



Puffins. Photograph: Eric Dempsey

➔ For further information see BirdWatch Ireland website



BirdWatch Ireland Reserves

County Mayo: Illaunmaistir

Dave Suddaby describes the birdlife of the island reserve of Illaunmaistir, Co Mayo.

BirdWatch Ireland's **Illlaunmaistir Nature Reserve** is hidden away just off the north coast of County Mayo, 19 kilometres west of Ballycastle. The reserve was established in 1989.

Difficult to access and often by-passed at sea, the island and its grassy slopes rise out of the sea as a dome shape. It is just meters from the mainland cliffs and within sight of the more visible jagged pinnacles of the Stags of Broadhaven to the northwest, off Benwee Head. It is a summer home to seabirds that principally nest below ground.

Exploring the reserve

Just a stone's throw from the mainland, the domed, grassy slopes of Illaunmaistir (Irish: Oileán Máistir) can be viewed by looking down from higher cliffs on the shore. The island is home to breeding **Puffins** during the summer. These comical characters, often referred to as the 'clowns of the sea,' return to their burrows on the grassy slopes from late April onwards. Throughout the summer, adults can be watched bringing in fish for their chicks, affectionately known as 'pufflings,' which wait underground in their burrows.

The island also hosts breeding **European Storm-petrels**. Their numbers are unknown but are estimated to be in the thousands; they are difficult to see because they only visit their burrows at night so as to avoid the attentions of gulls and a pair of **Great Skuas** (a very recent coloniser). However, by carefully scanning the sea with a telescope or binoculars, it may be possible to see some feeding nearby.

The island buzzes with life only for a few months every summer, when the seabirds return to breed. Given that they are all highly dependent on the sea and are part of the marine ecosystem, their fate is closely linked to it.

Having walked up to the 238-metre-high



Cóilín MacLochlainn

point to look down onto the island, keep a look out for breeding **Twites** amongst the grassy heather slopes, or breeding **Wheatears** amongst the rocks, or the impressive sight of **Peregrines** hunting along the cliff tops.

Work we are doing associated with Illaunmaistir

The importance of islands such as this for seabirds is widely recognised and, as such, it is a **Special Protection Area** designated under the European Union's Birds Directive. The island is also listed as one of BirdLife International's **Important Bird Areas**, as identified by BirdWatch Ireland. By monitoring the success of seabird colonies like this, it helps us to measure the health of the surrounding marine environment.

The reserve and your support are vital in helping us to:

- protect Ireland's important breeding seabird colonies;
- provide an environment in which to learn about seabirds;
- encourage amateurs and experts alike to undertake environmental studies.

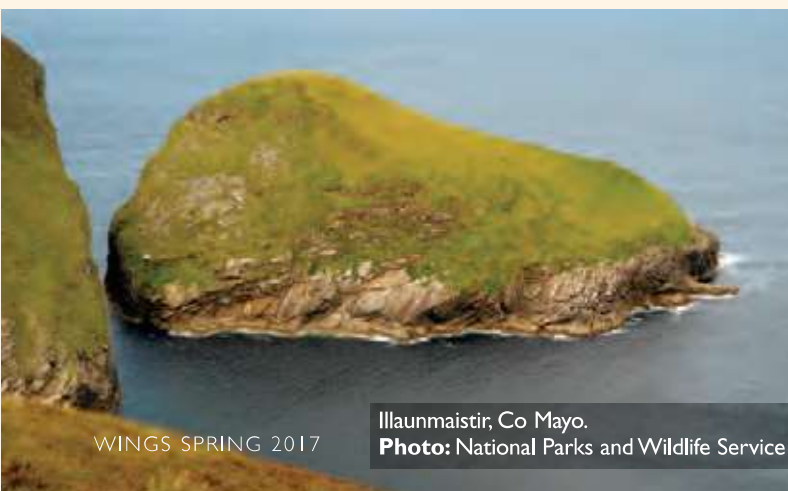
Visitor information

Access to the island is difficult and, to ensure that disturbance is kept to a minimum, please contact BirdWatch Ireland for permission to land. Viewing from the mainland offers good views over the island and sea, although the uphill walk to the cliff edge can be difficult, crossing uneven terrain for some 2 km, at its nearest point, from the unclassified road running between Belderg and Porturlin. **Be careful not to slip on clifftop grass.**

Don't miss.....

- the spectacle of whirling flocks of **Puffins** as they fly back and forth between their island burrows and the sea during the summer months;
- possible sightings of **Grey Seals, Basking Sharks, dolphins, porpoises and whales;**
- possible sightings of **Twites and Peregrines.**

We hope you enjoy your visit!



Illlaunmaistir, Co Mayo. Photo: National Parks and Wildlife Service



European Storm-petrels. Photo: Paul Walsh