

Where to watch

By Breffni Martin



Most of Louth's best birdwatching sites are situated on the coast. We begin our tour at Carlingford Lough and travel southwards via Dundalk harbour, Lurgangreen and Clogherhead to the Boyne estuary. The headlands are all good for migrants in spring and autumn, while the sea bays and wetlands are best in winter, when sea ducks, dabbling ducks, waders and gulls are most common.

Top 5 sites & Top 10 birds

1 Cooley Peninsula

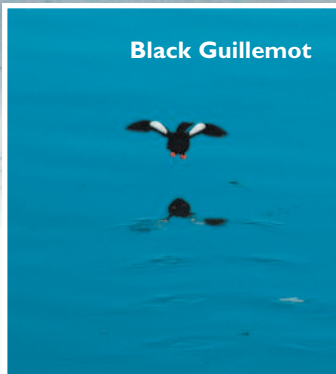
Target species: Black Guillemot, Greenshank

Carlingford has beaches and mudflats with mountains and woods nearby. Buzzard, Raven and Dipper are found on Carlingford Mountain, while the forests on Slieve Foye support Jay, Crossbill, Long-eared Owl, Woodcock and Grasshopper Warbler. From the pier at Carlingford in winter, scan the bay for grebes, divers and Scaup. Rarities have included Black-throated and White-billed Divers and Slavonian Grebe. Continue past the sailing club, back to the main road, scanning for waterbirds. Harbour Seals lounge on the rocks, and Whimbrel and Common Sandpiper occur on passage. Continue on to a small inlet, Shilties Lough, and, from the smaller road, look for Lapwing, Teal, Wigeon, Kingfisher and Yellowhammer.

Greenore port is excellent for Black Guillemots in spring and for terns, which nest on nearby Green Island. Ballagan Point is good for seawatching (Long-tailed Skua has been seen). On land, look for Snow Bunting, Twite and White Wagtail in winter. Rare migrants have included Firecrest and Radde's Warbler. At Whitestown beach, Mediterranean Gulls and White Wagtails are regular and Sand Martins nest in the sand-cliffs. Cooley Point, a rocky coastal spit, is much favoured by Cormorants, Brent Geese, Golden and Grey Plovers and Turnstones. The finches and wagtails at Templetown beach are worth a closer look, while Shelling Hill, at the end of the beach, is a useful seawatch point. Giles Quay is excellent for Black Guillemots. Look also for divers, sawbills, scoters, Eider and Long-tailed Duck.

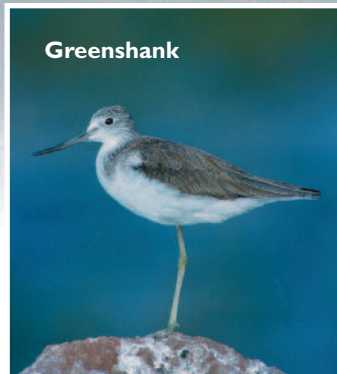


Carlingford Lough and the Mountains of Mourne
(Breffni Martin)



Black Guillemot

Bill Quinn



Greenshank

Billy Clarke

1 Black Guillemot

Giles Quay supports a large nesting population.

2 Greenshank

The mudflats around Cooley peninsula hold good numbers in winter.

2 Dundalk Harbour

Target species: Ruff, White Wagtail

Dundalk Docks, where the Castletown and Flurry Rivers flow into the sea, is rich in estuarine mudflats. A large flock of Mute Swans and many ducks and waders can be viewed from the quay wall. Look for the large flocks (5,000+) of Golden Plovers and Black-tailed Godwits (up to 2,000). Ruff (5-6), Curlew and Common Sandpiper are regular and recent rarities have included Temminck's Stint, Long-billed Dowitcher and Green-winged Teal.

Leaving the docks, take the first left turn down the Point Road, leading to Soldier's Point and the Navy Bank, a half-mile walkway along the riverbank. This area is good for Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits, Curlew, Redshank, Dunlin, Golden Plover, Grey Plover, Shelduck, Wigeon, Teal, Grey Heron and occasional Goldeneye and Pintail. Just east of Soldier's Point, look for White Wagtail, Twite and Water Pipit.

3 Ruff

Regular at Dundalk Docks on passage and in winter.

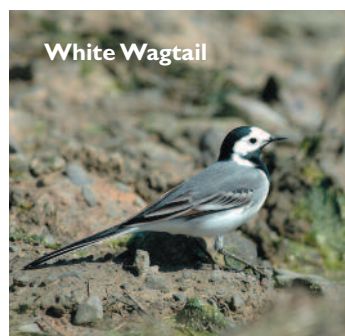
4 White Wagtail

Can often be seen at Soldier's Point, Dundalk.



Ruff

Sean Cronin



White Wagtail

John Murphy



Common Scoter

(Eddie Dunne)

3 Lurgangreen to Dunany Point

Target species: Common Scoter, Greylag Goose

Follow the R172 south from Dundalk and through Blackrock, heading towards Castlebellingham. Cross the Lurgangreen Bridge on the River Fane and turn left down a short cul-de-sac to a saltmarsh. This area holds a variety of waterfowl in winter. Up to five species of goose occur – Greylag, White-fronted, Pink-footed, Brent and Barnacle – and are best viewed by walking about 100m south and viewing from the high bank that runs along the shore.

Turning back, take a left turn down a narrow road to Seabank, at the southern end of the marsh. This area is excellent for winter ducks and waders, particularly on a rising tide, and the fields regularly hold a variety of wintering geese.

Barn Owl has been seen here occasionally, as well as Hen Harrier, Peregrine and Merlin, and Osprey is regular on passage. Of all the sites in Louth, Lurgangreen offers the most exciting possibilities.

Follow the N1 south to Castlebellingham, turn left onto the coast road (R166) and pause at the estuary of the rivers Glyde and Dee and Annagassan Strand to look for waders and gulls, before going on to Salterstown, the Hermitage and Dunany Point. This area is excellent for divers, grebes (Slavonian is regular) and sea ducks, particularly scoters and occasionally Long-tailed Duck, Scaup and Eider. Rarities have included Velvet Scoter, Black-throated Diver and Goosander. The Hermitage has produced Arctic Skua, Black Tern, Yellow Wagtail, Wood Sandpiper and Little Auk.

5 Common Scoter

One of the many seabirds that can be seen off Salterstown.

6 Greylag Goose

Lurgangreen attracts Greylag and other goose species in winter.



Greylag Goose John Carey

Where to watch ...in Louth



Grey Plover

Billy Clarke



Little Tern

Michael Finn



Great Crested Grebe

Mike Brown

4 Clogherhead & Cruisetown Strand

Target species: Manx Shearwater, Grey Plover

Return to the R166 and continue south to Cruisetown Strand. At its southern end there is a freshwater stream outflow which attracts gulls and terns – Yellow-legged Gull, Franklin's Gull and Black and Forster's Terns have been seen here. Sanderling and Little Stint are regular on passage on the beach.

Further south, you come to Clogherhead. The harbour, Port Oriel, holds a small colony of Black Guillemots. A small garden near the harbour regularly attracts spring and autumn migrants, sometimes rare vagrants. Ireland's first Rock Thrush and Serin were found on the headland.

Clogherhead is one of the best seawatching points on the east coast, with Manx, Sooty and Mediterranean Shearwaters, skuas and Storm and Leach's Petrels passing regularly.

7 Manx Shearwater

One of the many seabirds that can be seen passing Clogherhead.

8 Grey Plover

One of the wader species found on Cruisetown Strand in winter.



Manx Shearwaters

Anthony McGeehan / RSPB-images.com

5 Boyne estuary

Target species: Little Tern, Great Crested Grebe

As you come through Drogheda, check out Mell Quarry between the N1 and R168. Park near the entrance gates and view through the green fencing. A male Ring-necked Duck regularly overwinters here with Tufted Ducks. Also look for Pochard, Shelduck, breeding Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Mute Swan, Coot and Moorhen. Fulmars have been absent since excavation works commenced at the quarry.

En route from Drogheda to Baltray, turn off the R167 and take a walk around Beaulieu Pond (opposite Beaulieu House). Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler, Mute Swan, Little Egret, Coot, Moorhen, Little Grebe, Tree Creeper, Redpoll, Kingfisher, Chiffchaff and Grey Wagtail may be seen here and, from March to July, you can hear the raucous calls of Grey Herons in the heronry.

Along the Boyne estuary, from Tom Roe's Point out to Baltray village, you may see Wigeon, Teal, Shelduck (breeding), Lapwing, Golden Plover, Brent Goose, Black-tailed Godwit, Snipe and passage migrants such as Curlew Sandpiper.

Continue through Baltray, past the golf course, to the beach (looking out for Skylarks) where Little Tern and Ringed Plover nest on the shingle from May to July. Also look for gulls, Common and Sandwich Terns, Cormorant and waders.

9 Little Tern

Ireland's rarest nesting seabird can be seen on the beach at Baltray from May to July. You will see signs and a fence erected to protect the nesting area. Ringed Plovers also nest here.

10 Great Crested Grebe

Great Crested Grebes breed on the Mell Quarry ponds.

(NB: The Boyne estuary has the record for the world's most northerly breeding Little Egrets. In 2006, one pair successfully fledged four young. They can be seen feeding along the river or on Beaulieu Pond.)

• Acknowledgments to Margaret Reilly for preparing the Boyne estuary section.