

Site Guide

by **Kevin Collins**



Cabragh Wetlands, Co Tipperary

Aerial view of Cabragh Wetlands near Thurles, Co Tipperary, with visitor centre, car park and hide in the foreground. **Photo:** Robbie Ingram

Kevin Collins (Tipperary Branch Chairman) describes a popular nature reserve in Co Tipperary.

Cabragh Wetlands is located beside the R659 just 4 km south of Thurles, Co Tipperary (grid reference: S 109 550). The site is a magnet for birds in all seasons.

It is one of the best birding sites in the county and is also a good place to see insects, including butterflies, damselflies and dragonflies. (Further details on www.cabraghwetlands.ie.)

With the closure of Thurles Sugar Factory in the 1980s came the loss of the lagoons, which were important for wildfowl and waders. A group of local people led by Tom

Grace set up the **Cabragh Wetlands Trust** in 1993 and bought 14 acres from the Sugar Company. Since then, they have bought a further 42 acres and they have management agreements covering another 100 acres.

Habitats

The entire site is managed for conservation purposes by the Cabragh Wetlands Trust. It lies in the floodplain of the River Suir and is a very important part of the river catchment in terms of the biodiversity it supports. The main habitat is reedbed, followed by fen and wet grassland.

Facilities

There is an excellent visitor centre at the site, run by dedicated volunteers from the Cabragh Wetlands Trust. The centre was built with the aid of grants from the Leader programme in both North and South Tipperary.

The visitor centre has lecture rooms, a small café, educational facilities, car parking, toilets and outside seating.

Bird hides

A bird hide next to the visitor centre gives views over the site. There was a smaller hide on the west side of the site but this was destroyed in the storm of early 2014. It was located near the lake on the west side of the wetland and access was from the small road along the west side. There are plans to have it replaced.

There are well maintained paths through the reeds with information panels about the biodiversity in the area.

Birdlife

If you take a walk through the extensive reedbeds during the breeding season you will see **Reed Buntings** and **Sedge Warblers** singing from the tops of the reeds while secretive **Water Rails** squeal from below. **Grasshopper Warblers**, **Stonechats** and **Snipe** also breed here.



BirdWatch Ireland ringers at Cabragh Wetlands (left to right): Michael Whelan, Alex Copland and Sinéad Cummins.

KEVIN COLLINS



Snipe at Cabragh Wetlands

Because so much of this type of habitat was drained and cleared, **Bittern** and **Marsh Harrier** became extinct as breeding birds in Ireland. Marsh Harrier is still seen as a passage migrant and tends to appear at Cabragh in the third week of May.

Bittern is not faring well in Europe and it is now a rarity in Ireland. One turned up in Cabragh on January 1997 after a severe cold snap on the continent.

Ringing studies

A Constant Effort Sites (CES) ringing scheme has been running in Cabragh for the last 12 years, led by Alex Copland. All of the regular

Spotted Crake (adult male) ringed at Cabragh Wetlands on August 28th 2012.



reedbed species are ringed, but a **Spotted Crake** trapped in August 2012 was a rare surprise. This species was also heard here in spring in two recent years, and a **Quail** was also heard.

The ringing studies have shown that the site is an important roost for migrating **Swallows** in autumn, with a turnover of birds from one night to the next. **Sedge Warbler** populations are also being studied by the ringers. Bird nests are also being studied as part of the BTO's Nest Record Scheme.

Winter waterbirds

The regular winter visitors to Cabragh include **Wigeon**, **Teal**, **Shoveler**, **Pochard**, **Pintail** and **Whooper Swan**. However, rare ducks such as **American Wigeon**, **Blue-winged Teal** and

Green-winged Teal have also been seen here in winter.

Some of the surrounding fields flood in winter, attracting thousands of migrant **Golden Plovers** and **Lapwings** and hundreds of **Curlews**. BirdWatch Ireland member **Pat Brennan** has carried out I-WeBS bird counts at Cabragh since the I-WeBS survey began.

In most winters there is also a spectacular **Starling** roost, when thousands of these noisy birds arrive from all directions at dusk. They form a massive flock and perform amazing manoeuvres before dropping into the reeds for the night.

In spring, Cabragh is a likely place to see **Garganey** among the other dabbling ducks. A **Glossy Ibis** was seen in March 2014 and a **Reed Warbler** was heard singing in May 2015. It is still a rare bird at inland sites.

Insects

As well as being a haven for birds, Cabragh is an excellent place to see and photograph



Approximate perimeter of Cabragh Wetlands

dragonflies. In early summer you will find **Hairy Hawkers**, **Four-spotted Chasers** and various **damselflies**. In late summer, the **Brown Hawker** and **Migrant Hawker** are common. The first Migrant Hawker for Co. Tipperary was found in Cabragh in October 2009.



Teal and Wigeon at Cabragh Wetlands