

Survey work is a rewarding experience

The famous adage “Golf is a good walk spoiled” has been variously attributed to Mark Twain, William Gladstone and numerous others. No matter that the true identity of its originator is lost to us, it is a useful phrase to quote (and elaborate on) when trying to encourage people to participate in the Countryside Bird Survey.

My extra spin on it is simply to add: “On the other hand, the CBS is a good walk made all the more enriching and enjoyable because you are contributing something to science and conservation.”

It is probably true to say that we don’t make enough of the enjoyment that can be derived from taking part in a bird survey such as the CBS. The very word “survey” is often enough to put off some would-be perfectly capable participants at the very first hurdle. But what makes someone take that step, to inquire about the survey in the first place, maybe attend a training day, and then, ultimately, make that commitment to taking on a CBS square?

The answer surely must be because there is some level of enjoyment involved. Birdwatchers enjoy watching birds and, naturally, they develop identification skills over time. Some will become sufficiently concerned about serious declines in our bird populations which they feel they should be doing something about it. Volunteering for survey work is one very good way to achieve this.

The Countryside Bird Survey has simple objectives – to monitor how our common and widespread bird populations are faring and to try to identify causes of decline. We know from CBS that some species, including **Kestrel**, **Stock Dove**, **Skylark** and **Swift**, are showing declines since the survey began in 1998 – we need to continue to track these changes. Effective monitoring of this nature can only be done if we have a large number of observers who know their birds, to survey a large number of sample sites. For the results to be



DICK COOMBES

Blue Tit: found in 75% of CBS squares and showing a slight increase since CBS began in 1998

robust and representative, a minimum of 300 squares must get covered each season.

It is no accident then, that “enjoyment” is built into the CBS survey design. What is there not to like about being out and about in the countryside at daybreak, seeing the sun rise above dewy fields, smelling the waft of warming bracken and, of course, being surrounded by the quadruphonic dawn chorus. Then there is the satisfaction in knowing that you are putting your birding skills to good use, not to mention that great sense of ownership you feel for “your” square. Hopefully, CBS strikes a good balance between being a reliable data gathering system and providing an enjoyable experience.

So, when you arrive at your square,

having recovered from the shock of the alarm clock and extrication from the warm bed, think about how enjoyable it is to be surveying your very own CBS square on a spring morning. Let’s make this 22nd season of CBS a good one.

Dick Coombes,
CBS Co-ordinator

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Wild Nephin Wilderness,
Co Mayo
Photo: Sam Birch
Inset: Skylark
Photo: Dick Coombes

CBS square in Wild Nephin



Sam Birch, Western Region Conservation Ranger with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, recounts his experiences surveying his first CBS square, in north Mayo.

It is 7.00am on an early May morning and I'm parked on the side of a windswept hill in the Nephin Beg Mountains in north Mayo. I am waiting to start my first ever CBS transect, but I can't see more than 100 metres from my vehicle due to thick, low cloud sweeping past in a gale.

These were not the conditions I was expecting when I left Westport an hour earlier. Leaving home, it was a clear and pleasant morning which should have provided suitable survey conditions, but, as I have often learned the hard way, there can be very different weather conditions in north Mayo compared to the rest of that county.

I consider giving up and rescheduling for a better day, but then I see the cloud starting to clear and a glimpse of blue sky appearing, giving me hope. I am eager to get going, the morning is passing, so I don't waste any time: I head down towards the start of my transect.

My survey square is located not far from the Mayo National Park boundary and it comprises mainly upland blanket bog, apart from where my transect crosses the corner of a grazing field. Between the habitat, exposure and weather, I don't expect to see much, but I have only gone a few metres when I spot a **Wheatear** standing proud in the wind on a small hummock. A beautiful little bird, amber-listed, and not something I had expected to see; it gives me a burst of enthusiasm for the rest of the survey.

Wheatear
Photo:
Dick Coombes



The morning is clearing up quite well and I can see some sheep scattered around the hillside and a farmhouse at the bottom of the hill. The next bird I see is a **Skylark**, followed by several more and some **Meadow Pipits**. I spook a **Hooded Crow**, which I presume is the same one that flies over me inquisitively several times during the rest of the survey.

As I get to the corner of the grazing field, which has a few conifers at the edge, I expect to find something new, maybe a **Chaffinch** or a **Robin**, but no luck – only the **Hooded Crow** again.



Stonechat
Photo:
Dick Coombes

The first transect is all downhill and, as I head back up the hill on the second transect, I cross a small tarmac road. As I am crossing, a tractor drives by, stops and reverses. A man leans out and says: "Hello, Cameron! You are out counting the birds again. You are not as tall as I remember!"

It seems Cameron used to cover this area and they had often had a chat on the road. I say hello and explain I am the new NPWS ranger for the national park. We chat about wildlife and he recalls how there used to be a lot of **Red Grouse** found there, but only small numbers now. His land is currently included in the national **Irish Hare Survey**, using camera

traps. He tells me they are delighted to have the national park nearby and often walk the forest loops around Letterkeen.

As we are speaking, we spot something on the road: it turns out to be a female **Mallard** that had left a small drain. She walks up the road happily for 50 metres and then hops into the bog on the other side. I say goodbye then and finish the rest of my survey, recording two more **Skylarks** near the finish.

My first CBS visit turned out to be really interesting overall. My second visit a month later was a complete contrast, weather-wise. It was a lovely sunny day with high visibility and, unusually, no wind. Indeed, the view was magnificent, giving clear sight of the Ox Mountains in the distance. There was also increased bird activity and some extra species seen, including **Swallow**, **Pied Wagtail**, **Cuckoo** and **Stonechat**.

After completing my first CBS, I think the upland squares may not be as busy as the lowland squares, but are just as rewarding if you get some records and the right weather. And in terms of ensuring good representative coverage in CBS, upland sites are just as important as those with a rich selection of species.

Hooded Crow
Photo: Dick Coombes





Dick Coombes, the CBS Co-ordinator, explaining the CBS survey methods in the field at the Athlone training day and, right, some of the attendees at the joint CBS and Irish Wetland Bird Survey training session in Mallow in March.

CBS workshops attract new surveyors

We hold an annual series of training days each spring which strive to demonstrate, and hopefully demystify, the Countryside Bird Survey (CBS) methods for the uninitiated and to encourage new recruits to sign up. This year, the training sessions were once again joint CBS and Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS) affairs and were well attended in Athlone, Donegal and Mallow. Thirty-three CBS squares were taken on by attendees, which was an excellent result, proving that these training sessions are a very effective way of finding people to fill gaps in coverage.

Late-nesting bird survey makes interesting findings

Survey finds that nesting continues into August and September for many different hedgerow-nesting species, notably the Yellowhammer. C  il  n MacLochlainn reports.

While the CBS takes place during the peak nesting period of April-May, nesting can take place from as early as January and continue right through August, stretching to the end of September for some species as breeding pairs raise three, sometimes even four, broods in a season.

However, until two years ago, firm data on late nesting had never been gathered in Ireland: there was a gap in our knowledge. This mattered because there was pressure to reduce the closed season for hedge-cutting by adding August to the months it was allowed in; hitherto it had been permissible only from September 1st to the last day in February to protect hedge-nesting birds.

With the Heritage Bill passing through the D  il aiming to (amongst other things) add August to the cutting season, it was imperative to obtain rigorous data on late nesters. In particular, we needed data on **Yellowhammer**, a species that had suffered alarming declines and was now a red-listed species of conservation concern.

BirdWatch Ireland duly organised a survey of late-nesters in 2017 with the help of volunteers from branches in Meath, Kildare

and Tipperary and members of the public, who attended preparatory workshops. The survey was supported by the **Heritage Council, Meath County Council** and the **National Biodiversity Data Centre**, which hosted a recording portal for the project. The survey confirmed nesting in August and September by **Yellowhammers** mainly, but also by **Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Blackbird** and other species, with a majority of active late nests in the first half of August.

The survey continued in 2018, this time with branches in Carlow, Cavan, Laois, Louth and Monaghan participating. It recorded 168 cases of late-nesting **Yellowhammers** with young seen as late as September 22nd, though nesting activity fell off as the survey progressed. The next most frequently recorded species were **Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Woodpigeon** and **Blackbird**.

A licensed nest searcher was contracted to search for Yellowhammer nests in Offaly, to learn more about their ecology. He found it difficult to locate Yellowhammer nests, as they were very well concealed, and he recommended that searches start earlier in the season to establish the locations of breeding pairs first.

The 2018 survey was again supported by



Yellowhammer
Photo: Dick Coombes

the **Heritage Council** and the **National Biodiversity Data Centre**.

Despite a two-year, well-publicised campaign of advocacy in conjunction with other organisations, including a petition which garnered almost 35,000 signatures, and the presentation by BirdWatch Ireland staff of evidence to a joint Oireachtas committee, the Heritage Bill was passed in July 2018, though with certain limitations on August hedge-cutting.

The project, however, proved an excellent example of citizen science being used to fill gaps in our knowledge, in this case on a range of late-nesting bird species, twenty-one in all.

SPECIES FOCUS

Starling

We know them as noisy little characters perched on chimneys, gable ends and aerials, wings quivering from time to time, all the while uttering a jumbled chatter of squawks, wheezes and clicks and a whistle that sounds remarkably like a bomb dropping to Earth.

Starlings are also superb mimics, producing very convincing impersonations of Buzzard, Curlew, Jay and Swallow, to name a few, bringing a taste of the countryside into the bleakest urban setting.

The Starling's strong association with humans is clear. Any missing roof tile or gap in the fascia board is an open invitation for them to nest in and raise a brood of raucous young. They are recorded in around 80% of gardens in the Garden Bird Survey, and their main foraging grounds are farmland, especially fields of pasture, where crane fly larvae (otherwise known as leatherjackets) are a mainstay. Indeed, their appetite for leatherjackets, which cause brown patches in lawns, should make them a visitor to be welcomed by gardeners.

Today, the Starling is common and widespread in Ireland, but it was not always so. In the 19th century it was scarce or absent from many regions, including west Cork, Kerry, Wexford and Waterford.

The CBS trend covering the nineteen years from 1998 to 2016 shows the Starling population to be stable in Ireland. This is in marked contrast to a severe decline in Britain, where it has been in trouble for several decades (there was a decline of around 50% between 1995 and 2010) and it is now red-listed as a species of conservation concern there.

The abundance change map produced by the Bird Atlas 2007-11 graphically illustrates the massive crash in numbers of breeding Starlings throughout Britain in twenty years and, equally, the significant increase in

numbers in Ireland.

It is thought that the reason for the contrasting trends in Britain and Ireland may be related to food availability. Intensive improvement of grassland for the beef and dairy industry in Ireland has produced high soil fertility, conducive for leatherjackets and other prey. In a curious twist, Ireland's steady shift from arable farming to pasture, which hasn't suited our Yellowhammers and Stock Doves, appears to be working positively for Starlings.

There may be an interesting by-product of the decline of Starlings in Britain: studies have shown that Starlings compete with Great Spotted Woodpeckers for nest sites – sometimes even ousting the woodpeckers from cavities which they have excavated. Is it pure coincidence that in the same forty-year time-frame when Starling numbers fell drastically the Great Spotted Woodpecker population rose exponentially? And, indeed, the subsequent colonisation of Ireland by Great Spotted Woodpeckers in the late 2000s must surely be a spin-off of this population explosion.

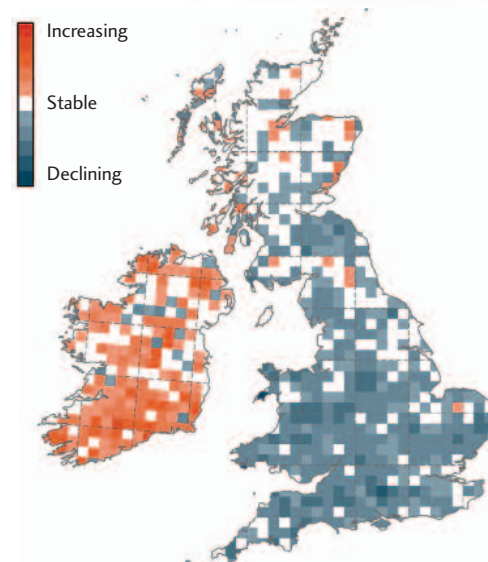
For reasons which escape modern thinking, Starlings were introduced to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and North America in the 19th century. Forty pairs released in Central Park, New York, in 1890 kicked off a massive colonisation of North America, where the present-day population of 500 million is subjected to drastic pest control. Bizarrely, in communist Russia, the attitude was rather different – farmers provided some 22 million nestboxes for them.

For now, the future looks good for Starlings in Ireland and hopefully we can continue to enjoy the spectacle of huge winter murmurations for years to come.

Dick Coombes,
CBS Co-ordinator



Adult Starling
Photo: Dick Coombes



Starling relative abundance change from 1988-1991 to 2008-11. From the Bird Atlas 2007-11, courtesy of BTO.

Juvenile Starling
Photo: Dick Coombes
Starling murmuration
Photo: Andrew Kelly



Out and about this summer?

The Irish Rare Breeding Bird Panel is urging all bird surveyors, both volunteer and professional, to keep an eye out for rare breeding birds this summer (and, indeed, every summer). Please visit the panel's website for the list of species of most concern at <http://irbbp.org/species-list>.

In the coming weeks the website will provide further details on how best to find and report these rare breeding birds and how you can contribute to a very valuable bird conservation initiative.

