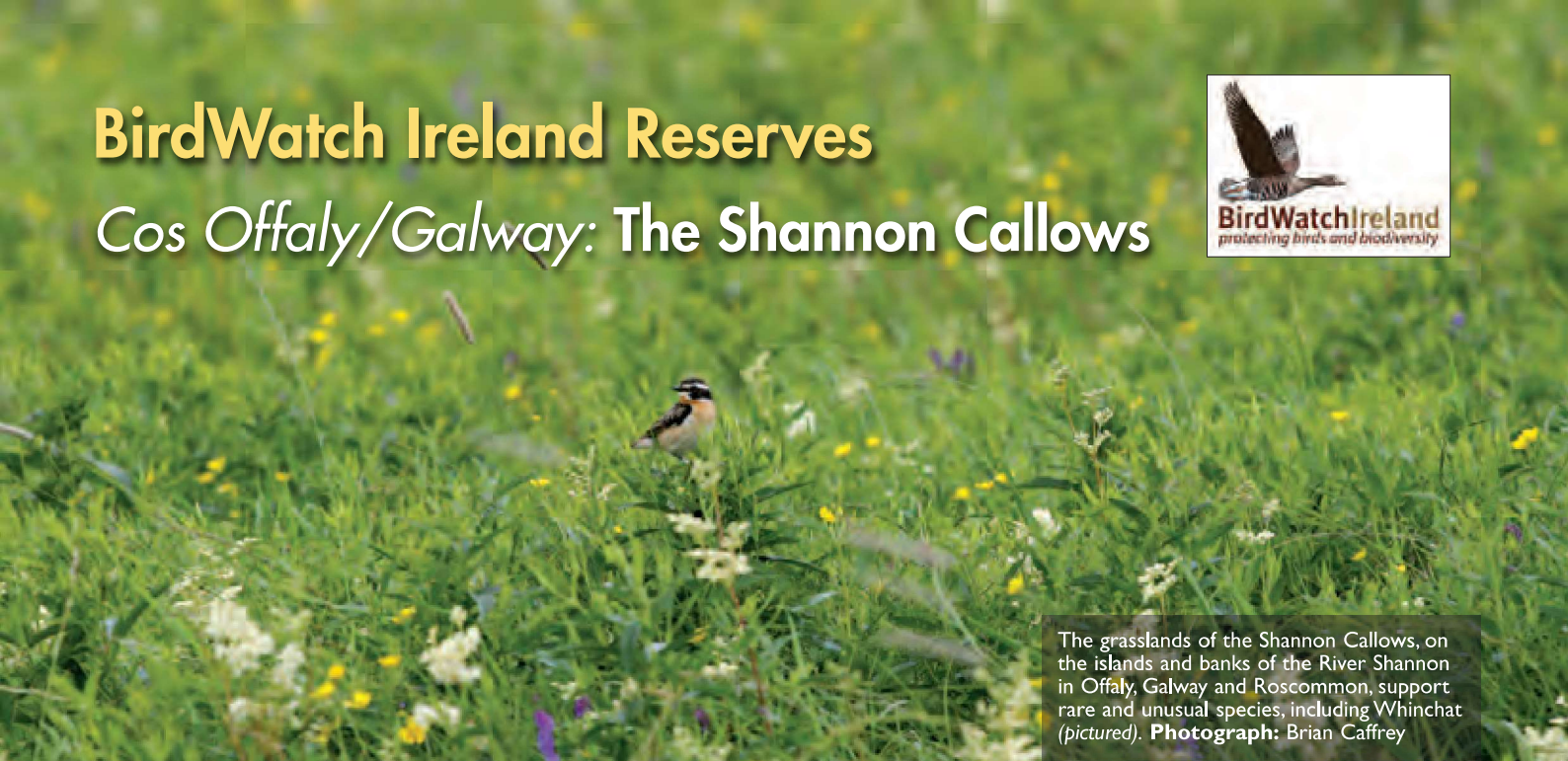


BirdWatch Ireland Reserves

Cos Offaly/Galway: The Shannon Callows



The grasslands of the Shannon Callows, on the islands and banks of the River Shannon in Offaly, Galway and Roscommon, support rare and unusual species, including Whinchat (pictured). **Photograph:** Brian Caffrey

Kathryn Finney, BirdWatch Ireland's Breeding Wader Management Officer, describes the attractions of the Shannon Callows Reserve, located between Shannonbridge and Banagher, Co Offaly.

Between 1993 and 1998, BirdWatch Ireland purchased several areas of grassland in the heart of the Shannon Callows. They collectively form the **Shannon Callows Reserve** today.

The two main parts of the reserve are our 23 hectares on **Bullock Island**, located near Shannon Harbour, 3 km north of Banagher, Co Offaly, and, a few kilometres upriver from there, three hectares on **Bishop's Island**, located north-east of Clonfert, Co Galway. These form part of the **Middle Shannon Callows Special Area of Conservation (SAC)**, and a **Special Protection Area (SPA)** for birds.

A callow – from the Irish word *caladh*, meaning flood-meadow – floods regularly in winter, but typically dries out in summer, when it can be used as pasture or for saving hay.

However, the Shannon Callows can be under water for anything up to six months of the year, and flooding can occur at any time. Because of this, the callows have not been subject to the same agricultural intensification that has occurred elsewhere for the last one hundred years or so, and therefore they remain a stronghold for many rare and threatened species and habitats.



The Shannon Callows in flood in winter at Bunua Cunna, Cloonown, Co Roscommon. **Photo:** Alyn Walsh (National Parks and Wildlife Service)

Formerly, the callows were an important stronghold for **Corncrakes**, but sadly, summer flooding caused their extinction by 2010. Even so, a visit during the summer months offers a chance to see other nationally important populations of breeding birds.

species and home to some rarities, including **Green-veined Orchid** and **Summer Snowflake**.

Although the grasslands no longer hold **Corncrakes** regularly, a walk along the access

Exploring the reserve

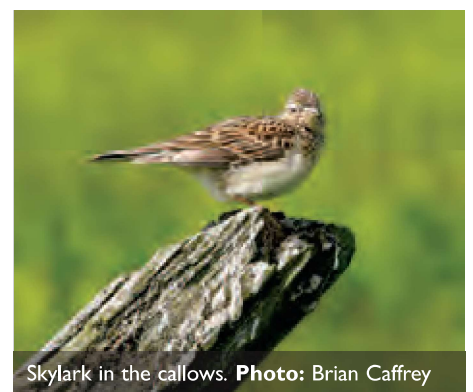
Located between Banagher and the picturesque village of Shannon Harbour, the Bullock Island part of the reserve is made up of several individual plots.

Our lands on Bishop's Island are located a few kilometres north of Bullock Island and just a stone's throw from the historic Clonfert Cathedral and the neighbouring remains of Bishop's Palace.

The grasslands in the reserve are rich in plant



Wild flowers in the callows grasslands.



Skylark in the callows. **Photo:** Brian Caffrey



Work we are doing on the Shannon Callows

We aim to manage our callows for the benefit of their breeding birds and the great diversity of plants and insects they support, without detriment to the traditional farming ecosystem.

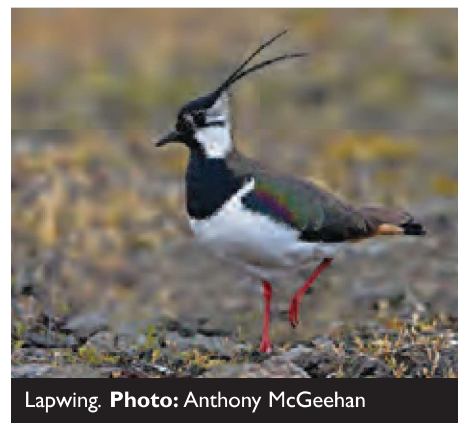
We aim to contribute to the conservation of priority species and to use this to provide advice, where practicable, to farmers on how to enhance the wildlife value of the area, particularly for breeding waders such as **Curlews**, **Redshanks** and **Lapwings**.

Visitor information

Access to the callows is easiest at **Shannon Harbour**, where parking is available and where tracks lead out onto the land. The callows are only accessible in the summer months, and on foot.

The callows are privately-owned farmland, so please do not walk through the grasslands. Stay on the tracks at all times and keep dogs on a leash and under close control at all times. Out on the callows, the tracks are used by tractors and there may be grazing animals present, so please do take care.

In winter, the callows are flooded, so please view from surrounding roads only.



Lapwing. Photo: Anthony McGeehan

tracks on a summer's day can yield the sounds of singing **Skylarks** and **Meadow Pipits**. Carefully scanning the tops of the taller grassland plants may reveal the presence of **Whinchats**, a scarce summer migrant in Ireland. Listen, also, for other summer visitors including **Sedge Warblers** and **Grasshopper Warblers**, singing from within the wetter grassland boundaries.

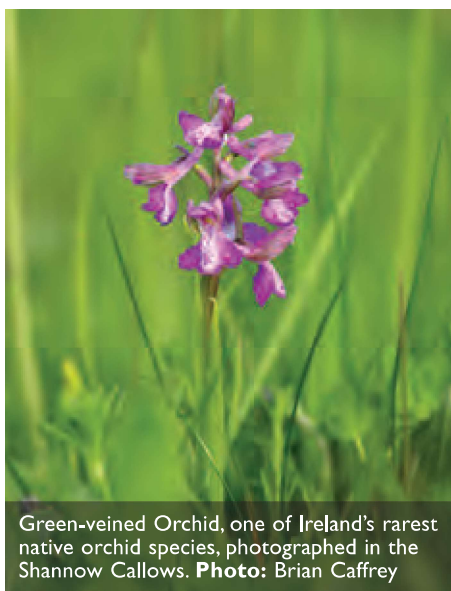
At this time of year, **Curlews**, with their bubbling calls, displaying **Lapwings**, alarm-calling **Redshanks** and drumming **Snipe** can also be seen and heard, particularly in grasslands grazed by cattle.

If you are visiting late on a summer's evening, you may be lucky enough to hear the distinctive "wet-my-lips" song of **Quail** or the 'whiplash' call of **Spotted Crake**; both are rare visitors and, if present, will keep well hidden in the long grass.

During a visit, it is also worth taking note of the traditional **callows farming system**. Here, there are very few boundary fences, although the land is divided into many small, narrow plots owned by individual farmers. Come mowing time, the farmers rely on knowledge passed down through the generations to locate their plot boundaries. This open system is a beauty to behold at the height of summer when the wildflowers are in bloom across the

vast expanse of the callows, and a variety of **bees** and **butterflies** can be witnessed dancing from flower to flower, while **dragonflies** hunt for food and for mates in their territories.

During winter, the callows are often flooded. However, scan the surrounding wet grassland edges for **Black-tailed Godwits**, **Golden Plovers** and **Lapwings**; all are often present in large numbers, along with wintering **swans**, **geese** and **ducks**.



Green-veined Orchid, one of Ireland's rarest native orchid species, photographed in the Shannon Callows. Photo: Brian Caffrey

Don't miss...

The sights and sounds of summer on the reserve, including:

- **Skylarks** singing high in the sky;
- **Curlews**, **Lapwings**, **Redshanks** and **Snipe** breeding in the grasslands. The first three are increasingly scarce breeders, owing to loss of their preferred nesting habitats;
- **Whinchats** in wet heath areas, **Quail** in the drier grasslands and **Spotted Crake** in the wet grassland and reedbeds;
- An array of **wild flowers** bringing colour to the grasslands, including the rare **Green-veined Orchid**;
- **Bees** and **butterflies** buzzing and dancing from flower to flower, and **dragonflies** hunting for food and mates.

We hope you enjoy your visit!