

Site Guide

by Paul M Walsh

Brownstown Head, Co Waterford

Brownstown Head, Co Waterford, its two former signal towers (or navigational beacons) built in 1819 and World War II look-out hut. **Photo:** Paul Walsh

Paul M Walsh describes the attractions of a popular south-coast birding hotspot.

Brownstown Head forms the south-east corner of Tramore Bay in east Waterford. It is well placed as a migrant watch-point and has a long history of notable bird records, including **Sociable Plover** and even **Great Auk!** (see box). (This is the only historical record of Great Auk in Ireland, but bones have been found in prehistoric kitchen middens at several locations, including the Tramore sandhills, west of Brownstown Head.)

Brownstown Head is nowadays among the top mainland sites for landbird migrants and vagrants, boasting two first Irish records and four species of North American passerine since 1985.

Seabird movements can also be impressive, and birding can be good at any season, but especially in spring and autumn.

Road access is due south from Waterford city (via the airport road); west from Dunmore East (good access from Co Wexford via the Passage East ferry); or east from Tramore town.

Then, from the north-east corner of Tramore Backstrand, via Corbally church just to the south, take the straight road south-west until you run out of road (see OS Discovery Map No 76).

Best conditions for landbird migrants are south-easterly winds (especially with some rain overnight), but good numbers and variety can also occur in other conditions, e.g. clear anticyclonic days in autumn.

For seawatching, strong

onshore winds are best (south-easterly winds can be as effective as south-westerly here). Local landowners are very accommodating, but please keep to tracks and roadsides, where possible; otherwise stick to field margins, keep gates closed and avoid damage to ditches and fences.

1. The main gardens

The main gardens produce the highest concentrations of passerine migrants, drawn in by dense willows and other cover. Good numbers of **Chiffchaffs**, **Willow Warblers** and other commoner migrants such as **Spotted Flycatchers** can occur in the right conditions. Before you reach the main gardens, the 'west boreen' to your right is worth checking for migrants.

Rarer species including **Pied Flycatcher** and **Garden Warbler** also occur; and **Yellow-browed Warblers** are regular in October.

A mouth-watering list of vagrants found here includes Ireland's first **Yellow Warbler** (1995) and **Iberian Chiffchaff** (2010) plus **Northern Parula**, **Red-eyed Vireo**, **Western Bonelli's** and **Pallas's Warblers**, and more – including a **Scops Owl**, in April 1998, sadly found dead. **Tree Sparrows** regularly breed in nearby farm buildings.

Mist-netting has been annual since 1988, with **Goldcrest**, **Chiffchaff** and **Redpoll** the most frequently ringed species. Recoveries are rare, but a single weekend in October 2016 produced two amazing movements of Siberian 'phylloscops' (i.e. warblers of the *Phylloscopus* genus, commonly



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Red-breasted Flycatcher, October 2015



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Scops Owl, April 1998

CÓILÍN MACLOCHLAINN



Great Auk (juvenile), Zoological Museum, Trinity College Dublin

The last Great Auk in Ireland

An immature female Great Auk was captured alive "close to the cliffs between Ballymacaw and Brownstown Head" in May 1834, according to Ussher and Warren's *The Birds of Ireland* (1900).

It was kept in captivity for four months by Jacob Goff, of Horetown, Co Wexford, who fed it mainly on fish. It died in September 1834 and was given to Dr Robert J Burkill of Waterford, who preserved it. In 1844, he presented the specimen to the museum in Trinity College Dublin. It is believed to be the only surviving example in immature plumage.

The species, now extinct, was last seen alive in 1844. It was found throughout the North Atlantic but may have had as few as 20 colonies owing to its requirement for isolated rocky islands with sloping shorelines (the bird was flightless).

known as leaf warblers) – a Russian-ringed **Yellow-browed Warbler** (see photo) from the eastern Baltic was found, while a **Radde's Warbler** that had been ringed on the headland was re-sighted at Barry's Head, Co Cork, both within six days of ringing.

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Russian-ringed Yellow-browed Warbler retrapped six days later at Brownstown Head, October 2016

2. Main lane and fields

The main boreen and the fields and hedges on either side are very productive for common migrants, and breeding **Whitethroats** and **Skylarks** are prominent, plus foraging **Choughs** and, in spring, **Whimbrels**.

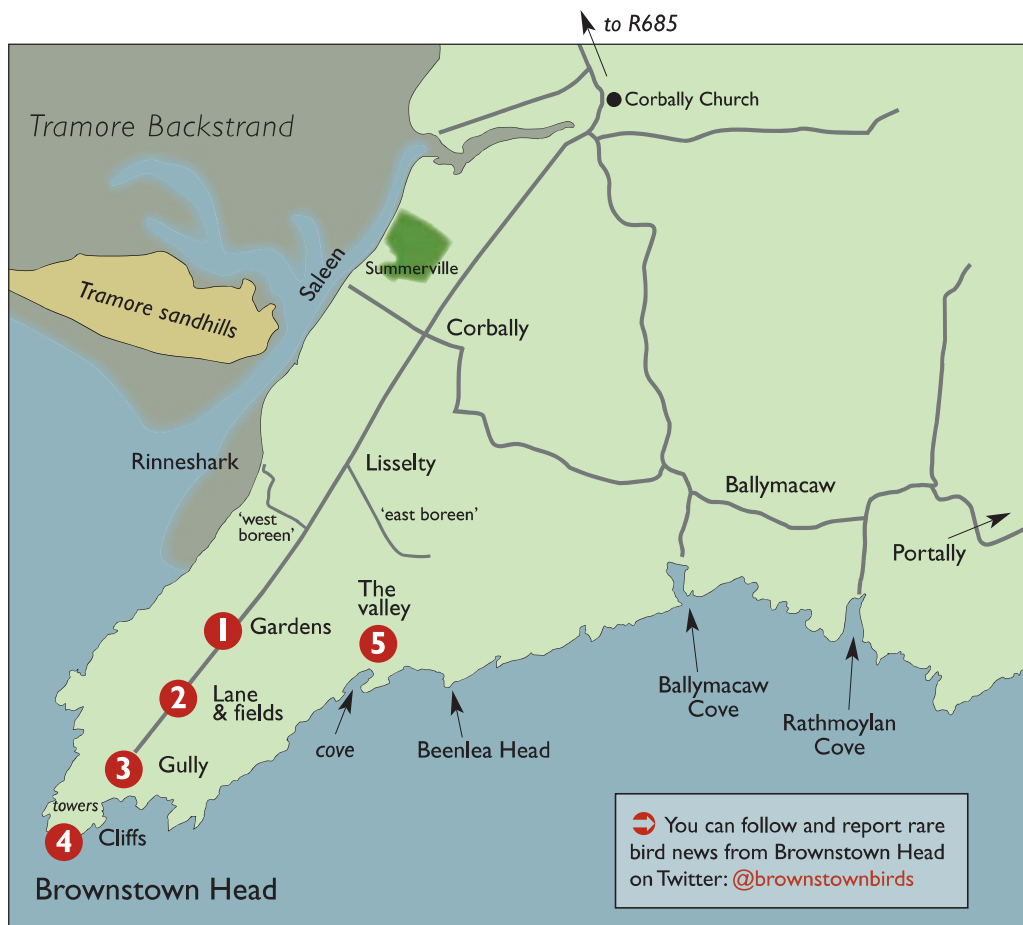
This is the best area for **Whinchats**, and rarities have included **Red-backed Shrikes**, **Barred** and **Subalpine Warblers**, **Tawny Pipit**, **Blackpoll Warbler** and **Red-breasted Flycatcher**.

Similar habitat further inland along the head is less well-watched but could also be productive.

3. The gully

The short gorse-and-bramble-clad section of stream here is the first patch of feeding habitat encountered by many arriving migrants, and is a great spot to search for the first phylloscops of spring.

In recent years, this has been a **Wryneck** hotspot, and other notable species have included **Little Bittern**, **Woodchat Shrike** and



Subalpine Warbler in spring, and **Icterine Warbler** and **Rose-coloured Starling** in autumn. This is also a good vantage point from which to watch breeding **Linnets** and **Stonechats**, foraging or migrating **hirundines**, **Meadow Pipits** and **Wheatears** and, from the seaward end, inshore **seabirds**.

4. The cliffs

For proper seawatching, the World War II lookout hut near the towers is ideal in the foulest conditions; otherwise, vantage points between the towers and gully can be productive.

Manx Shearwaters are often the most prominent species from late March to September, with passage movements or feeding flocks sometimes involving thousands of birds.

Skuas are regular almost all year, with small flocks of **Pomarine Skuas** (often east-flying) almost predictable in May, **Sooty** and **Balearic Shearwaters** frequent, and **Great** and **Cory's Shearwaters** occasional. **Common Scoters** and **divers** are regular on passage or feeding in adjacent Tramore Bay (easily scanned from the west cliffs).

Species nesting on the Old Red Sandstone cliffs include **Chough** and **Rock Dove** and, in the recent past, **House Martin**. Nesting seabirds are surprisingly scarce, except for a small colony (including **Guillemots** and **Razorbills**) at nearby Beenlea Head.

5. The valley

This area – best accessed from the 'east boreen' near the base of the head – includes sections of stream with dense blackthorn scrub, tall willows and, in steeper sections, tall sycamores, leading

down to a cove. This is a productive area for **Chiffchaffs**, **Blackcaps** and other common migrants, and well worth checking in autumn for **Firecrest** or **Yellow-browed Warbler**.

Rarities have included **Desert Wheatear**, **Golden Oriole**, **Melodious** and **Greenish Warblers** and **Hawfinch**. Nearby stubble fields are good for **Skylarks** in autumn, with **Hen Harriers** turning up fairly regularly and **Lapland Buntings** on occasion.

Just east of Brownstown Head, several further coastal glens – at Ballymacaw, Rathmoylan and Portally – are well worth checking along the coast to Dunmore East. These are underwatched, but they have produced rarities like **Woodchat Shrike** and **Icterine Warbler**, among others.

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Northern Parula, Brownstown Hd, October 2003

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Summer-plumaged male Subalpine Warbler at Brownstown Head in April 2015