

Site Guide

by **Cóilín MacLochlainn**



Blessington Lakes, Co Wicklow

Threecastles, at the northern tip of Blessington Lakes, where the River Liffey enters the reservoir. **Photo:** Cólín MacLochlainn

Cóilín MacLochlainn takes a tour of Blessington Lakes in County Wicklow.

Pollaphuca Reservoir, known locally as Blessington Lakes, was created in the 1940s by damming the River Liffey at Pollaphuca Bridge in west Wicklow, for both water supply and electricity generation. It is the largest freshwater body in Leinster.

Despite its artificial origins, it is scenic and naturalistic thanks to its setting on the edge of the Wicklow Mountains and the many conifers planted around its shores by the ESB, as well as the natural scrub woodland on promontories and the reedbeds and overgrown marshes in the bays.

Its large size makes it impossible to cover in a single outing and, without some direction, much time could be squandered birding at random. One tip is to avoid the eastern shoreline, which is exposed and not very attractive to waterbirds. Having said that, the pretty villages of Ballyknockan and Lackan offer elevated views of the lake and are popular in their own right.

However, the best birdwatching spots are on the western side of the reservoir and perhaps the best spot of all is Threecastles at the northern end.

A fantastic resource developed in recent years by Wicklow County Council is the **Blessington Greenway**, a walking route extending for 6.5 kilometres from Blessington to Russelstown Bay. This cinder track, suitable for walkers and cyclists, runs close to the

shore for much of its length but otherwise passes through forest, scrub and marsh (where boardwalks replace the hard track). This new trail is likely to produce some interesting bird sightings in coming years. For more information contact blessingtongreenway@gmail.com.

1 Threecastles

The River Liffey enters the reservoir here and deposits sand and silt in the shallows. This is a rich environment for waterlife and it attracts a good variety of waterbirds, particularly in spring and autumn – especially if water levels are low and the mudflats are exposed.

In summer, look for **Kingfisher, Common Sandpiper, Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover** and **Snipe**. In winter, look for **Teal, Mallard, Whooper Swan** and **Grey Heron**. A flock of **Greylag Geese** winters in the area; look for them in the bigger fields.

During spring and autumn, look for passage migrants including **Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper** and **Green Sandpiper**. **Buzzards** are frequently seen soaring overhead and an **Osprey** has spent a summer here, giving rise to hopes that the species might nest somewhere in the area.

Oddities have included **Little Gull** and **Mediterranean Gull**. **Starlings** and **Jackdaws** gather here to roost in the winter.



Osprey. **Photo:** Shay Connolly

2 Burgage

Moving south to Blessington town, make your way south from Avon Rí to the **Blessington Greenway** at Burgage. The willows and alders hold **Long-tailed Tits** and **Siskins** in winter. The marshy lake edges shelter **Teal, Mallard, Moorhen, Water Rail** and **Reed Bunting** and, with luck, you might encounter an **Otter** or a **Gadwall** or a **Goosander**.

In summer, look and listen for warblers – **Willow, Sedge** and **Grasshopper** – and for **Swallows** and **martins**, and look for **Little Grebes** and **Great Crested Grebes**.

3 Russelstown

Follow the trail south, crossing the Vallemount Road to enter Russelstown, an area of marshland and forest, designated a local conservation area. Many of the conifers are tall and mature and heavy with cones – ideal for **Siskins**, **Crossbills** and, indeed, **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** which have recently arrived in the area though have yet to be recorded from this trail. Listen for interesting warblers in the marsh: a **Reed Warbler** record is long overdue.

The trail ends at a car park beside the scenic Russelstown Bay (an alternative starting point for this trail), a popular fishing spot.

4 Russborough

Here, the Greenway joins a walking route to and around **Russborough House and Gardens**, nearby. Huge mature trees and ponds are a feature of the grounds, definitely worth a visit in their own right. Plenty of finches occur in winter – look for **Brambling**, and **Hawfinch** could occur.

A little further south along the N81 the road overlooks a freshwater marsh in Russborough townland, on the lake side of the road. This is actually an old and overgrown sand quarry but the site, owned by the **Native Woodland Trust**, is notable for its flora and fauna. For example, **Dingy Skipper** butterflies and **Smooth Newts** breed here, as well as **Snipe**, **Reed Bunting** and a variety of bats, including **Daubenton's Bat**, and some rare wild flowers. Low sandcliffs along the lakeshore support a **Sand Martin** colony, and a **Hobby** has been seen here in spring.

5 Baltyboys

There is a popular car park and picnic area beside the bridge at Baltyboys. It offers good views over the lakes to north and south. Look for **Cormorants**, **grebes** and **diving ducks** such as **Tufted Duck**, **Pochard** and even



Blessington Greenway at Burgage. Photo: C  il  n MacLochlainn



Goosander. The latter could be breeding in the area given that they are seen here fairly regularly; they are an elusive species.

Travelling south towards Vallemount, keep an eye out for **Greylag Geese**, and **Pheasants**, in the more open fields.

6 Vallemount

Vallemount Bridge offers good views over the lakes. Vallemount itself is located on a narrow esker ridge, which divides the reservoir at this point. In Humphreystown, located southwest of Vallemount Bridge or directly opposite Vallemount, BirdWatch Ireland has signed a management agreement with landowner **D  nal Bevans** for a new reserve. Here, we are working with D  nal to improve the oak-ash woodland and ponds that he has created. Certainly worth keeping in mind for a future visit.

Further south, at Lockstown, where the King River enters the reservoir, there is much scrubby marshland and forest by the shore. Try to view the marshy headland at **Monamuck**, north of Blackditches; the natural habitat here is likely to support a range of interesting waterbirds, dragonflies and butterflies.