



Number 9 Spring 2014

BIRD DETECTIVES

The magazine for Junior Members of BirdWatch Ireland



FOCUS ON
KINGFISHERS

SPRING ALIVE
WITH SWIFTS

FANCY
A DIP?

SEABIRD
SPECIAL





Welcome!



Springing alive with Spring Alive!

It is really great to be involved with **Spring Alive 2014**. Now nine years old, www.SpringAlive.net brings together children, their teachers and families in Europe, Central Asia and Africa to observe and record the arrivals of five species of migrant birds: Swallow, Cuckoo, Swift and, in other parts of Europe, White Stork and Bee-eater. These last two are only very rare visitors to Ireland but you might see them if you are lucky enough to take a holiday abroad.

Spring Alive began as a project all across Europe to create an online map showing the arrival of these spring migrants. Though this remains a core activity, 2014 is set to be a special year for **Spring Alive**. We would like to encourage you to get more involved in a variety of indoor and outdoor events ranging from birdwatching outings to actions for the conservation of migratory birds. You will find them all on the **Spring Alive** website, just get ready to go out and act for nature!

There's no better way to enjoy the summer than watching over your local patch. Ponds are special habitats, so why not visit with a parent or guardian, and explore the food chain that emerges from the depths. You can enter the competition to

win a pond book. Towns and cities are not without teeming, screaming bird life: **Swifts** are the Formula One of the bird world, screaming in loud flocks as they fly at high speed around the rooftops – dare devils that never seem to collide but come so close!

Catch your breath and maybe make a trip to the coast. Our capital city even hosts a **Gannetry**: noisy, high rise living on the edge of the ocean. It's a sight and sound that is sure to stay with you all summer. Better still, why not record your summer experiences? We would love to receive readers paintings, photographs and written stories, to share with our members. The best ones will receive a prize!

Shelduck Holmes

Look out for Swifts!
See page 7



Graham Catley

Editorial Address: Bird Detectives, Unit 20 , Block D, Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow.

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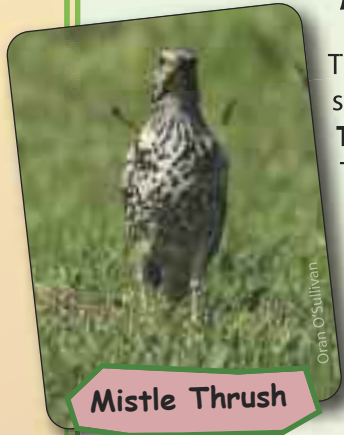


Shelduck Holmes

School of ID

Mistle or Song?

They look very similar, at first glance but differ quite markedly in their habits, and songs. There's more than one way to ID these beauties!



Oran O'Sullivan

Mistle Thrush

Thrushes are well known for their sweet songs, especially the **Song Thrush** and the **Mistle Thrush**. They are with us all year round, unlike Redwing and Fieldfare, which only spend the winter with us.

History in Song and Verse

Song Thrushes are one of the most welcome of birds which visit our gardens and are as widespread in suburban areas as in woodland. Their song is loud and ringing with full clear notes and a sweet tone.

It is Robert Browning's rapturous thrush that *'sings his song twice over'*, (good observer that Browning fellow, but not too good on the counting!) or Shakespeare's *'Throstle with her note so true'*.

The Mistle Thrush's song is not nearly as melodious as the Song Thrush but is powerful and far carrying. It has a certain rambling quality, but doesn't grab your attention like a Song Thrush. It is almost always delivered from the very top of one of the tallest trees often the nest tree itself, and is given in all weathers. Its habit of singing in windy and wet weather has earned it the name of 'Stormcock'.



Dick Coombes

Mistle Thrush

The Mistle Thrushes fondness for berries, was mentioned by Aristotle in his *History of Animals* in the 4th century BC. Its other Olde English names such as 'Hollin Cock' and 'Holm Cock' are also reminders of its favourite food, Holly berries.

ID and Habits

Song Thrush

Small. Brown upperparts with **small black spotting on warm buff breast**. Medium length plain brown tail. In flight, **underwing orange**.

Song Thrushes are usually seen singly, occasionally in pairs, and rarely far from cover. They often forage in the leaf litter in gardens, beneath trees or along the edge of shrubs and hedgerows. Their diet includes worms and grubs and berries in autumn and early winter. Its speciality however is feeding on snails, especially in dry weather when worms are harder to find. It cracks these against a stone to break their shells and over time the area surrounding the 'anvil' becomes littered with shell fragments, a good indication that there is a Song Thrush at work!



Oran O'Sullivan

Song Thrush



Oran O'Sullivan

Song Thrush

Mistle Thrush

Big. Bold appearance. Upperparts cold grey-brown, **underparts white with large bold black spotting**. Long tailed with **white tips to outer tail feathers**. In flight, **underwing whitish**.

Mistle Thrushes often hop in big bounds across open fields and parks, quite unlike a Song Thrush. Usually stand bolt upright on the ground. In autumn and winter they will form flocks of up to 20 birds, often mixed in with their cousins from Scandinavia. They rely on berries for winter food, and can be really aggressive defending single berry bushes or trees from other, smaller thrushes.



Wikimedia.org
Marek Szczepanek

Brightly coloured jewel of the river

FACT FILE

Irish name Cruidín	Irish population 1,000 – 2,500 pairs
Wingspan 24 – 26 cm	Food Fish, rarely insects and frogs
Weight 34 – 46 grammes	No. of broods 1 or 2
No. of eggs 6 – 7	Nest Tunnel in river bank
Incubation of eggs 19 – 21 days	Threats Pollution, severe cold weather
Fledgling period 23 – 27 days	

Our Kingfishers are fairly sedentary birds of slow-moving, lowland rivers and lakes. However, migrant birds have been recorded on a number of occasions on Cape Clear Island, off County Cork, and one bird was seen in September 2013, within metres of O’Connell Bridge, in Dublin’s city centre.

Catching fish

Our Kingfishers feed by launching themselves from a perch such as an overhanging branch and diving straight into the water with their sharp bill open and dagger-like. Their eyes are protected underwater by a second eyelid.

John Murphy



Kingfishers are about the same size as a House Sparrow, that’s about 18cm, or the length of a pencil.

Female Kingfishers have a pale reddish base to the lower bill, the male’s bill is all dark.

The smallest kingfisher in the world is the African Dwarf Kingfisher, it weighs a mere 10 grams, less than ½ an ounce. The largest is the Australian Laughing Kookaburra, weighing in at 490g or just over a pound weight; it doesn’t feed on fish at all, preferring snakes, lizards, frogs and snails.



Pied Kingfishers, found in the Middle East and Africa, feed by hovering over water, without the need for a perch.



Kingfishers are found all over Ireland, along unpolluted rivers and lakes.

Apart from Ireland, they are also found all over Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia!



A bird found on rivers all over Europe and Asia



Sinead Cummins

A quiet, slow-moving river with overhanging branches - perfect for a fishing Kingfisher.

Kingfishers like slow-moving rivers, the kind you see in low-lying, flat areas. They need a sandy bank for nesting and some overhanging vegetation for hunting.

Kingfishers are often reported by anglers, walking along stretches of river bank with similar intentions - to catch fish!

Bright, bright blue on its back - you nearly need sunglasses to look at it!

Where to find them

You might be surprised how many Kingfishers we have... for such a brightly coloured bird they are surprisingly hard to see! This is because they are very patient and secretive birds that lurk in the shadows, watching for small fish, their favourite food.

If they have to break cover, they are extremely quick. In fact you might hear one first and only glimpse a streak of colour flying away from you: that flash of turquoise runs right down the back and is best seen when the bird is in flight.



Wikimedia.org
Peter J. Trimming



Like all good anglers, Kingfishers have lots of patience and can sit still for long periods.

Dealing with fish

An adult Kingfisher needs to catch and eat about **17 minnows a day**. A pair with young might need to catch over **110 minnows in a day**. Is fresh breath a problem? You bet! The odour and mess in a Kingfisher's burrow is as distinctive as its bright plumage. At least the adults can wash off bones and fish scales – they are never far from a shower or a bath!

Sticklebacks and minnows are caught and prepared by knocking the victim out before swallowing it. They go down head first. This ensures that fins or spines are flat and don't get caught in the Kingfisher's throat. Fish is sometimes presented to a breeding partner.



A fish goes down head first.

Nesting

To nest along rivers, Kingfishers need to burrow in a vertical or overhanging sandy bank and excavate a hole up to a metre long. The tunnel ends in a nesting chamber which slopes upwards. Here the female will lay about **seven white eggs**. In a good season they may have up to three broods of youngsters.

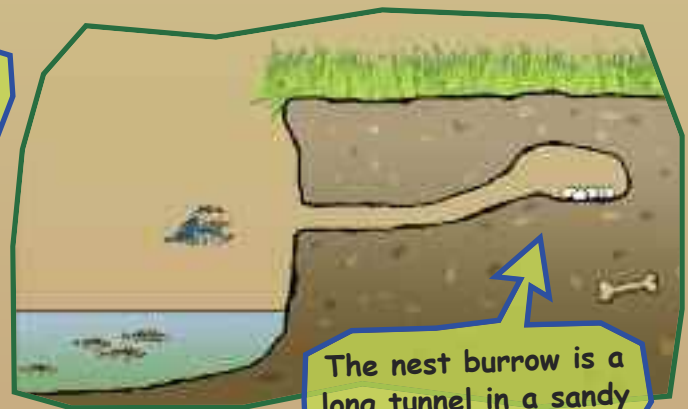


Michael Finn

Males will offer fish to females during courtship.

Winter

Kingfishers defend territories from early autumn onwards, to protect feeding rights over a stretch of river. Survival in winter can be very difficult. Frozen stretches of rivers and lakes prevent birds from feeding and getting enough food to survive the long dark hours. Birds can move to the coast where the salty lagoons and intertidal areas are unlikely to freeze over. Populations can recover quickly, because in good years they can raise up to three broods of young in summer.



The nest burrow is a long tunnel in a sandy river bank.

Threats

Apart from hard weather, the most obvious threat to Kingfishers is from water pollution. Clean water ensures a steady food supply. Covering over waterways with culverts also disrupts the Kingfishers' territories and may lead to birds colliding with traffic or other objects away from water.



Spring Alive Swifts

When you see Swifts this summer,
please report them at www.springalive.net

Swifts

The Swift is sooty brown all over, but against the sky it appears black. It has long, scythe-like wings and a short, forked tail. You could mistake it for a Swallow, but the easiest way to tell them apart is to remember that Swifts don't bend their wings while flying. It's also nearly impossible to see them land – their nesting places are hidden away in roofs and they fly in and out very quickly. Swifts have an unusually long lifespan for a bird – some can live to the age of 21!

Unlike Swallows, Swifts never perch. You might see screaming parties of them careering madly at high speed around rooftops and houses, mainly in towns and cities, especially towards dusk. Swifts are superb fliers, and spend almost the whole of their lives on the wing. They land only to breed. They even sleep on the wing!

They are easiest to observe in built-up areas, where they build their nests in the cracks and holes in buildings, and sometimes in specially provided nest boxes. Remember that Swifts are very common in towns and cities, but can be rather hard to spot in the countryside.

How do I tell a Swift from a Swallow?

Swifts are noticeably larger than Swallows, and their wings are longer, significantly narrower, and scythe-shaped. Unlike Swallows, Swifts do not bend their wings while flying. Also, a Swift's tail is wider and shorter than a Swallow's. You should remember that generally you will see Swallows in the countryside and Swifts in the city or towns.

What do they eat?

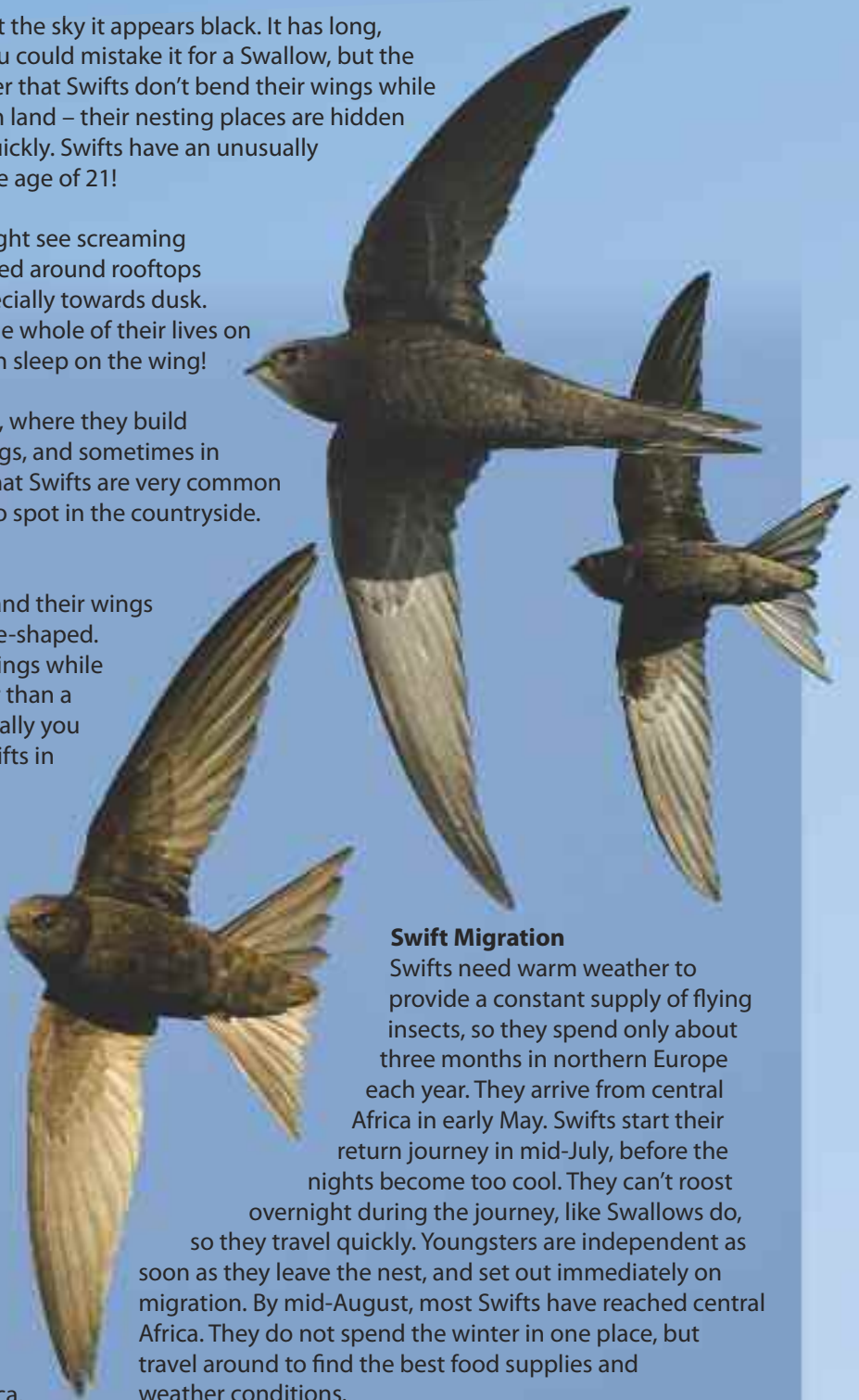
Swifts eat nothing but flying insects and small spiders floating in the air.

Swifts' nests

Swifts place their nests in hollow spaces in buildings and ruins, in deep holes between bricks, air-holes, under tiles and in other well hidden cavities, between rocks, in hollows and in special nest boxes. The nest is bowl-shaped and formed of light blades of grass, leaves, feathers, plant fluff, petals, moss, seeds and rubbish (e.g. pieces of paper etc), glued together with saliva.

Wintering sites

Swifts spend the winter in Africa, south of the Sahara, and some fly as far as South Africa.



Swift Migration

Swifts need warm weather to provide a constant supply of flying insects, so they spend only about three months in northern Europe each year. They arrive from central Africa in early May. Swifts start their return journey in mid-July, before the nights become too cool. They can't roost overnight during the journey, like Swallows do, so they travel quickly. Youngsters are independent as soon as they leave the nest, and set out immediately on migration. By mid-August, most Swifts have reached central Africa. They do not spend the winter in one place, but travel around to find the best food supplies and weather conditions.

See competition on page 31

BIRD DETECTIVES



Shelduck Holmes

Kevin Murphy



Sharing the colony with Guillemots



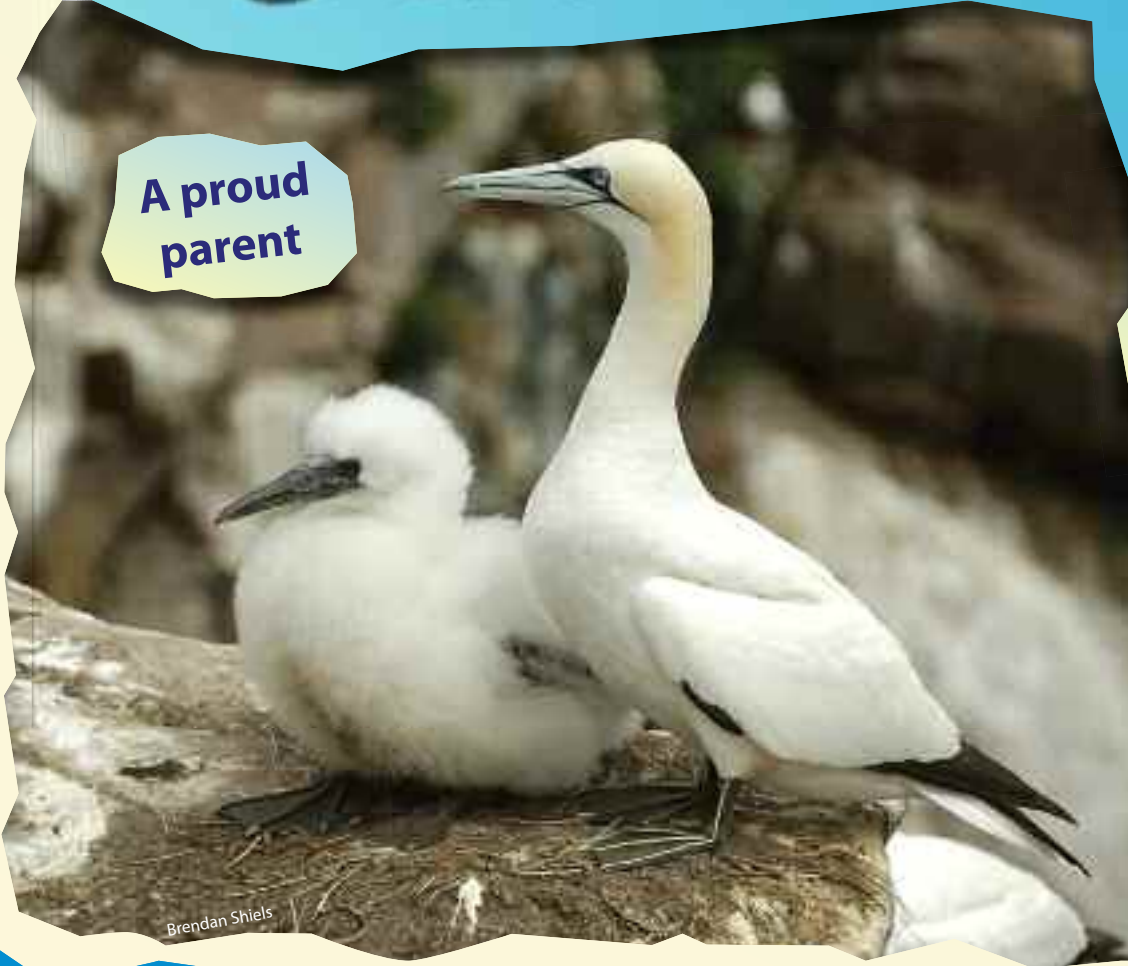
Colum Clarke

Gannets are powerful fliers



Clive Timmons

Gannets



A proud parent

Adults greet by 'sky-pointing'

Brendan Shiels





are
liers



Shay Connolly

**Look out!
Coming in to land!**



Colum Clarke

**Young Gannets are mainly
brown, getting whiter with age**




Watch Ireland
ireland.ie
birds and biodiversity

Safe places for seabirds



I'm a seabird scientist for BirdWatch Ireland, so I spend most of my time on windswept cliffs or wobbly boats studying seabirds to find ways to help them. I'm trying to find the best parts of the sea to set up nature reserves there – but first, to give you an idea of the problems facing some seabirds, I want you to imagine something...



What if when your parents went to the supermarket to get your food, it was no ordinary supermarket? What if it was the most dangerous supermarket in the world?

What if the floor shifted constantly, throwing your parents, the trolleys and tins of beans all over the place? What if there were sharp hooks hidden in the fruit and veg, or nets trawling through the biscuit aisle that caught people and lifted them right out of the shop?

What if a huge greedy monster charged through the supermarket ahead of your parents, eating ALL of your favourite food? This is exactly what life is like for some seabirds.



On land, lots of the places where seabirds nest have been made into nature reserves – there they are safe from harm. But when parent birds go out to sea to get food for their chicks, they go to dangerous places that aren't protected.

Out here, fishermen and seabirds fight for the same fish. Sometimes the birds even get caught up in the nets, or on the fishing hooks.



Other sea life suffers too. Some fishing nets are dragged along the seabed, damaging everything that lives there. Boats with big contraptions like vacuum cleaners suck up sand and gravel to use for buildings and roads on land. Miles and miles of pipes carrying oil and gas snake across the seabed.

People need to work at sea, but if these things are done in the wrong places, they can destroy beautiful and delicate underwater gardens.

It doesn't have to be like this.

Now, new laws mean there can be nature reserves at sea too. It's great news.

We can make sure that when work is done at sea, it's done in ways that aren't damaging to sea life.

But first, we need to help find the best places to make into marine nature reserves. It'll take a lot of research and talking with people who work at sea. This is why we need your help.

Together, we'll make sure that seabirds have safe places to nest on land AND to feed at sea.

These nature reserves will also be wonderful for all the octopuses, starfishes, seahorses, crabs, corals and anemones that live there.

**FIND OUT HOW OUR
GANNETS ARE FARING:
SEE PAGES 12 & 13.**

Our biggest seabirds Gannets!



Rónán McLaughlin

Gannets are Ireland's largest seabird – they are nearly a metre in length, have a wingspan of 1.7 metres and weigh in at 3 kilos. A smart, striking bird with a mostly white body with black wing tips, a yellowy-orange head and a long dagger-like bill which they use to catch fish.

Where they breed

Gannets are highly colonial and only nest on six Irish islands, and some of these are newly colonised. We have one very large colony, two medium-sized and three small colonies. The larger ones are off the south coast but all colonies are impressive, noisy places.

Overall, Ireland holds about 40,000 pairs of Gannets: about 10% of the world population. Britain has some of the largest colonies in the world including St. Kilda, Bass Rock, Ailsa Craig (all in Scotland) and Grassholm in Wales.

Little Skellig -
the largest
colony in Ireland

Steve Newton

Facts about breeding

Gannets start nesting about April. They make a nest out of seaweed and anything else they find in the sea such as discarded fishing nets – this can get them into trouble (see later)!

Each nest is about a metre from its nearest neighbours, just far enough to avoid their jabbing bills when they fly in and out! They lay a single egg and incubate it for around

six weeks. Chicks are looked after and fed by their parents for at least 12 weeks and towards the end of this period their feathers change from white fluffy down to the brown juvenile plumage.

Young Gannets are dark brown with pale spotting when they leave the nest and it takes them five years to mature, each year they gradually look more like an adult.

Feeding

Gannets are devoted parents and travel vast distances (often several hundred km) to find fish for their chicks.

Gannets catch fish by a spectacular 'plunge dive', where they drop almost vertically from a height of 10 to 30 metres. They crash into the water, and can continue 'swimming' underwater for several seconds, to pursue the selected fish.

Once caught they bob up to the surface and swallow the fish before flying off again. The Gannet has special air sacs in its body to cushion the impact when they hit the water at up to 100 km per hour.

Gannets are 'top predators' and catch a variety of fish which can be up to 30 cm in length. They will take small fish such as sandeels, but also eat larger mackerel.

The oldest known Gannet is 37 years old, though most live about 17 years. The oldest known Irish Gannet, ringed as a chick on Great Saltee Island in 1990 and still going strong, is nearly 24 years old.

They often follow fishing boats and will take small discarded fish that are thrown overboard together with fish 'offal' (after gutting on board). New European laws will prevent this wasteful 'discarding' but it may stop the Gannet colonies from getting even larger, something that has been going on for 30 years or more.

There are only six colonies in Ireland, but together they hold 40,000 pairs!

Clare Island
>50 pairs

Lambay Island
187 pairs

Little Skellig
32,655 pairs

Ireland's Eye
504 pairs

Bull Rock 4,328 pairs

Great Saltee
2,673 pairs

A noisy Gannet colony!



R.T. Mills

Winter

Gannets have a very long breeding season but following it they disperse away from colonies in a general southwards direction.

The BirdWatch Ireland autumn seawatching project **Seatrack** follows these movements. Over 21,000 Gannets passed the watchpoint at Annagh Head in County Mayo in autumn 2011. Some of these may have been late breeders from Little Skellig but most were probably Scottish and Icelandic birds heading to the coast of Iberia and northwest Africa to spend the winter. Some even go in to the Mediterranean Sea.

Threats

Gannets can get entangled in some of the marine litter they bring back to the colonies as nest material. Sometimes, but not always, seabird researchers see them and are able to free them.

Their habit of following fishing boats can also get Gannets into trouble. Some are tempted by baited hooks dropped by Spanish long-liner trawlers that operate on the 'Grand Sol' fishing grounds, about 200 km west of Ireland. They can also mis-calculate their plunge dives and hit the heavy wires behind the trawlers and in some cases they have hit each other causing serious injury or death.



Arnold Corey

Gannets often follow fishing boats



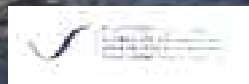
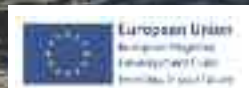
Ronán McLaughlin



Steve Newton

A Gannet casualty

Changing European fishing regulations may make the seas a slightly safer place for Gannets but it will also reduce the supply of easy meals that can be obtained by following fishing vessels. However, all seabirds will benefit if fisheries are made sustainable and overfishing comes to an end.



Fancy a Dip?

There is a whole watery world full of life waiting for you to discover in a pond. Here's how to take a closer look.

First, find your pond. It could be in a garden, nature reserve, park or village, but you must get permission from whoever owns or looks after it before you dip.

DIP KIT

You will need:

- A strong net with a fine mesh – this could be a seaside fishing net, a sieve, or an aquarium net from a pet shop. The finer the mesh (the smaller the holes) the better – you'll catch more.
- A large, plastic, light-coloured container. A washing up bowl or a deep tray is ideal.
- And two or three smaller ones – ice-cream or margarine tubs are great. It's best if these are light-coloured or white, so that you can see the creatures you catch.
- Plastic spoons, or tea-strainers – to pick up tiny creatures.

Other things that help

- Magnifying glass or hand lens.
- Paper and pencil to write down and draw your finds.
- A bug book or identification sheet to work out what they are.

DIP IN

Fill your containers with just a few centimetres of water and place them away from the pond's edge. Slowly swish your net just below the surface as if you were making the number 8.

Empty your catch in the big container by turning your net inside out and swishing it some more in the water. If you find anything interesting you could move it to one of the smaller containers with a plastic spoon or tea strainer. Now dip deeper, but try not to stir up mud, or you'll end up with a heavy net full of stinky sludge.

What have you found?

Here's the exciting bit! Gaze into your tub and study your catch. Many of the creatures will be microscopic. It's well worth getting a magnifying glass for a close-up view. Record your catch, photograph it, draw it or just sit and marvel at it.

Most importantly, don't leave your animals out for too long – they'll have nowhere to hide from predators and might eat each other. When you've finished, pour them gently back in from the water's edge, or sink your containers in the pond and swish them back in.

Finding out
what's there

WIN!

Special Prize

Win a copy of **'Lets Look in Ponds and Rivers'** a spot & learn, stick & play book, value €6.50. See competition on page 16.

Don't be dippy! Safety First.

- Ponds can be dangerous, so look out – it is very easy to get distracted and fall in.
- Always go with a grown-up.
- Never run near the pond.
- Kneel on the edge when you're dipping, rather than squatting
- Cover any cuts or grazes with waterproof plasters and don't put your fingers in your mouth, eyes or up your nose.
- Wear trainers or wellies that give good grip around the slippery edge of the pond.
- Don't pick up frogs, toads or newts with dry hands - you'll burn their skin.
- Wear old clothes
- Don't forget to wash your hands well afterwards, with lots of soap.

Make a net!

You will need:

- A pair of old tights
- A stick or thick bamboo cane
- An old wire coathanger or some thick garden wire
- Needle and thread or stapler
- Thick tape – such as electrical or parcel tape.

Artwork by Anthony Rule

1 Curve the coathanger or wire into a circular loop.

2 Wrap the waist of tights round the loop and stitch or staple it in place (or ask a friendly grown-up to do it. Make sure it's really secure.

Cut the legs off the tights and tie the end in a knot to make your net escape-proof.

3

4

Attach the end of the loop to your stick by wrapping garden wire round it and covering it with strong tape.



Shelduck Holmes

Competition Page

Competition 1

Moving Swiftly on...

The prize is a copy of this fantastic new book, *The Birds of Ireland - A Field Guide*, by Jim Wilson & Mark Carmody, valued at €11.99



Prize

- Q1 Swifts nest on the ground **TRUE** or **FALSE**?
- Q2 Swifts sleep on the wing. **TRUE** or **FALSE**?
- Q3 Swifts raise one brood per summer. **TRUE** or **FALSE**?
- Q4 Swifts winter in Europe **TRUE** or **FALSE**?
- Q5 Swifts are silent in summer. **TRUE** or **FALSE**?

To enter...

- Fill out your age, name and address on a blank sheet of paper.
- Answer the questions, marking them Competition 1 and/or 2 (you can enter both competitions if you like).
- Post it to: Bird Detectives Competitions, BirdWatch Ireland, Unit 20, Block D, Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow.

Competition 2

Pond and mini-beast Quiz

The prize is a copy of 'Let's Look in Ponds and Rivers', valued at €6.50

Can you sort out this selection of 5 pond plants and mini-beasts for Shelduck Holmes?

Toad Boatman Newt
Water Flag Smooth Yellow
Damselfly Blue Natterjack



Prize