



Number 12

Winter 2016

BIRD DETECTIVES

The magazine for Junior Members of BirdWatch Ireland



FOCUS ON
KESTRELS

SCHOOLS' GARDEN
BIRD SURVEY

FINCHES ON
THE MOVE

PLANTING FOR
POLLINATORS





Welcome!

Winter birds are best!

Winters days – short and not always so sweet – but hey, the birdwatching here is always great, especially once the cold weather hits across northern Europe.

Closer to home, in fact just outside your window, you can see lots of our garden birds in winter, especially if you keep the bird feeders full!



Tits, finches and more will visit feeders



Golden Plover

Richard T. Mills

Our wetlands and waterways are likely to be literally stuffed with wading birds, like the squadrons of Golden Plovers and Lapwing that crowd onto our estuaries. They need soft, muddy conditions to probe for food, so frozen ground is bad news for them. That's why they flock here to make use of the relatively mild winters around Irish coasts.

Make sure you take a trip to a wetland reserve this winter. BirdWatch Ireland recommends visiting a wetland where you can get in out of the weather and yet see literally thousands of birds.

So, why not try the Wexford Slobs, Cork Harbour, Lough Boora and Cabragh Wetlands in the Midlands, Blennerville and the Tralee Bay Wetlands Centre in Kerry, Inch Lough in Donegal or the East Coast Nature Reserve in Wicklow.

What's your favourite wetland? Write to us and tell us what you can see and send pix too!



Keep birds safe from marauding moggies!

Ronan Browne

It's fascinating to think that many of the finches that perform acrobatics around your feeders might be 800 kilometres or more to the east come the spring.

But first, they have to negotiate the perils of winter life – short days, cold temperatures and more than one predator to look out for!

Make sure your feeders are safe havens... Your pussy cat can get its food inside the house, so make the feeders safer by keeping cats indoors at dawn and dusk, when birds really need to find food for fuel.

Shelduck Holmes

Editorial Address: Bird Detectives, Unit 20 , Block D, Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Greystones, Co. Wicklow, A63 RW83.

Edited by Oran O'Sullivan. Design by Michael O'Clery.

Cover pic: Kestrel by Shay Connolly.

An irruption* of finches

Siskin: M.O'Clery



Siskin: Shay Connolly



Redpoll: Shay Connolly



*Yes! It's spelt correctly! **IRRUP**T is when birds move into new areas in large numbers, not **ERUPT**, like a volcano!

Three species of finch, known for dramatic movements

The fairly familiar finch family

Finches are a family of passerines (songbirds) that share characteristics such as small size, seed-eating bills and the male usually being brighter than the female. Species of finch in Ireland include many common species such as Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Greenfinch, as well as a few maybe less familiar such as Brambling, Crossbill, Siskin and Redpoll. Several species, notably Goldfinch, Siskin and Redpoll, have expanded their range in recent years and are now much more widespread and common.

Redpoll
(‘poll’ means
‘head’)

Three species in particular – **Siskin**, **Redpoll** and **Crossbill** –

are generally regarded as birds of coniferous forest. All three are nomadic however, when the occasional failure of their food source compels these specialised birds to wander to seek more reliable

**A young
Crossbill**

meals. When this

happens, they can turn up in unusual areas in large numbers, often quite unexpectedly. These events are called ‘**irruptions**’.

Crossbills, with the crossed bills

Crossbills depend on a good crop of tree seeds in order to survive the colder winters of northern European countries. The Norway Spruce, or ‘Christmas Tree’, normally has mature seeds available for birds such as the Crossbill between November and March. If enough of this food larder is available, Crossbills can actually breed in winter.

However in some years, if the seed crop fails, they are forced to ‘irrupt’, and will have to leave the northern forests to fly south and west in search of food, often as far as Ireland. Once on our shores some Crossbills will even stay and rear young in Ireland during the following breeding season.

Crossbills generally remain in coniferous forests and rarely come into gardens. Although they can be easily overlooked in the forest canopy, listen out for their metallic “Chip!-Chip!-Chip!” calls, really distinctive when a flock takes flight. If you are lucky, they can sometimes be

watched coming down to bathe and drink at forest pools. Those scaly pine seeds need plenty of water to wash them down!



Dick Coombes

Crossbill acrobatics

Crossbill QuickFacts

Irish name: Crosghob

Population: In good years, many thousands, in bad years, perhaps only a few hundred pairs

Seed extraction? Call in the specialist!

Crossbills have evolved specially adapted bills in order to prise open tough pine cones to get at the edible seeds inside. This is just like a precision tool kit, involving a wrench, pliers and tweezers, all in one!



Though they may look parrot-like, with a large head and beak, and often bright plumage, the Crossbills are a unique group of finches. The crossed beak (or mandibles) are designed to get into pine cones and extract seeds. Crossbills grab a cone in one foot and prise their beak into the pine scales, using the mandibles like a lever. They then use their tongues to scoop out the seed from the gap between the scales.



Young Crossbill

This is an interesting habit, probably stemming from their behaviour around their favourite food in woodlands which are cones of the Alder, Spruce and Larch. The upside-down approach allows them to reach parts that they would otherwise miss.

Siskins and Redpolls weigh only about 10 grams: Some heavier finches don't seem able to do this upside-down balancing act, so the smaller 'polls and

siskins exploit their balance and ability to get to places that other birds can't reach, and can do it on nut feeders too!

Male Siskin



You can sometimes tell if they've been in the area as they often drop the cones to the forest floor after the seed has been extracted.

Siskin

Siskins are fun to watch and are keen 'feeder followers' in winter. They are often seen in a distinctive pose, hanging upside-down, along the side of a mesh peanut feeder.

Expert at upside-down feeding!

Siskin QuickFacts

Irish name: Gealbhan Fearnóige
Other name: Alder Sparrow
Population: 60–80,000 pairs

Female Siskin



Male Siskin

Where do they nest?

The spread of conifer forests in Ireland has meant that Crossbills, Siskins and Redpolls have more areas in which to feed and nest. Crossbills are the scarcest and are very variable in numbers.



It's amazing to think that back in the 1960's Siskins were confined to coniferous woodland and were largely unheard of as a garden bird. Since then, they have benefited from a huge increase in the planting of coniferous plantation across Britain and Ireland. Coupled with this, they have shown the ability to adapt to a winter diet which often includes peanuts and other seeds from garden feeders.

Redpoll

Like Siskins, Redpolls breed in woodlands and spend a large amount of time not only in coniferous plantations but also in Birch and wet Alder habitats, particularly in the autumn and winter.

Their time in the forests and the movements they undertake will depend on the amount of tree seed (mainly pine cones and catkins) that are available to them. Like the Crossbill, they will undertake long migrations if their favourite food sources fail, and often

Redpoll QuickFacts

Irish name: Deargéadan Coiteann or 'Common Red-forehead'

Population: 70–90,000 pairs

appear in gardens in autumn and again at the very end of the winter

when they can pop in to garden feeders to top up their fat reserves for a migration back to their summer homes.

Many of our wintering Redpolls will return far to the north and east of Ireland, some even to Scotland, or Scandanavia, even to Russia. Other birds stay closer to home but will leave gardens to nest in nearby forest plantations.

streaked brown, red forehead

Female Redpoll

Forests in Ireland

As you can see in the image here, Ireland has almost the least forest cover of any country in Europe. Ireland was covered in thick woodland up until the Middle Ages. Now, forest only covers about 11% of the land, compared with a European average of 35%. Most of the woodlands left in Ireland are coniferous forest.



What's your favourite cone?



Spruce = Crossbill



Birch = Redpoll

Oran O'Sullivan

A 99 – With sprinkles please!



Alder = Siskin

Where have you been?

Siskins and Redpolls must be firm favourites amongst bird ringers as they often show up in their nets during winter, only to be re-trapped by other ringers, often months later, and sometimes hundreds of kilometers away!

Garden birdwatchers should keep a note of when these birds pass through their gardens. From the information we get from BirdWatch Ireland's Garden Bird Survey, we know that many Irish gardens don't usually record Siskins in any numbers until February and March, so if you start the survey in December be sure to keep looking!

A ringed Redpoll



Colin Rigney

Redpoll

Ringed: September 2007, at Copeland Island, Co. Down. Controlled, November 2007, Noord Holland. Travelled 710km ESE

Ringed: October 2007, at Copeland Island, Co. Down. Controlled, November 2007, Antwerp, Belgium. Travelled 810km ESE.

Ringed: September 2008, Copeland Island, Co. Down. Controlled, October 2008, Sandwich Bay, Kent. Travelled 599km SE

Rigned: September 2008, Copeland Island, Co. Down. Controlled, October 2008, at Tinsley, Sth Yorkshire, 305km ESE

Ring

By contrast, heading north west to Donegal

Siskin

Ringed: Wiltshire, England, February 2013. Controlled, Inch Island, Donegal, April 2013, Travelled 536km NW

Redpoll

Ringed: Norfolk, England, October 2011. Controlled, Inch Island, Donegal, April 2013, Travelled 650k, NW

Redpolls are real wanderers, capable of travelling hundreds of kilometres to find suitable feeding areas - and that could include your garden!



Shay Connolly



KESTRELS

M.O'Clery



The commonest bird of prey in Ireland

FACT FILE

Irish name

Pocaire gaoithe

Latin name

Falco tinnunculus

Other common names

'Windhover'

Wingspan

65–82 cm

Average weight

Male 155 g

Female 184 g

No. of eggs

3–7, usually 5

Incubation of eggs

28–30 days

Fledgling period

About 35 days

Breeding population

Poorly known, but recent decline to around 8–10,000 pairs

Food

Small mammals, birds, large insects, lizards, etc.

Nest

A flat ledge on a cliff or building, a tree cavity, or an old crows' nest

Threats

Intensification of farming, pesticides, rodenticides

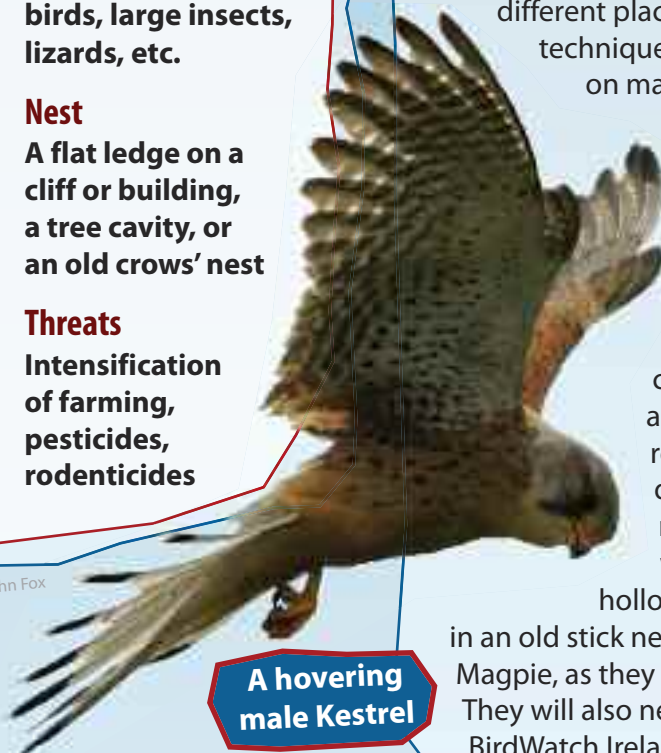
The hovering falcon

The Kestrel is one of our most common birds of prey. They can be found throughout the country and, in fact, it is likely that there are Kestrels nesting close to your school or where you live, AND you probably have seen one, even if you didn't know it was a Kestrel!

The reason that Kestrels are so widespread is that they are very adaptable. They can nest in many different places and use different hunting techniques so they can catch and feed on many different types of prey.

Where do I nest?

Kestrels can nest in a wide range of places and this is another reason they are so widespread. They will nest in ruined buildings such as castles and churches and will also use ledges or cavities on rocky outcrops, cliff faces and quarries. The most common nest sites of all are in trees, where they can nest either in hollow cavities in big, old trees, or in an old stick nest made by a Hooded Crow or Magpie, as they don't build a nest themselves. They will also nest in special nest boxes which BirdWatch Ireland puts up for them.



John Fox

A hovering male Kestrel

DID YOU KNOW?

As with a lot of birds, their Irish name tells you about them. The Irish for Kestrel is 'An Pocaire Gaoithe' which means 'the wind puncher'. This describes the Kestrels most famous hunting technique where they hang almost motionless in the air, scanning the ground below for any movement of prey. This is called 'hovering'. The next time you are on a car journey on a motorway keep a look out for one hovering over the grass at the side of the road where Kestrels love to hunt.



Michael Finn



John Lusby

Nest in an old building



Shelduck Holmes

Egg-cellent nest site, on



Hunting from
a favourite
perch



M.O'Clery

Kestrel

A proud parent



J.Lusby & D.Fernandez Bellon



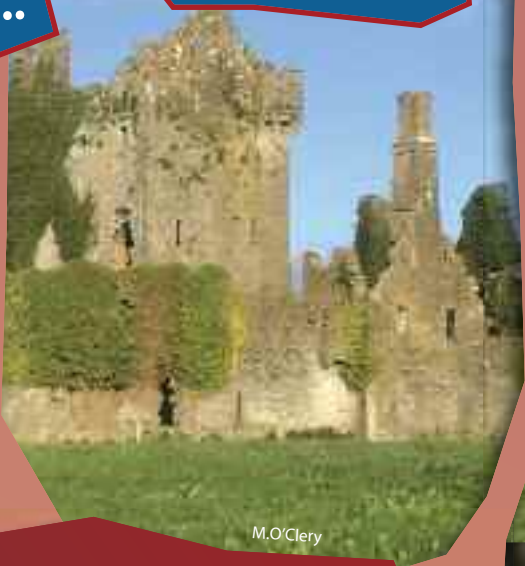
BirdWatchIreland
birdwatchireland.ie
protecting birds and biodiversity

a ledge...

...in a castle



M.O'Clery



M.O'Clery



M.Finn

**Sharp-eyed
falcon looking
out for dinner**



T.McDonnell

**Youngsters playing
in mid-air**



Colum Clarke

**Less bover
when you hover**

Breeding range

Kestrels nest all over Ireland in a variety of habitats, from farmland to coastal cliffs, quarries, woodland edges and even the edges of towns and in large gardens. They are

most common in the west and south-west of Ireland, and numbers have fallen recently, particularly in the north and east.



Small, hovering falcon with superb eyesight

Close relatives

The Kestrel is often called 'the hawk', but it is actually not a hawk, it is a falcon. Two other species of falcon live in Ireland, the larger Peregrine Falcon – which is the fastest animal in the world! – and the Merlin, which is our smallest bird of prey.

Expert hunters

When you look at a Kestrel it is easy to tell that it is a predator. They have large, forward-facing eyes and excellent vision for spotting prey from far away (much better than ours!), sharp



A Bank Vole for lunch!

talons and strong beaks. Their eyesight is their most effective tool for hunting. They can

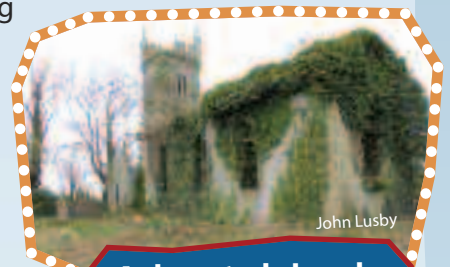
spot movement of their prey on the ground from high in the air. Their vision even extends into the ultra-violet spectrum, which allows them to see the urine trails of small mammals, invisible to humans! This helps them narrow down the search of large areas to find small mice and shrews.

What's on the menu?

Kestrels feed on a wide range of prey, which includes small mammals like mice, rats, shrews and Bank Voles. They will also catch and feed on small birds, frogs, lizards and invertebrates such as beetles, and even earthworms. A healthy environment needs top predators like Kestrels, otherwise the ecosystem would be out of balance, so birds of prey are very important.

Nesting

Spring and summer is the busiest time for Kestrels, as this is when they nest and try to raise young. The adults spend all day hunting to feed hungry chicks. Each nesting season, BirdWatch Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service visit Kestrel nests to record information on their breeding success. The most young we ever recorded in a nest was six... that is a lot of hungry mouths to feed. After learning to fly, one of these chicks travelled all the way from its nest in County Kerry to France, over 700km away!



A deserted church makes a good nest site



A lot of hungry Kestrel chicks to feed

Rat poison

One of the main dangers to Kestrels is from rat poison. The Kestrel doesn't eat the poison, but if it catches and eats a rat or mouse that has poison in its system then it can transfer to the Kestrel – this is known as 'secondary poisoning'.

WAP!

Winter Action Plans

Planting for the Pollinators

All photos: Oran O'Sullivan

Plan your planting now to help our wildlife in springtime

All photos: Oran O'Sullivan

Shorter days as winter approaches means the birds are piling into your garden for shelter and food. Winter months are also a great time to plan for next spring in the garden, at home or in school.

Wildlife that stirs early in the spring really needs our help, and you can provide springtime food no matter what size garden you have. Bees are the great pollinators that move from plant to plant, picking up sweet nectar to drink and spreading pollen or plant seed as they go.

Action 1 Plant pollinator-friendly bulbs

We all love to see and admire showy daffodils and tulips. However, they are not the best for pollinators such as bees as they produce a lot less nectar. Why not plant a few more bulbs that not only look great, but flower early and provide nectar for the first bees on the wing?

Cast off the shadow of winter!

From late January you and the bees can enjoy a show of spring colour. Choose from:

- Snowdrop
- Crocus
- Allium
- Grape Hyacinth

These bulbs can be planted in well-composted soil in pots, or straight into the border. Just make sure the area is weed-free and follow the planting instructions on the pack.

Snowdrops

Allium

Action 2 Plant pollinator-friendly shrubs

Shrubs that flower early in spring provide Queen Bumble Bees with lots to eat. The best early shrubs to plant in a school or home garden are:

- Hazel
- Broom
- Firethorn
- Berberis
- Mahonia
- Willow

Flowering Willow and Alder catkins

Fact: Queen Bumblebees have to visit 6,000 flowers in a day when they emerge from hibernation!

Action 3 Plant fruit and veg

Delicious for us to eat AND good for wildlife. Their flowers provide food for bees in spring and early summer, and later you get a chance to share a delicious harvest! Try planting:

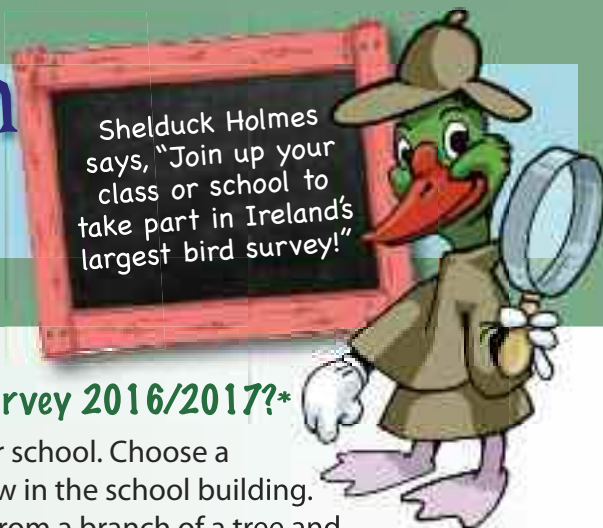
- Strawberries
- Raspberries
- Peas
- Courgettes
- Apples

Veg patch



Starling: Ronnie Martin

Schools' Garden Bird Survey



Shelduck Holmes says, "Join up your class or school to take part in Ireland's largest bird survey!"

Why don't you take part in the Schools' Garden Bird Survey 2016/2017?*

You can, simply by setting up a feeding station for birds at your school. Choose a place in the school grounds that is clearly visible from a window in the school building. Try and pick a safe space for birds where feeders can be hung from a branch of a tree and where birds have a safe area to approach and to retreat to. Then watch, and record what you see. Easy!

*The survey is designed for primary schools. You may also continue to take part in the original Garden Bird Survey, designed for private gardens (full details in *Wings* magazine).

School Garden details

Tell us some information about your school

The school grounds, are they... (tick 'yes' or 'no')

Urban (in a town or city centre)? ☐ yes ☐ no

Suburban (on the outskirts of a town or city)? ☐ yes ☐ no

Rural (in or beside open country or farm land)? ☐ yes ☐ no

What size are they?

Half the size of a tennis court, or smaller ☐ yes ☐ no

Approx. tennis court size ☐ yes ☐ no

Larger than a tennis court ☐ yes ☐ no

An acre or larger ☐ yes ☐ no

Food available for birds...

Are berry bushes present? ☐ yes ☐ no

Do you provide...

Peanuts in feeders? ☐ yes ☐ no

Seeds in feeders? ☐ yes ☐ no

Scraps? ☐ yes ☐ no

Fruit? ☐ yes ☐ no

Fat / bird cake? ☐ yes ☐ no

Food for Birds: Some do's and don'ts

- Peanuts, sunflowers and mixed seed in mesh and plastic feeders are ideal for many small birds;
- Over-ripe or slightly spoilt fruit is ideal for Blackcaps and thrushes, either left on the ground or speared onto a branch.
- Some crumbs and stale cake will be mopped up by sparrows and larger birds. Bird cake recipe is available from BirdWatch Ireland. Check out our web pages at www.birdwatchireland.ie and go to 'Birdwatching' pages.
- Don't put out too much at a time as you may encourage some less welcome furry visitors. Loose food shouldn't be left out overnight.
- Try and provide some clean water. An upturned bin lid will do, as will any shallow container.
- Make sure the birds have a regular food supply. Fill the feeders on Fridays and top up during the following week as they empty.
- Try and continue feeding and watching birds right through the winter season, especially when it is cold.

Resources BirdWatch Ireland can provide your class with our new Garden Bird Poster, showing the top 30 species in gardens and schools. There are lots of useful tips too. Check out our website for downloadable Bird Profiles, www.birdwatchireland.ie. Get your teacher to e-mail gardenbirds@birdwatchireland.ie for a free copy of the Garden Bird Poster.

Robin: Clive Timmons



Free poster!

We can also provide your class with a super **free gift** if your school joins BirdWatch Ireland. School membership includes 4 issues of *Wings*, 2 issues of *Bird Detectives*, specially for 7 to 12 year-old children, and a Welcome Pack that includes a copy of the best-selling book, *Ireland's Garden Birds*.

Join online or telephone BirdWatch Ireland on 01-2819878.



Fill out online, or return form to: BirdWatch Ireland, Unit 20, Block D, Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Greystones, Co Wicklow, A63 RW83.

What did you see?

Students should jot down any counts during the week in a jotter or notebook. Some birds you will see every day, some less frequently, or maybe just once in a flock.

At the end of the school week, go through the list with your teacher and take the largest single count for each bird species and enter it on the recording sheet below. If you have no count for a species or no counts at all, leave the boxes or column blank!

Example On Monday you count 3 Blue Tits on a peanut feeder and notice 1 waiting in a nearby bush, total = 4 birds. On Wednesday, just 2 on the feeder = 2 birds.

On Friday, 1 was seen all day which was joined by 2 first thing in the morning = 3 birds. So, record 4 Blue Tits on the form, the highest count of the week. If you see a bird that is not on the list below, just add it to the end of the form.

Top Ten garden birds

How many of our 10 most common garden birds did you see?

- | | |
|------------------|---------------|
| 1. Chaffinch | 6. Blue Tit |
| 2. House Sparrow | 7. Greenfinch |
| 3. Starling | 8. Jackdaw |
| 4. Goldfinch | 9. Blackbird |
| 5. Rook | 10. Great Tit |

Schools Garden Bird recording form

Participating school name

Address

Class

Teacher

E-mail address

Week beginning	5 Dec	12 Dec	19 Dec	26 Dec	2 Jan	9 Jan	16 Jan	23 Jan	30 Jan	6 Feb	13 Feb	20 Feb	27 Feb
Sparrowhawk				School Holidays!									
Feral Pigeon													
Woodpigeon													
Collared Dove													
Grey Wagtail													
Pied Wagtail													
Wren													
Dunnock													
Robin													
Blackbird													
Fieldfare													
Song Thrush													
Redwing													
Mistle Thrush													
Goldcrest													
Long-tailed Tit													
Coal Tit													
Blue Tit													
Great Tit													
Magpie													
Jackdaw													
Rook													
Hooded Crow													
Starling													
House Sparrow													
Chaffinch													
Greenfinch													
Goldfinch													
Siskin													
Bullfinch													
Redpoll													
Other species													
Other species													

Activities

**Ricky Whelan reports
on the Cabragh
Wetlands Family
Wildlife Discovery
Day – August 3rd, at
Thurles, Co. Tipperary**

WILD GALLERY

All photos by Ricky Whelan

In early August BirdWatch Ireland staff and volunteers joined forces with the members of Cabragh Wetlands Trust close to Thurles to celebrate all things wild during the day-long Family Wildlife Discovery Day event. Cabragh Wetlands Centre is owned and run by this community-based group of volunteers who raised the money to buy the land at the site in order to protect it and all the species of birds, mammals, insects and plants that called it home. Cabragh wetlands is an important wetland site in the area



The Bug Hotel at Cabragh Wetlands

watch large adult dragonflies fly around from the pond edge each summer.

On the day of the event, BirdWatch Ireland staff together with volunteers from our local branch and Cabragh Wetlands ran a number of activities, crafts and games. There were families ready and queuing at the door before we even got started and so many families visited us and got involved in all the activity stations across the day.

Outside the Pond Dipping activity volunteers were kept busy all day showing visitors aquatic invertebrates up close. There were dragonfly larvae, diving beetles, caddisflies hiding in their protective tubes and stickleback fish, to name a few.



Spotting birds from the Bird Tower

and many, many species benefit from the great work that has been done there over the years.

Among the habitats there is a river where Kingfishers are regularly seen. At night Barn Owls can be observed hunting for rodents over the reedbed, this year the local pair fledged 5 young. The large pond contains loads of dragonfly species and you can



Pond-dipping fun

The weather was a little bit cold and wet but the children who visited warmed up quickly playing the Barn Owl foraging game. This game involved taking on the role of a Barn Owl parent and racing under a time limit to get as many mice as possible back to the Barn Owl chicks waiting at each nest.

Inside the visitor centre it was a hive of activity, with families arriving and collecting their Wildlife Bingo and Bird Race cards. They then ventured outside to see how many bird and wildlife species they could find around the site.



Jamie chats to visitors at the Cabragh Wetlands Centre



Kathryn and Charlie Caffrey bug-hunting

After all that running around, lots of people took part in three popular activities inside. Visitors made dragonflies and mini bug hotels at the craft tables to hang up at home. Adventurous kids even took part in dissecting a real Barn Owl pellet, which is made up of all the material that owls can't swallow, such as bones, and fur. In the



Lilly Durrant making a Mini Bug Hotel

Taking a closer look at Barn Owl pellets



A big thank you to the Tipperary Heritage Officer Roisin O'Grady for making the event possible, and all the folks from the Cabragh Wetlands Trust and our local BirdWatch Ireland Tipperary Branch.



find out more at
www.cabraghwetlands.ie



Shelduck Holmes Competition Page

Competition

Find the waders, 21 in total!

Avocet
Lapwing
Turnstone
Snipe
Oystercatcher

Knot
Redshank
Phalarope
Stilt
Sanderling

Greenshank
Ruff
Curlew
Dunlin
Godwit

Plover
Sandpiper
Whimbrel
Dotterel
Stint
Woodcock

Win a **Make Your Own bird food pack**, value €10.00

The pack contains two tubs of seed and one tub of beef tallow. Enjoy making a mix, just add your own mould from containers such as yogurt pots or a big pine cone for a natural looking treat for your garden birds.

Prize

Jumbo Bird Word Search



To
enter

- Fill out your age, name and address on a blank sheet of paper.
- Find all the waders in the Word Search (you can photocopy this page if you prefer).

• Post it to:
Bird Detectives
Competitions,
BirdWatch Ireland,
Unit 20, Block D,
Bullford Business
Campus, Kilcoole,
Greystones, Co Wicklow
A63 RW83.

Closing date is
30th November 2016.

Winner of the Spring 2016 Wordsearch: Sara O'Leary, age 8, Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan.

Winner of the Spring 2016 Odd One Out competition: Zoe and Sean Massey, age 4 and 6, Kilcoole, Co. Wicklow.

Why not check out the Kids' Zone on www.birdwatchireland.ie for lots more fun activities