

Where to watch

By Michael O'Clery



Top 5 sites & Top 10 birds

1 Brandon Bay and Brandon Point

Target species: Common Scoter, Great Shearwater

The broad sweep of Brandon Bay attracts sea and coastal birds throughout the year, but is best from October to April. It is accessible from four roads from the Castlegregory to Dingle road. From east to west these are Stradbally, Gowlane, Kilcummin and Fermoy, where the highest numbers of birds occur.

Great Northern and Red-throated Divers, Razorbill, Guillemot and Gannet are present almost all year, while Manx Shearwater and terns are often present in summer. On the beach, large gatherings of Common Gull and Oystercatcher occur.

At Fermoy a flock of Scaup is usually present offshore. Common Scoters are common in the west of the bay (800 or more in most winters) and are best seen on calm, bright days with little or no swell. A few Surf Scoters usually appear in winter, while Velvet Scoter is seen in larger numbers, but erratically. Close scrutiny of the flocks might reveal Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Black-throated Diver or Black-necked Grebe, all seen in recent years.

Lough Gill is the best wetland hereabouts and can be reached by leaving Castlegregory westwards and taking a right turn after the Natterjack Pub. Good views over the lake can be had from the small pier at the end of the road. Winter is the best time, and Whooper and Mute Swans, Teal, Tufted Duck, Scaup and Cormorant are all usually present. Gadwall, Coot, Pochard and Goldeneye also occur, and this is a good spot to see Otters as they dive and fish in the middle of the lake, especially in early morning or late evening.

Barnacle Geese are irregular winter visitors to the lake edge (from a small wintering flock on the Maharee Islands). If present, they will be on the fields between the road and lake on the southern side. From Castlegregory continue west, then turn right at the sign for the Golf Course, checking the fields on your right. Rare birds seen on the lake in recent years have included Surf Scoter, Ruddy Duck and Canada Goose, while Ring-billed and Mediterranean Gulls are seen in most years.

Brandon Point is well signposted and is reached by continuing west from Castlegregory for Dingle. Take a right turn, signposted for Cloghane and Brandon Point, and at Cloghane continue north until you reach the carpark at the Point. Autumn seawatching here can be dramatic, with thousands of seabirds passing the headland during onshore winds (winds from the northwest). It is possible to view these from the carpark with a telescope. Fulmar, Gannet and Chough are present all year, with Raven, Peregrine and Wheatear often seen in summer. During strong onshore winds from August to early November, you may see huge movements of seabirds. Manx and Sooty Shearwaters are regularly seen, while auks, terns and Storm Petrels can be encountered, and any good movement of seabirds will usually produce Arctic, Pomarine and Great Skuas. Rare seabirds have included Leach's, Wilson's and Fea's Petrels, Sabine's Gull, Long-tailed Skua, Great and Little Shearwaters and Little Auk.

1 Common Scoter

2 Great Shearwater

2 Trabeg

Target species: Lapwing, Greenshank

The estuary at Trabeg is reached by taking the turn signposted for Cinn Aird, 6km from Dingle on the N86 Dingle to Tralee road. Continue over a small bridge and take the next right for good views over the estuary. This area is good all year, except for midsummer. Avoid high tide, as part of this road will be flooded. This area holds a good variety of waders, gulls and other waterbirds. In particular, Lapwing, Greenshank, Redshank and Little Egret are usually immediately obvious. Golden Plover and Kingfisher sometimes occur, while Curlew, Red-breasted Merganser and Cormorant are usually seen. A large gathering of roosting gulls gather on the western side of the estuary at low tide, and Iceland, Mediterranean, Ring-billed and Yellow-legged Gulls have been seen recently. The estuary has also held some rare North American waders in recent autumns, with Pectoral, White-rumped and Semipalmated Sandpipers and Lesser Yellowlegs seen.

3 Lapwing

4 Greenshank

Great Shearwater
(Anthony McGeehan)



Inishnabro

Inishvickillane

Sybil Point

Ferriter's Cove

Clogher Head

Inishtooskert

Beginish

village

Blasket Sound

pier

Slea

5 Great Blasket Island

3 Dingle Harbour

Target species: Black Guillemot, Iceland Gull

The port at Dingle is one of the easiest places to see Black Guillemots throughout the year. Several pairs nest in the pier walls and can often be seen swimming in the harbour. If there is a lot of activity they may move outside but are usually easy to find, often giving terrific close-up views. The fishing port, though much less busy lately, can attract large gatherings of gulls, especially in winter, though this depends on trawler activity. Look carefully around the harbour for many of the commoner gull species. Some more unusual gulls occur here with some frequency: Iceland and Glaucous Gulls can sometimes be found in winter while rarer visitors have included Ring-billed, Laughing, Kumlien's and American Herring Gulls. The nearby bridge at Milltown, just west of Dingle town, is a loafing area for many gulls and holds small numbers of ducks and waders, with usually one or two Mediterranean Gulls and Little Egrets present. Elegant Tern and King Eider have been seen in this area.

Burnham Lagoon is another spot well worth checking. It can be reached by leaving Dingle heading west, following the signs for Sleah Head Drive or for Ventry. After 3km pull in at the side of the road just before an area of mature woodland. Walk down the short muddy path to the coast. The lagoon is to your right, the main bay to your left. Redshank, Greenshank and Little Egret are usually present, along with common waders and gulls.

This is also a good spot for Whimbrel, while Common Sandpiper is possible in winter. Rare species seen here have included Surf Scoter,



Black Guillemot

Breffni Martin



Iceland Gull

Dick Coombes

Stilt Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper and Spoonbill. The woodlands hold breeding Spotted Flycatcher, Long-tailed Tit and Blackcap in summer.

5 Black Guillemot

6 Iceland Gull



Lapwings

Clive Timmons



Greenshank

John Fox



W Kerry

Area covered by map



Head

Where to watch ... Dingle



White-tailed Eagle

Photo: Mike Brown



Arctic Tern

Photo: Dick Coombes

4 Smerwick Harbour

Target species: Chough, Pectoral Sandpiper

The best area of Smerwick Harbour is the southeast corner, where a small beach, reedbed and small lagoon hold most of the birds. It can be reached from the main R559 Dingle to Ballyferriter road, turning right opposite Tig Bhric's pub and shop. Take the next right to the beach. Waders and gulls gather here, mainly at mid- to low-tide. 50m to your right is a small metal footbridge. Cross this and walk up the river channel. A small lagoon becomes visible to your left, behind the sand dunes. Although numbers of birds can be quite low, this whole area has been a magnet for rare species in recent years and deserves a thorough search. Although rarities can appear at any time of year, May and autumn are best. American Black Duck, Wilson's Phalarope, Buff-breasted Sandpiper and American Black Tern are just some of the highlights from recent years, and Pectoral Sandpiper is as likely to be encountered here in September as at any site in Ireland. This whole coastal area is good for Chough throughout the year.

Nearby Ferriter's Cove is also worth a look and holds large numbers of gulls and waders. This is another rarity hotspot, with Baird's Sandpiper, American Golden Plover and Kumlien's Gull seen here. To reach it, leave Ballyferriter heading west on R559 for Dunquin and take a right just 1km from Ballyferriter. Continue for another 1.5km until the beach becomes visible on your left.

7 Chough

8 Pectoral Sandpiper

5 Great Blasket Island

Target species: Arctic Tern, White-tailed Eagle

Boat trips to Great Blasket Island depart from the pier close to Dunquin. The trips run every half hour in good weather, from May to early September, and the crossing takes about 20 minutes. You will be allowed three hours on the island, though longer stays, and overnight stays, can be made by arrangement with the boatman. Other boats leave from Dingle town – information on these can be obtained from the tourist office.

On the journey across, Fulmar and Lesser Black-backed Gulls are easily seen and a large Arctic Tern colony can be seen on Beginish,

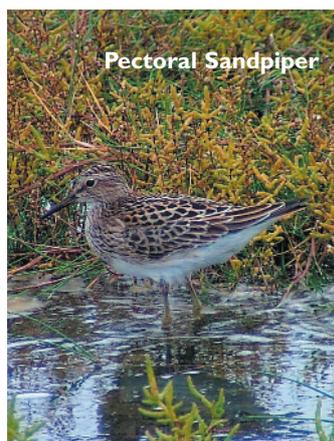
the large, flat island to your right on the way out. Shags and Black Guillemots are often present in Blasket Sound and Manx Shearwaters can sometimes be seen in the channel. Razorbills and Guillemots can often be seen in small groups.

The landing area is below the village. There is a small café, hostel and camping grounds. Choughs are common on Great Blasket and it won't be long before you see and hear them overhead, sometimes in company with Ravens. Kestrels are frequently seen hunting over the grassy slopes. In summer, Wheatears and some Swallows and Robins can be found around the village, and there is always the chance of an encounter with something rarer: Wryneck, Red-rumped Swallow and Yellow-rumped Warbler have been seen in recent years.

The Blaskets are expected to be one of the future nesting sites for the White-tailed Eagles from the reintroduction project, and an encounter with one of these impressive raptors is now increasingly likely. There have already been sightings in the area since birds were released in August, and one was seen on the island in the last days of September. It is expected that several pairs could be nesting on the islands within five years. What more magnificent a sight could there be for such a magnificent area?

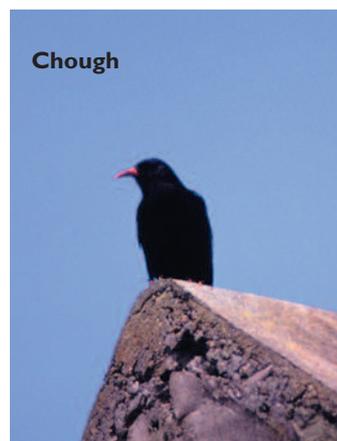
9 Arctic Tern

10 White-tailed Eagle



Pectoral Sandpiper

Jerry Cassidy



Chough

Oran O'Sullivan