slyne Head archipelago is currently the only location in the county where Eider breeds. At least two nesting females were found this year and up to 18 birds were seen around the islands. Other seabirds found breeding on the islands included 20+ pairs of Fulmars, 20 pairs of Shags, 30+ pairs of Common Gulls and many Herring, Lesser & Great Black-backed Gulls.

Slyne Head is the location of a first for Ireland in the form of a Sora Rail on 11th April 1920 unfortunately picked up dead beneath the lighthouse. This fate must surely have befallen many migrants in the lighthouses' 174-year-old history and I dread to think what must have occurred here down during the years. On one visit during the Spring there was a rather lost looking Willow Warbler hopping around rock pools. As there is a complete lack of bushes on the islands, migrants have nowhere to hide and probably quickly fly onto the mainland in search of food and cover. Species as diverse as Leach's Petrel, Bittern, Jack Snipe, Grey Phalarope, Little Gull and Red-breasted Flycatcher have all been found under the lighthouse in the past. The south lighthouse has been out of commission since 1898 but today contains a nesting pair of Ravens which must rely the numerous breeding seabirds and grounded migrants here during the Spring for food.

Due to its location it has been proven to be a productive site for seawatching in Spring and Autumn. Large numbers of skuas on spring passage have been recorded here in the past. During the springs of 1979 to 1981 a total of 899 Pomarine Skuas and 39 Long-tailed Skuas were seen. Two weeks of seawatching were also carried out here in the autumn of 1969. Huge numbers of shearwaters were recorded passing e.g. 10 Cory's, 233 Greats, 1856 unidentified large, 385 Sooty, 14523 Manx etc. On one of my visits to islands with local boatman Martin O'Malley there were at least 2000 Manx Shearwaters feeding in the waters just off Oileán Imill. It was an amazing experience moving through the water where birds seemed to be everywhere flying and diving left, right and centre.

There is every possibility that Slyne Head could hold its own against the likes of the Birdges of Ross, Kilcummin and Annagh Head. I look forward to visiting Slyne Head during the Autumn, fingers crossed and hopefully this location will provide



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some very interesting seabird records for the county in the coming years. **Dermot Breen**

INISHBOFIN

Anthony McGeehan is hosting a 4-day trip for migrants on Inishbofin around October 6th, in conjunction with the Dolphin Hotel. You may be interested, or know someone who would be. Hopefully he gets the weather for it, in which case he's bound to turn up something interesting – he always does. Further info from the Dolphin.

**MERLIN USING HEN HARRIERS TO FLUSH
PREY AT A WINTER ROOST**

During the winter of 2006 while counting Hen Harriers at a communal winter roost in Co. Galway I observed Merlin using Hen Harriers to flush prey. This behaviour was first observed on 19th November 2006. Within twenty minutes of arriving at the roost site a total of six Hen Harriers - 3 ringtails, a 2nd winter male and two adult males were observed. These harriers were engaging in typical pre-roosting behaviour hunting around the roost site and occasionally perching on fence posts and the ground. Two female/juvenile Merlin were also present and hunting in the area. After a few minutes it became obvious that both Merlin were using the Hen Harriers to flush prey for them. Both Merlin were seen to use both the ringtail and the 2nd winter male harriers with far more time spent around the male than the ringtails. Two strategies appeared to be used by the Merlin. The first was for the Merlin to fly past a quartering harrier and perch approx. 100m ahead of it along its flight path. If suitable prey was flushed the Merlin took off and gave chase - generally back in the direction the harrier. The second strategy appeared to consist of either flying up behind the harrier at speed and then shooting past or flying through the harriers flight path just ahead of the harrier - possibly in the hope that if prey was flushed by the harrier then sufficient momentum would have been built up to give the Merlin an advantage in any chase which might arise. At one point the 2nd winter male harrier perched on the ground in some rushes in an area of wet grassland. One of the Merlin followed it and perched on a fencepost beside it less than a metre away. It waited there for at least 5 minutes until the harrier alighted and resumed hunting at which point the Merlin continued with its shadowing of the harrier. At no point was either Merlin observed to catch prey. A number of individual Meadow Pipits were flushed by the harriers and chased by the Merlin but due to factors such as distance from the birds and fading light it was not possible to determine the outcome of all hunts. It was obvious that the Merlin were shadowing the 2nd winter male with greater frequency than the ringtail harriers. The reason for this is unknown but it may be that in the fading light the male provided a better field

mark than the darker ringtails. Both adult male harriers had gone to roost by the time this behaviour by the Merlin came to my attention. On the 11th December 2006 at the same site 2 female/juvenile Merlin were again present at the harrier roost and the same hunting behaviour was observed. On this occasion the Merlin shadowed a 2nd winter male harrier repeatedly as he hunted over a period of 30 minutes. At one point both Merlin were shadowing this same harrier with one flying past and perching ahead and the other flying over and back along the harriers flight path at speed. A total of seven ringtail harriers used the roost that evening with most hunting for short periods in the vicinity of the roost. Despite this the Merlin never engaged in this hunting behaviour with any of the ringtail harriers. Once again it was not possible to see if any of the hunts were successful due to poor light and the distance involved. On the 29th December 2006 an adult male and adult female Merlin were observed once again using harriers to flush prey for them. Both birds were observed using the same hunting techniques as on previous occasions alongside both ringtail harriers which came to roost at the site. For twenty minutes before the harriers arrived both Merlin were perched close to the harrier roost and engaged in no hunting activity. Similar activity was observed the following day when a single female Merlin was observed perched on a post for ten minutes prior to the first roosting harrier arriving at the site. This bird only began hunting when the harrier, a ringtail, did so, flying ahead of the quartering harrier and perching in its flight path. Is it possible that the Merlin were waiting for harriers to arrive at the roost to take advantage of their presence to catch prey? Despite repeated visits to the roost this activity has not been observed since.

Aonghus O Donail

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Wednesday 15 September, branch meeting, Anno Santo Hotel, Threadneedle Road, Salthill, 8pm. All members are welcome to attend the monthly meetings.

Friday 24 September, *Birds in Connemara* – illustrated records for the new Atlas of

Birds of Britain and Ireland and other highlights by Dermot Breen, NPWS

Conservation Ranger and member of the Irish Rare Birds Committee, Anno Santo Hotel, 8pm.

Saturday 2 October, short outing at Nimmo's Pier with Tim Griffin *et al.*, 10.30am.

These outings take about an hour and a half and are suitable for all age groups; beginners get lots of help to identify the birds on the shore and on the water.

Wednesday 20 October, branch meeting, Anno Santo Hotel, 8pm.

Saturday 6 November, short outing at Nimmo's Pier with Tim Griffin *et al.*, 10.30am

BirdWatch Galway (Branch of BirdWatch Ireland) 2nd Quarter 2010

QUARTERLY BIRD REPORT COMPILED BY CHRIS PEPIATT

DATE OF ISSUE: 3rd August 2010

1st April: Drake Ring-necked Duck X Tufted Duck hybrid, An Lough Ard, Recess (Dermot Breen).
1st April: Drake Ring-necked Duck, Angliham, Lough Corrib (Josh Jones).
1st April: Swallow, Angliham, Lough Corrib (Tom Cuffe).
2nd April: Peregrine, Loughanbeg, Inverin (Brian Cahill).
3rd April: 1st Win. Iceland Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Tom Cuffe).
4th April: Red-necked Grebe, again present, Newtownlynch Pier. (1)
4th April: 1st Win. Iceland Gull & Ad. Ring-billed Gull, again present, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City.
5th April: Eagle sp., Cregboy, Doorus, Nr. Kinvara (Frank Sanford). Any other sightings?
5th April: 2nd Win. Glaucous Gull & Ad. Ring-billed Gull, again present, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City.
5th April: Black-throated Diver, Newtownlynch Pier (per Irishbirding).
9th April: Cuckoo, Killeenaran (Gordon D'Arcy).
9th April: Dipper, canal by River Corrib, Newtownsmyth, Galway City (Colin McCay).
10th April: Little Tern, 2 Willow Warbler & Goldcrest, Inishmore (Dermot Breen).
11th April: 70 Great Northern Diver, Newtownlynch Pier (Dave MacNamara).
12th April: Spoonbill, Tawin (Marty Kerrane). (2)
13th April: Whimbrel, Mutton Island, Galway City (Michael Davis).
15th April: Pink-footed Goose, over Inishbofin (Dermot Breen).
15th April: Willow Warbler, Dangan, Galway City (Michael Davis).
17th April: Eagle sp., claimed just S. of Loughrea (Poona McNally). Any other sightings?
17th April: Grasshopper Warbler, Moycullen (Gerard Walshe).
18th April: 1st Sum. Iceland Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Tom Cuffe).
21st April: House Martin, Loughrea (Pete Capsey).
22nd April: 2 Common Sandpiper, Lough Inch, Barna (Brendan Power).
23rd April: Dotterel & 100 Golden Plover, Aillebrack, Ballyconneely (Dermot Breen). (3)
23rd April: Ad. Sum. Forster's Tern, Mutton Island, Galway City (Tim Griffin). (4)
25th April: 6 White Wagtail, Kilcolgan Point, Tawin (Michael Davis).
25th April: Whinchat & Osprey, Clonfert (Neal Warnock).
26th April: 1st Sum. Iceland Gull, Mutton Island, Galway City (Michael Davis).
26th April: Corncrake, Omev Island (Patrick Poohill).
27th April: 2nd Yr. Mediterranean Gull, Arctic Tern & 63 Sanderling, Mannin Bay (Dermot Breen).
29th April: Swift, Angliham, Lough Corrib (Tom Cuffe).
29th April: Corncrake, Inishturbot (Feicin Mulkerrin).
30th April: 1st Sum. Glaucous Gull, Mutton Island, Galway City (Michael Davis).
30th April: 2 Swift, Lombard Street, Galway City (Michael Davis).
30th April: Swift, Galway City (Neil Ellis).
30th April: 2 White-tailed Eagle, Lough Aclogher (Aonghus O'Donail).
30th April: 3 Corncrake, Inishturbot (Paddy Pryce).
1st May: Spotted Flycatcher, Tullyvoheen, Clifden (Miryam & Michael Harris).
2nd May: 1st/2nd yr. drake Garganey & 4 Wigeon, Rahasane Turlough (Dermot Breen). (5)
2nd May: Barn Owl, Aughclogheen, Corrandulla (Pete Tyndall).
2nd May: 2 Common Sandpiper, Ballinahinch lake (Miryam & Michael Harris).
2nd May: Dipper, Ballinahinch Castle (Miryam & Michael Harris).
2nd May: 3 Little Tern, Gurteen Bay, Roundstone (Jim Sheehan).
3rd May: 6 Wigeon, 8 Little Egret, Sand Martin, Wheatear, Blackcap, Willow Warbler & Chiffchaff, Rahasane Turlough (Pete Capsey).

3rd May: 15 White Wagtail, Kilcolgan Point, Tawin (Michael Davis).
3rd May: 2 Common Tern, Rabbit Island, Galway City (Chris Peppiatt).
4th May: 18 Purple Sandpiper, Salthill, Galway City (Michael Davis).
5th May: 1st Sum. Iceland Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Michael Davis).
7th May: White-tailed Eagle, Letterfir (Aonghus O'Donaill).
8th May: Dipper, Loughrea town (Pete Capsey).
9th May: Corncrake, Tower Callow, Nr. Banagher (per Tim Gordon).
9th May: 2 (female and sub-ad. male) Marsh Harrier, Angliham, Lough Corrib (Tim Griffin).
13th May: Ad. Yellow-legged Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Davey Farrar & Joe Adamson).
13th May: 10 Wigeon, 7 Gadwall, 4 Shoveler, 3 Pochard, Whooper Swan, 60 Black-tailed Godwit & 40 Redshank, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Neil Sharkey & Paul Hillis).
16th May: Whitethroat, Angliham, Lough Corrib (Dermot Breen).
17th May: Corncrake, High Island (Feicin Mulkerrin).
17th May: Corncrake, Inishbofin (George Lacey).
21st May: 5 Corncrake, Inishturbot (Tim Gordon).
25th May: 1st Sum. male Golden Oriole, Inishbofin (Anthony McGeehan). (6)
25th May: 3 Chough, Murvey, Roundstone (Miryam & Michael Harris).
30th May: 2 Ruff, 20 Dunlin & 30 Black-tailed Godwit, Muckrush, Lough Corrib (Aonghus O'Donaill).
3rd June: Pair Yellowhammer, Gorumna Island (Aonghus O'Donaill).
5th June: Pair House Martin nesting, Kilcreevanty, Nr. Tuam (Pat Flaherty).
5th June: Merlin, Nr. Ballinahinch Castle (Miryam & Michael Harris).
5th June: Corncrake, Omev Island (Feicín Mulkerrin).
5th June: Corncrake, Inishturbot (Vincent Knight).
6th June: Corncrake, East End, Inishbofin (Neil Stewart).
11th June: Male Yellowhammer, Gorumna Island (Aonghus O'Donaill).
14th June: 2 Barn Owl, Clonfert (Helen Carty & Chris Peppiatt).
21st June: 34 pairs Arctic Tern, Slyne Head (Dermot Breen).
28th June: 2nd Sum. Glaucous Gull, Nimmo's Pier, Galway City (Stephen Lawlor).

NOTES:

(1) A Red-necked Grebe (presumably the same bird as was present in the previous quarter) was seen in the Aughinish/Newtownlynch area on the 5th of April, 11th of April, 12th of April and the 20th of April. Newtownlynch Pier has regularly produced records of this species.

(2) The Spoonbill was present in the Tawin area until the 20th of April.

(3) The Dotterel was present at Aillebrack until the 26th of April.

(4) This Forster's Tern was a long-staying individual also recorded in the last quarter.

(5) The Garganey was present at Rahasane turlough until the 3rd of May.

(6) The Golden Oriole was present on Inishbofin until the 27th of May.

OTHER BEASTS:

4th April: 2 Otter, Ballinahinch lake, Ballinahinch, Connemara (Miryam & Michael Harris).

HIGHLIGHTS:

Spoonbill, Dotterel, Garganey, Golden Oriole, Osprey, White-tailed eagle (at least two birds and two other reports of Eagle sp.), Pink-footed Goose and Yellowhammers in Connemara. Long stayers/returning birds included Red-necked Grebe, Forster's Tern and Marsh Harrier. Possible breeders included Wigeon, Gadwall, Shoveler and Pochard.

First Summer migrants: Little Tern (10th April), Whimbrel (13th April), Grasshopper Warbler (17th April), House Martin (21st April), Common Sandpiper (22nd April), Whinchat (25th April), White Wagtail (25th April), Osprey (25th April), Corncrake (26th April), Arctic Tern (27th April), Swift (29th April), Sedge Warbler (29th April), Spotted Flycatcher (1st May), Garganey (3rd May), Common Tern (3rd May), Whitethroat (16th May). Any earlier records for any of these? In particular, House Martin, Sedge Warbler, Common Tern and Whitethroat would be expected earlier.

Note: the Stone Curlew that was present from the 26th-30th June 2009 at Murvey, Roundstone was uncredited at the time; in fact it was found by Miryam and Michael Harris.