



## **Ireland's Wild Birds**

### **How are they faring and what can be done to help them?**

#### **Statement read out to the Oireachtas Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht**

**July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019**

#### **Introduction**

We thank the members of the Committee for inviting us here today to talk about how Ireland's wild birds are faring. The primary objective of BirdWatch Ireland is the conservation of wild birds, their habitats and other biodiversity. Our organisation is the largest independent nature conservation charity in Ireland with 15,000 members, a network of 25 branches nationwide, and over 1,500 volunteer surveyors who contribute thousands of hours of survey time collecting information on our wild bird populations. We are a science-based organisation and our staff includes internationally recognised experts. We are the Irish representative of BirdLife International, the world's largest conservation partnership, and we collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders to achieve our goals.

Today we will outline the conservation status of Ireland's wild birds, the pressures and threats they are facing, what we are doing to help and what else needs to be done. The Dáil declared a biodiversity and climate emergency on May 9<sup>th</sup> 2019 and also called for biodiversity loss to be addressed by the Citizens' Assembly. This indicates that as a nation we recognise that our wildlife is in trouble and urgent action is needed to protect and safeguard our environment into the future.

#### **How are Ireland's birds faring?**

This year is BirdWatch Ireland's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In the last 50 years Ireland has seen dramatic changes to its landscape and to its biodiversity. Birds are key indicators of the health of our environment and they face many challenges. Significant changes are evident in bird populations, most sadly for the worse. There are some good news stories, but the trends for some key species groups are very worrying.

With our mild climate and vast abundance of wetlands, Ireland attracts thousands of migrant waterbirds every winter. For the past 25 years we have monitored their populations through the **Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS)** funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and coordinated by BirdWatch Ireland, with help from our volunteer network. Each year roughly 11,000 volunteer hours are contributed to the survey by irreplaceable, skilled individuals who care about, and want to protect their local birds and wetlands. Our most recent I-WeBS survey analyses shows that Ireland has lost around half a million waterbirds, almost 40%, in less than 20 years.

In more specific detail, the analysis shows that over half of the 15 wader species that regularly winter here have declined, e.g., our wintering Lapwing are down by 67% in less than 20 years. Mallard – a duck so familiar to everyone that it is often overlooked – has declined by over 40% in the last 20 years. Habitat loss, climate change and cumulative impacts represent the biggest pressures and threats on our wintering waterbirds and urgent action is needed to protect areas important for them and to maintain this diversity of species.

Farmland in Ireland has changed significantly in the last 50 years. The **Countryside Bird Survey (CBS)**, a BirdWatch Ireland-led citizen science-based survey, funded by National Parks and Wildlife Service, has been running since the late 1990s and monitors the most common breeding birds in the Irish landscape. Results tell us that although many common species, such as Goldfinch and Blackcap, are stable or even increasing, about a quarter of familiar farmland birds, such as Stock Dove, Swift, Greenfinch, Stonechat and Kestrel are exhibiting serious declines.

More detailed knowledge of longer-term trends in **all** bird populations comes from another volunteer-based survey, **the Bird Atlas**, the most recent of which was completed in 2011. Bird Atlases allows us to monitor change over the longer term and are particularly important to highlight declines indicative of dramatic changes in the Irish landscape.

The Atlas shows that our once biodiversity-rich farmland landscape has become less and less hospitable for wildlife, as agricultural methods and technologies have intensified. This is clearly reflected in the almost complete extermination of farmland birds such as the Corncrake. Once widespread, they are now confined to the most marginal areas of the west and north-west as late cut

hay meadows have been converted to multiple cut silage. Similarly, severe declines have been recorded in most of our breeding waders including Curlew, Lapwing and Snipe. These species were once widespread and familiar to many farmers, as they nest in damp pastures, traditional hay meadows and bogs. Curlew is one of the most severely impacted and is now on the verge of extinction in Ireland, with only about 150 pairs remaining of the 5,000 pairs that nested here in the 60s and 70s. Once, not long ago, the famed Cry of the Curlew was literally the sound of wild Ireland, but most of its former strongholds have now fallen silent.

The main reason for the declines of many farmland birds is habitat loss from the widespread drainage of wetlands and damp pastures and the more intensive management of agricultural grasslands through reseeding and increased fertiliser use. Other factors include industrial scale extraction of peat bogs and afforestation of habitats. Remaining populations of many farmland species, particularly ground nesting birds, are now much more fragmented and isolated, and are impacted by predation. Loss of mixed and arable farming has impacted species such as the Yellowhammer and Skylark and resulted in the extinction of the Corn Bunting in Ireland in 1991.

While agri-environment schemes such as GLAS, where farmers are incentivised to work the land in an environmentally friendly way, have gone some way towards maintaining or in some cases improving bird habitat on farmland, such schemes do not go far enough.

Other activities including inappropriate hedge-cutting and the burning of scrub and upland habitats are detrimental to our native wildlife and impact our carbon stores. The changes to the Wildlife Act contained in the Heritage Act have sadly weakened the protections afforded to breeding birds of uplands and hedgerows and must be repealed. Water quality in lakes and rivers affected by nutrient run-off and other inputs can reduce the number of invertebrates, which in turn can have a knock-on effect on birds living in these aquatic habitats such as Dipper, Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail.

Raptors (or birds of prey) are apex predators sitting at the top of the food chain and hence they can be affected by a range of changes and pressures in the environment. There have been several positive conservation success stories, such as the return through re-introduction of species such as the White-tailed Eagle and Red Kite and Buzzard and Peregrine Falcon populations are recovering in the Irish landscape after almost disappearing.

However, many of the issues which have caused the declines and extinctions of birds of prey are unfortunately still present in the Irish countryside. The illegal killing of birds of prey remains prevalent and affects a wide range of species through shooting and indiscriminate poisoning. To tackle these wildlife crimes, there is a need for greater emphasis on investigation and enforcement of the

legislation, including better resourcing of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and greater collaboration with An Garda Síochána. Raptors can also be exposed to other poisons which are legally used, such as rodenticides which are targeted at controlling rats and mice.

Barn Owl is a Red-listed Bird of Conservation Concern in Ireland and its populations have declined dramatically, largely due to land use changes and the intensification of agriculture, which has caused the reduction in the extent and quality of habitats available to it. Hen Harrier populations have also declined for similar reasons, much of their upland nesting habitat has been lost to the planting of non-native conifer plantations.

There are many species of bird that coexist with humans living amongst us in our cities, towns and villages. We often refer to this suite of birds as “urban birds”. Swift populations have undergone a 50% decline in the last 20 years. Factors include the loss of nest sites in the fabric of our older buildings, where access to the roof space and gaps in masonry has housed their nests for generations. Old buildings being demolished, renovated and retrofitted displace nesting Swifts by removing this vital access they once had. Once a Swift loses its nest site, it can mean many lost breeding seasons before the monogamous pair find new suitable nest sites and breed again. Other impacts include climate change, and in particular the decline in insects which the Swift solely relies on for food.

A familiar winter visitor to Dublin from Arctic Canada is the Brent Goose. Ireland hosts a high percentage of the global population of this species. They are threatened by the squeeze for space which is far greater in our capital than anywhere else in the country due to the pressure for development. Brent Geese need permanent short grassland swards (such as playing pitches) to graze in the lean months of the winter, sites which are disappearing in our capital.

### **Seabirds**

Ireland supports internationally or even globally important populations of a number of seabirds. Puffins and Kittiwake are globally threatened and have declining populations in Ireland, whilst Black-headed Gull and Herring Gull are on the Irish Red list due to dramatic decline in breeding numbers in recent decades.

Climate change is probably the most serious threat to seabirds; as the oceans warm, their food sources are changing. Other serious threats include sea level rise; oil pollution and increasing abundance of ingested plastics in seabird diets; as well as fatal entanglement in discarded fishing gear and non-sustainable fisheries practices.

BirdWatch Ireland staff have been involved in several active conservation projects for Terns including conservation of Roseate Terns on Rockabill island off Skerries. This has been a profoundly successful

project and shows what can be achieved with the input of resources. In the last 30 years numbers of Roseate Terns has increased from **152** breeding pairs of to **1,597** breeding pairs.

### **What is being done to address declines of bird populations?**

BirdWatch Ireland uses many tools to further conservation efforts including large scale EU-funded conservation projects. Nationally funded work includes long-term management, protection, research and monitoring of several important species groups in Ireland. Our advocacy and awareness-raising work seeks to influence decision-makers to improve policies which impact on bird populations and to engage with the public on the issues facing birds and their habitats.

There are other actions happening all around the country supported by government and concerned members of communities, which is heartening. Indeed it is clear that Irish people care deeply about their natural heritage as witnessed by the green wave which has taken hold in recent times. However, we will need to take further significant action if we are to protect birdlife and nature on our island.

### **What else needs to happen to help birds in Ireland?**

Ireland is in the midst of a biodiversity crisis. Saving biodiversity in Ireland is the responsibility of all government departments and sectors and all stakeholders have a part to play to turn the ship around.

Government must ensure that sectoral policies are coherent with the policies and legal obligations to protect and conserve biodiversity. Tackling the chronic historic funding cuts for biodiversity is essential. Now is the time to bolster this funding to ensure that we can continue to avail of the ecosystem services that nature provides. Full implementation of the National Biodiversity Action Plan is a must before it expires in 2021. In addition, we must act to stem the worst impacts of climate breakdown including using nature-based solutions for climate action.

The farmed landscape supports some of our most threatened and declining species. One of our most important messages to the Committee is that Government policy must urgently recognise and reward sustainable and low intensity farming systems that are supporting birds and other biodiversity. The policy direction of Food Wise 2025 is contrary to this in practice and this does not bode well for biodiversity, climate or for farmers on marginal land.

Ireland's climate ambition relies heavily on forestry, but forestry policy to date represents a significant pressure and threat to biodiversity with insufficient safeguards for high nature value farmland, ground nesting birds and other wildlife.

In relation to our vast marine area, Ireland needs to fully implement the Common Fisheries Policy and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

We cannot protect what we don't measure. Funding is needed for additional bird survey coverage to fill gaps in our knowledge of bird species distributions and abundances. This will require professional co-ordination and survey with support from citizen scientists.

In conclusion, again, birds are indicators of the health of the environment. Conservation of wild birds and their habitats will bring wider benefits to biodiversity, communities and our economy. there is a huge challenge ahead that can only be met by political will, policies that work with nature instead of against them and a significant increase in funding, to save our birds and biodiversity.

*This statement was read by Oonagh Duggan, Assistant Head of Policy and Advocacy, BirdWatch Ireland.*