

Site Guide

by Des Finnermore

South County Laois

View of River Erkina wetlands from Woodenbridge. Photo: C  il  n MacLochlainn

Des Finnermore describes the best birding sites in south County Laois.

South Laois would not normally be noted as a key birding destination, but during periods of flooding, from November to March, the landscape is transformed. Large areas along the River Nore and its tributaries become very attractive to many wetland species. Ducks, swans and waders abound and, within these flocks, vagrants and rarities can occur.

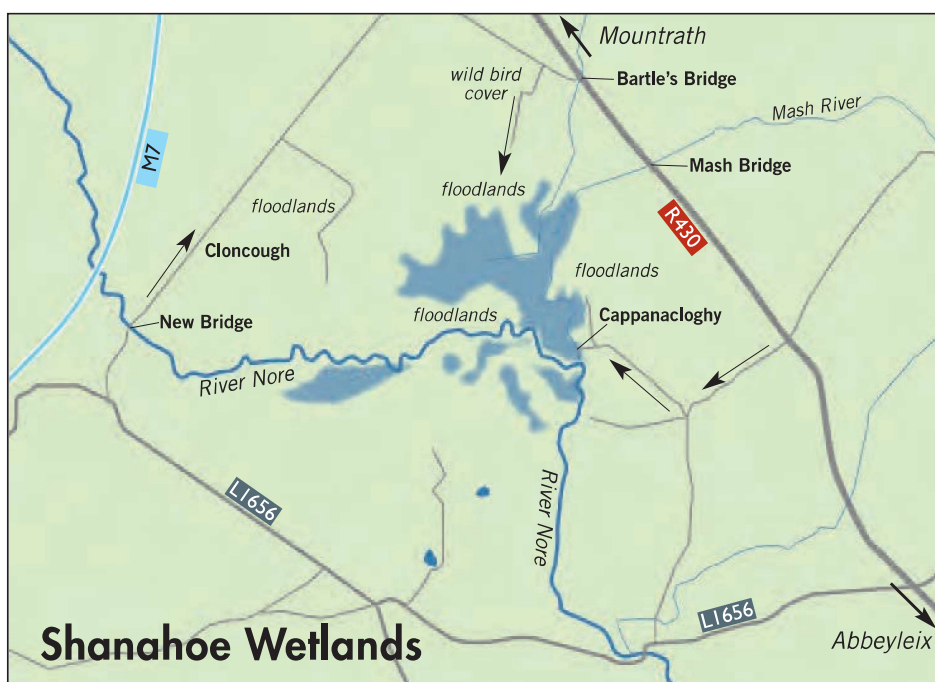
When flooding is severe the waters run deep, making underwater vegetation inaccessible to many waterbirds, forcing them to move to the flood edges. This can be good news for birders, though, as fields adjacent to public roads can become flooded and a lot of species can be viewed at close range.

Since taking up birding just over five years ago, visits to locations on my home patch around Ballacolla have become a delight, as one is never sure what will turn up next – and there have been many surprises!

Most of the land is privately owned but access to the floodwaters can be achieved using a myriad of farm tracks in public use, along with viewing points from some of the roads.

Woodenbridge

This bridge in the middle of the River Erkina floodplain is of interest all year round. During the summer, look for **Kingfisher**, **Sedge Warbler**, **Reed Bunting**, **Water Rail** and **Skylark**. A large



MAP: C  IL  N MacLOCHLAINN

inland **Cormorant** roost is located in trees upriver from the bridge.

In winter, a large area floods and, where islands form, you can see **Curlew**, **Lapwing**, **Golden Plover**, **Ruff** and **Dunlin**. Flocks of ducks, particularly **Wigeon**, **Teal**, **Shoveler** and **Pintail**, feed in the fields, while raptors such as

Buzzard, **Kestrel**, **Sparrowhawk**, **Merlin** and **Peregrine** are all regulars.

Woodenbridge gives one a first taste of what south Laois has to offer. A flock of up to 140 wintering **Whooper Swans** gathers on first arrival but breaks up into smaller groups as the floodwaters rise. **Otters** are resident. It is also possible to encounter **Long-eared Owls** or **Barn Owls** at dusk.

Boston Bridge

This site near Woodenbridge is reached via a cul-de-sac beside the M8. It lies at the western end of a floodplain known as the Curragh. It is on slightly raised ground, which gives good views over the floodplain; you will see species here similar to those at Woodenbridge in winter.

On drier ground, look for **Wheatears** in spring and autumn and **Stonechats** in winter, along with **Tree Sparrows** and **Yellowhammers** in the farmyard.

Grey Herons are resident; a small heronry is located in pines near the track. The above-

Six Green Sandpipers at Waterloo Bridge, Abbeylax, on March 2nd, 2016; the record is eight. Photo: Des Finnermore
Inset: Green Sandpiper in close-up. Photo: Paul Lynch





Great White Egret, left, and Little Egrets at Shanahoe on December 4th, 2017. Photo: Des Finnamore

mentioned **Cormorant** roost can be seen from here. Nearby, at Grantstown Lough, **Common Sandpipers** can be seen on the lily pads in July and August. This popular walking amenity of deciduous woodland and lakeshore offers views of a wide range of species, including **Moorhen**, **Water Rail**, **Swallows** and **martins**.

Shanahoe wetlands

This is an extensive area in the Nore floodplain, stretching from Mash Bridge on the R430 to Cloncough beside the M7. When in full flood, viewing can be good from either of these points, but you may need to use farm tracks to get closer.

At Bartle's Bridge a track heads westwards, passing a field of wild bird cover which in winter is great for **Tree Sparrow**, **Yellowhammer**, **Linnet**, **Greenfinch** and **Reed Bunting**. This takes you to a field gate with good views across the floodplain, where the meadows are grazed by herds of cattle from spring to autumn.

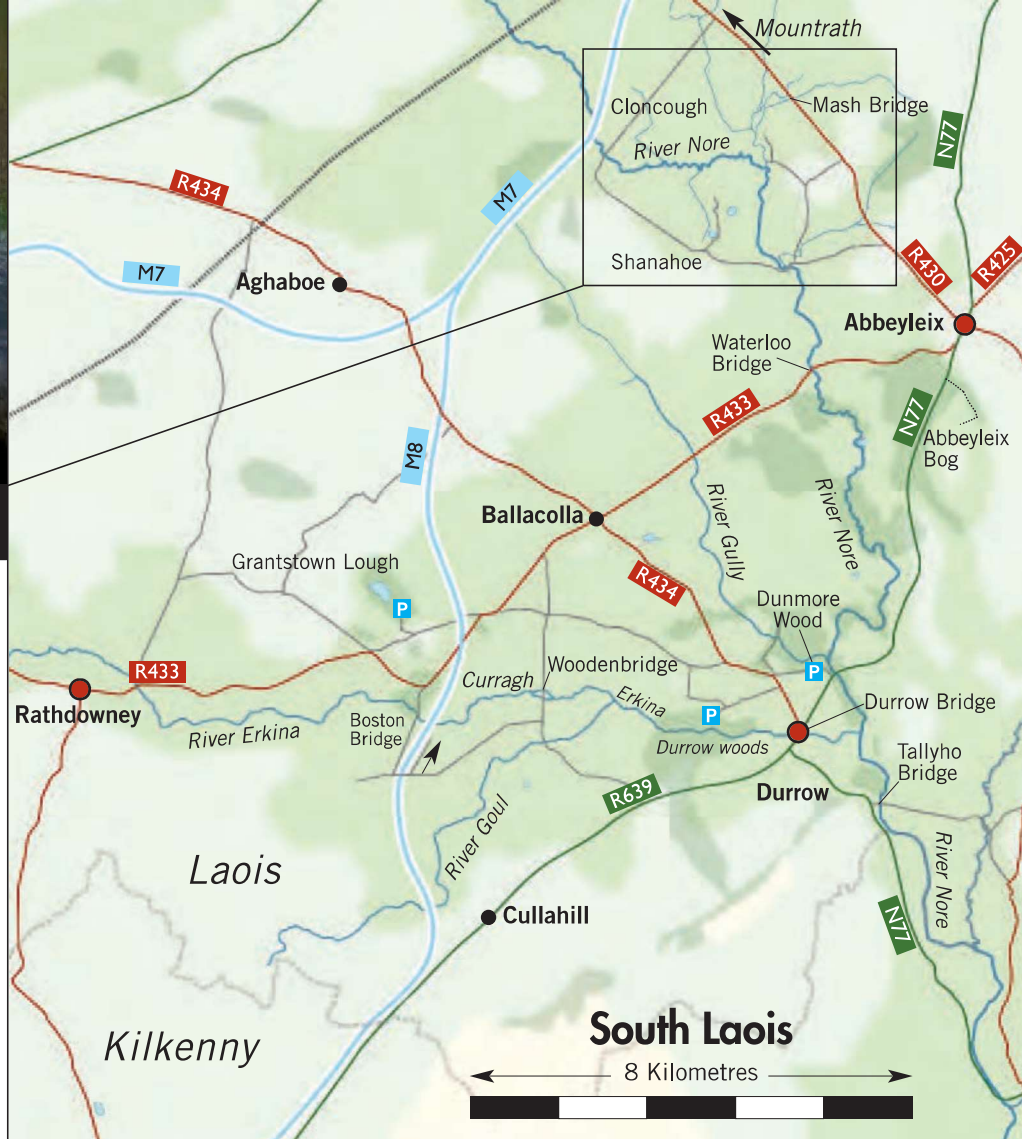
Go back towards Abbeyleix on the R430 and take the first right for Shanahoe. At an old water pump along this road, take a farm track to the right between some houses. This takes you to an old stone bridge with a farm gate over a small river (Mash), with the main floodwaters starting in front of you. Access can be possible here, depending on water levels, but parking is scarce. The fields are divided by drains, so be careful of water depth. It is possible to walk via the hedge along the river when safe.

During my visits over the years I have logged almost 100 species here. Many are similar to other local sites, but usually numbers are larger, particularly of **Pintail** this year.

Less common inland species such as **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Gadwall**, **Ruff** and **Little Egret** are regulars, with a count of 27 of the latter together on one occasion.

Birds such as **Great Crested Grebe**, **Redshank**, **Pink-footed Goose**, **Goldeneye**, **Whimbrel**, **Greenshank** and, my highlight, a **Great White Egret** (December 4th, 2017), have been noted here.

In winter, large flocks of **Redwings** and **Fieldfares** are present, with **Irish Hare** and



MAP: CÓILÍN MacLOCHLAINN

Stoat all year. Please note that local gun clubs are active during the season.

Waterloo Bridge

You will find Waterloo Bridge on the Nore, just outside Abbeyleix, on the R433 to Ballacolla. The river floods regularly beside Abbeyleix Demesne. When it floods, wintering **Green Sandpipers** are pushed into view, and up to eight have been seen together from the road.

Green Sandpipers occur throughout south Laois in winter; usually singly, but a gathering of eight is remarkable as, nationally, the bird has always been regarded as more of an autumn passage migrant than a winter visitor.

Tallyho Bridge

This bridge over the River Nore south of Durrow, on the road to Attanagh, is a good spot to park and observe the birdlife in a flooded field just over the low wall. **Whooper Swan**, **Snipe**, **Little Egret** and **Green Sandpiper** are amongst the regulars. In summer, **Daubenton's Bats** can be seen hunting for insects over the river surface at dusk.

Dunmore Wood

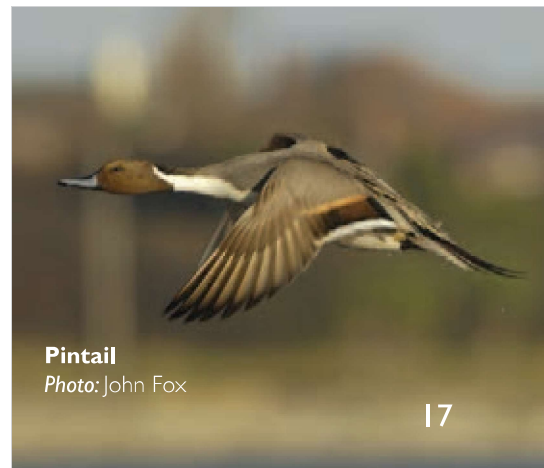
There is a popular walking trail through the woods here and along by the river: **Dipper**, **Kingfisher**, **Grey Wagtail** and **Jay** are resident. **Red Squirrels** are active, collecting nuts in

autumn, but this year's highlight was the discovery of **Purple Hairstreak** butterflies in oaks along the river walk in late summer.

Abbeyleix Bog

This is an excellent site for all-year-round walks using the resurfaced old railway track, a boardwalk and bog bridge. There are lots of **warblers** in spring, butterflies such as **Marsh Fritillary**, **Large Heath**, **Green Hairstreak**, **Silver-washed Fritillary** and **Brimstone** in summer; and **fungi** in autumn.

You can see **Crossbills** feeding in the pines, **Common Lizards** sunning themselves, or catch a glimpse of a **Pine Marten**. A highlight has been a **Woodcock** roding at dusk over the peaceful woodland. Listen for the calls of **Ravens** and **Buzzards** overhead and delight at being in such a magical place ■



Pintail
Photo: John Fox