

# Where to watch

By **Alex Copland**



## Top 5 sites:

Turraun Nature Reserve. – Tom Egan (Bord na Móna)

### 1 Little Brosna (Ashton's) Callows

**Target species:** Greenland White-fronted Goose, Black-tailed Godwit, Garganey

**Access:** The Little Brosna Callows are best viewed from minor public roads running parallel to the River Little Brosna on its northern side between New Bridge (next to the Angler's Rest pub) and Victoria Lock. If scanning fields from this road ensure that cars are well off the road, and do not block any gates.

Ashton's Callow hide (which is maintained by the Tipperary Branch of BirdWatch Ireland) is accessed from the R348 Borrisokane-Cloghan Road. Park adjacent to the Angler's Rest and walk south to the first road on the right. Take this road past two houses and, where the track turns sharp right, go straight ahead through the gate and follow the path as it meanders through the woodland, out onto the open bog and back into woodland around the hide. This track can be flooded in winter, so wellies are recommended.

**Habitats:** Predominantly lowland wet grasslands, which are flooded in winter. Some stubble fields also provide interest.

**Birds:** Winter is the best time of year to view this site. Large flocks (1,000+) of Black-tailed Godwit and over 100 Whooper Swans and Greenland White-fronted Geese are regularly seen, as are thousands of Wigeon, Teal, Lapwing and Golden Plover and significant flocks of Pintail and Shoveler. Scarcer birds can also be found at this time: Little Egret is increasingly regular and rarities such as Green-winged Teal have been recorded.

If the water levels are right, the callows can be excellent in spring for passage waders such as Whimbrel. Late-staying Black-tailed Godwit can be seen in breeding plumage in April, when Spotted Redshank and Ruff may also be seen. Garganey have become almost annual, and Marsh Harriers are regularly recorded. Rarities in recent years have included Common Crane and Long-Billed Dowitcher.

The New Bridge over the River Little Brosna at the Angler's Rest is a good location for Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail, and Dipper has bred here in recent years.

Alex Copland

### Whinchat



### 2 Shannon Callows

**Target species:** Corncrake, Whinchat, Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank

**Access:** In Offaly, access to the callows is easiest at Clonmacnois, Shannonbridge, Shannon Harbour and Banagher. Most of the callows have tracks for tractor access, and these can be used by birdwatchers on foot. However, the callows are privately-owned farmland and, due to the risks of disturbing or trampling ground-nesting birds, please do not walk through the grasslands, and keep dogs on a lead.

**Habitats:** The Shannon Callows are the natural floodplain of the River Shannon between Lough Ree in the north and Lough Derg at the southern end. The majority of the callows comprises lowland wet grasslands that are either grazed during summer or left for hay, which is mown in the autumn. The callows in winter can range from being almost dry to being under several feet of water, depending on rainfall.

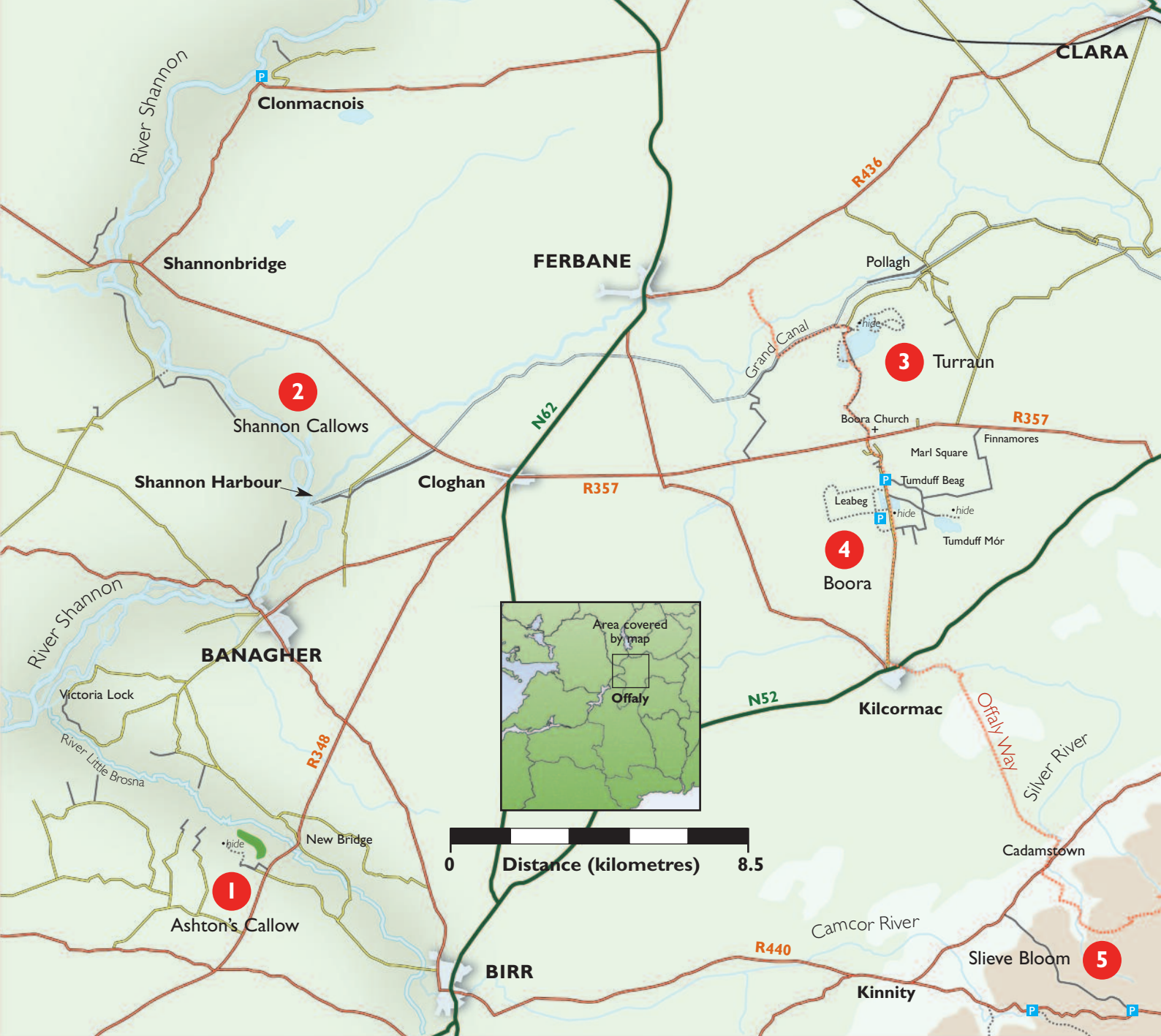
**Birds:** The Shannon Callows are one of the last remaining refuges of breeding Corncrakes in Ireland. Snipe can be heard drumming in the evening when listening for Corncrakes, as can other summer visitors such as Sedge and Grasshopper Warblers or the very rare Quail or Spotted Crake. During the day it is worth looking out for waders such as Lapwing, Redshank and Curlew, which all still breed on the callows. Whinchat and Stonechat can be seen perched on fence-posts or tall vegetation in the grasslands during May and June, and Great-crested Grebe can be seen on the river.

The whole landscape changes with the winter floods. At this time of year, thousand-strong flocks of Wigeon, Golden Plover and Lapwing are not unusual, interspersed with smaller numbers of Whooper Swan, Pintail, Shoveler, Teal, Dunlin, Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit. These birds range up and down the river so no one place can guarantee birds. Any of the minor roads that pass along the callows' edge are well worth investigating, and the callows at Shannon Harbour are often very productive. Ruff are regular in small numbers, and occasional rarities such as American Wigeon can be found amongst the larger flocks.

Pádraig Kavanagh



Greenland White-fronted Geese at Annagh, Ashton's Callow



### 3 Turraun Nature Reserve

**Target species:** Woodcock, Hen Harrier, Jack Snipe, Cuckoo

**Access:** Turraun wetlands are located near Pollagh. Vehicle access is easiest via Pollagh from either the R357 Blueball-Cloghan Road or the R436 Clara-Ferbane Road. Take the road west out of Pollagh (south of the Grand Canal) and follow this for about two miles until the tarmac surface stops at a 'T' junction. Turn left, and follow the track as it sweeps round right for about 200m to a car park. Walk back about 100m to a track leading off to your right that takes you into the nature reserve. For long-distance walkers, Turraun lies on the Offaly Way between Boora Church and the Grand Canal. Leaflets detailing the site can be found in local tourist offices and more information can be found at [www.loughbooraparklands.com](http://www.loughbooraparklands.com).

**Habitats:** Turraun was the first area to come out of commercial peat extraction and be restored to wetlands and woodland habitats by Bord na Móna. The wetlands comprise a freshwater lake fringed to the north-east by reeds, to the north-west by alder and reed scrub and open on its southerly shores. Other habitats include bare (cutaway) peatlands, reedbeds, birch, willow, gorse and mixed scrub, and some open bog.

**Birds:** Due to the variety of habitats, Turraun is worth a visit at any time of the year. Great-crested Grebe breeds on the lake, and Grasshopper Warbler, Cuckoo and Lesser Redpoll can be heard from the woodland. In winter, Hen Harriers can regularly be seen around the reedbeds, with a good variety of duck on the lake. Woodcock occur in good numbers in the woodlands, as do large flocks of Lesser Redpoll, interspersed with the occasional Siskin. Damp, open, rough grassy areas near the lakeshore are an excellent location for Jack Snipe, which often flush up from the tracks and paths.



Black-tailed Godwit

Ronnie Martin

# Where to watch ... in Offaly

Leabeg, Boora, Co Offaly. - Tom Egan (Bord na Móna)

## 4 Lough Boora

**Target species:** Grey Partridge, Marsh Harrier, Short-eared Owl

**Access:** This area of the Lough Boora Parklands is located between Boora village (south of the R357 Blueball-Cloghan Road) and north of Kilcormac (which lies on the N52 Tullamore-Birr Road). A number of car parks and way-marked trails exist on the site, and it is worth collecting site information leaflets from a local tourist office for a detailed map of the site (or see [www.loughbooraparklands.com](http://www.loughbooraparklands.com)).

Much of the land is privately farmed and, due to the presence of vulnerable ground-nesting birds in the area (especially Grey Partridge and waders such as Lapwing and Ringed Plover), it is essential that visitors stick to the ample network of paths, trails and tracks in the area. Also, dogs should not be taken into the core partridge conservation areas.

**Habitats:** Boora comprises several small, freshwater lakes interspersed with areas of private farmland and forestry plantations. The wetlands and amenity areas are principally managed by Bord na Móna, through a collaborative community partnership (The Lough Boora Parklands Group). The National Grey Partridge Conservation Project (a joint venture between the National Association of Regional Game Councils and the Irish Grey Partridge Conservation Trust) is funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and managed by The National Grey Partridge Conservation Project Ltd ([www.greypartridge.ie](http://www.greypartridge.ie)).

**Birds:** Boora is the location of the only remaining population of Irish Grey Partridge. The small areas of tillage (provided especially for the Grey Partridge to rear and feed chicks in) between Tumduff Beag and Finnermores, especially the Marl Square area, are the best spots to look or listen for these and other birds that take advantage of the habitat, such as Merlin and breeding Lapwings.

Spring and early summer is a good time to visit, with breeding Lapwing, Little Grebe and a colony of Black-headed Gulls at Tumduff Beag. Tumduff Mór and the Marl Square have had summering Marsh Harrier, Short-eared Owl and Quail in recent years.

Across the road from Tumduff Beag is Boora Lake, which can be good for passage waders in spring (Red-necked Phalaropes were recorded here in both 2007 and 2008) and autumn (typically Ringed Plover and Common Sandpiper, interspersed with the occasional Ruff or Greenshank).

During winter there are regularly over 100 Whooper Swans around the site, with huge flocks of 1,000+ Lapwing and Golden Plover and smaller flocks (50+) of Curlew also present.

The Grey Partridge tillage plots are also worth checking for wintering seed-eating flocks, dominated by Linnet, Lesser Redpoll, Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch, but with the occasional Stock Dove or Brambling. Hen Harrier are seen regularly during the winter.



Grey Partridge (male)

Alex Copland

## 5 Slieve Bloom

**Target species:** Hen Harrier, Red Grouse, Dipper, Woodcock

**Access:** Situated on the Laois/Offaly border, access is easiest from the Laois side via Mountrath, or via Kinnity on the Offaly side, taking either the R440 Mountrath-Kinnity Road over the Wolftrap or going through the Glendine Gap. Check out [www.slievebloom.ie](http://www.slievebloom.ie) for more information on access in the area.

**Habitats:** A mixture of open heather moorland on the hilltops with conifer plantations on the slopes and some mixed woodlands in sheltered valleys and on lower ground.

**Birds:** Worth a visit at any time of year for the excellent, self-guided trails and wonderful scenery over the low-lying Midlands. Bird interest is at its highest in summer when there is a chance of seeing Hen Harriers or hearing Red Grouse (both of which breed in the area). At dusk, a wander along some of the roads within mature forestry plantings can yield roding Woodcock. Many of the self-guided trails follow streams and rivers, such as the Silver River at Cadamstown or the Camcor near Kinnity. Jays can be seen in some of the mixed woodland in these sheltered valleys, Crossbills in the forestry and Dippers are regular on the fast-flowing watercourses.



Offaly County Council is pleased to work with BirdWatch Ireland and appreciates their contribution towards the biodiversity of Co Offaly.

For details on heritage in Offaly and on the Offaly Naturalists' Field Club, see <http://www.offaly.ie/offalyheritage>



Visit the Lough Boora Parklands  
in the heart of Co Offaly

Short-eared Owl



Alex Copland

# Top 10 birds:



**Grey Partridge female with chicks at Boora.**  
- Kieran Buckley (Irish Grey Partridge Conservation Trust)

## 1 Grey Partridge

Seeing this elusive species is difficult, but the best chance is in January-February when the males call in the evening. Try the Marl Square area in Boora.

## 2 Corncrake

The best place to hear them is from the bridge over the River Shannon in Banagher. In recent years Corncrakes have become scarce due to summer flooding, and it is worth contacting the BirdWatch Ireland Midlands Office in Banagher (on 05791 51676) if you're planning a visit.

## 3 Hen Harrier

In summer, the most reliable area for sightings is the Glendine Gap at the south end of the Slieve Blooms. In winter, they are regular on the callows and cutaway peatlands at Boora.

## 4 Red Grouse

The top of the Slieve Blooms, especially around the Wolftrap, is most reliable.



Red Grouse

Milie Brown

## 5 Greenland White-fronted Goose

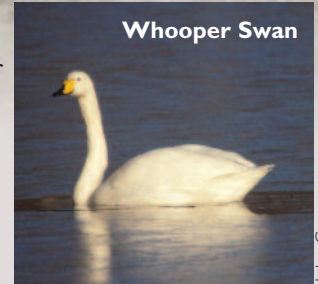
The Little Brosna Callows hold a regular winter flock, best seen at either Ashton's Callow or on fields flanking the river near the Angler's Rest.

## 6 Black-tailed Godwit

The hide at Ashton's Callow is the prime site for this species. Also regular on the callows near Shannon Harbour and Clonmacnois, especially in March.

## 7 Whooper Swan

A flock of over 100 spends the winter on grasslands around Boora. Similar numbers are regular on the Little Brosna Callows (especially towards Victoria Lock) and Shannon Callows.



Whooper Swan

John Carey

## 8 Whinchat

The callow grasslands in summer, especially at Clonmacnois and near Banagher, are regular sites, but they can turn up anywhere.

## 9 Woodcock

On summer evenings, roding Woodcock can be seen on the tracks through coniferous forestry above Kinnity. In the winter, the woodlands at Turraun hold good numbers.

## 10 Dipper

The River Camcor in Kinnity Castle demesne and the Silver River around Cadamstown are reliable locations, but can be seen on most fast-flowing rivers.

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