

Your dawn counts are truly valuable

Quite a few of you reading this will be about to launch into CBS fieldwork for the 23rd season. Many more of you will have been doing the survey for perhaps five, ten or fifteen years. And then for some of you, this business of counting birds on early morning walks will be a whole new experience. To all of you we say a very big thank you!

Two decades of monitoring have given us much valuable information about how our breeding bird populations are faring. We know that most species are doing okay – at least since 1998. But we must not be fooled by the stable trends shown by some species such as the **Yellowhammer**, which has contracted its range in Ireland by almost 60% in the 40 years between the first bird atlas (1968-72) and the most recent one (2007-2011). Most of the decline happened in the 1960s and 1970s, as a result of drastic changes in farming practices, and this was before the Countryside Bird Survey commenced. So, in 1998, CBS counts for many farmland birds, including **Yellowhammer**, were low, so any increasing or stable trends calculated from that point onwards should be interpreted as being purely relative to that low base. Imagine if the CBS had started in the 1960s.

But the CBS has produced some good news stories too. We have seen astonishing increases in the numbers of **Goldfinch** and **Blackcap**. CBS has shown significant increases in **Redpoll**, **Chiffchaff** and **House Martin** too. The survey has also shown how resilient some species can be. The severe winters of 2009 and 2010 took a heavy toll on the populations of **Stonechat**, **Grey Wagtail** and **Meadow Pipit**, but in just a few years all of these have bounced back.

The CBS is all about trends – comparing the numbers from one year to the next. Producing these trends is a lengthy process which starts with you, setting that alarm clock, driving to your square and counting those birds. The CBS needs around 230 participants every year to survey a minimum of 300 squares across the country. We are delighted to report that the total number



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Swallow – symbol of summer. Found in 90% of CBS squares, showing a stable trend overall, but anecdotal reports suggest declines in some regions.

covered last year was 329, the highest return since the survey began.

The level of effort and commitment put in by survey participants is phenomenal – to date, nearly 15,000 early morning counts have been carried out and an astounding 44,600 km walked within the squares. Add to this the time and distances walked and driven to get to the survey squares, not to mention the time taken to input the data later. And as for the number of birds counted so far, well that runs to close to 2.4 million!

There is no stopping now. The natural environment is under pressure from many quarters and the farming community is under pressure too, both to be ever more productive and, indeed, to simply survive. With your help, the Countryside Bird Survey will continue to keep a watchful eye

on our bird populations and provide robust data to help inform the relevant policy and decision makers in government charged with maintaining and improving Ireland's biodiversity.

Spring is in the air! The show goes on. Enjoy your fieldwork.

Dick Coombes,
CBS Co-ordinator

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Counting birds in ancient Clonmacnoise

Maura Noonan gives an account of her experiences in her CBS square in Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, since 2000.

It was the year 2000. Joe Proudfoot had arrived in the world in early February. I'm not saying there was a connection, but my husband at the time contacted Dick Coombes to offer our services to survey a square. We were given a choice of three, so early one morning Paul set off to visit each of them and he unreservedly opted for square N0030 – better known as Clonmacnoise.

Founded by St Ciaran in the 6th century, Clonmacnoise is one of the oldest and most important Early Christian settlements in Europe. It was built where an ancient east-west roadway known as Slighe Mhór crossed the River Shannon, having traversed the bogs of central Ireland along a route known as Esker Riada.



Common Sandpiper
Photo: Dick Coombes

And so it was that on May 6th, 2000, we set off at the crack of dawn to do our first CBS, listening to a CD of birdsong on the journey from Dublin. Two hours and 34 species later, I was hooked!

The first five 200m sections run south along the banks of the Shannon. From the get-go, birds abound: in the bushes around the interpretive centre; in the flooded fields to the north; **Swallows** and **Swifts** fly up and down the river, not to mention all the waterfowl on the river itself. Most years we have flocks of **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Whimbrels**, one

year we had a **Ruff**, and another year a **Water Rail**. Then there was the year the **Sand Martins** had just arrived and were flying upriver in their thousands. A **Hen Harrier** glided down the river once and, in 2018, as I was returning to the car, a **White-tailed Eagle** was perched on a post on the opposite side of the river.

We've seen a great selection of waterbirds, including **Wigeon**, **Tufted Duck**, **Shelduck**, **Shoveler**, **Redshank**, **Lapwing**, **Curlew**, **Great Crested Grebe**, **Snipe**, **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Common Sandpiper** and **Golden Plover** – the wonder of migration. There is a hedgerow where we always get **Reed Bunting**.

And then there was 2012. On June 25th I recorded a **Little Egret**. We had never seen a Little Egret in Clonmacnoise before and did not get a second one until 2019. And earlier this year Joe informed me that a **Great White Egret** had been reported from Clonmacnoise in April 2012!

After the first five sections we cross the road and climb onto a ridge of eskers. It's another world, one that abounds with **Cowslips** and **hares**... and barbed wire fences! But the view is spectacular and by this time of the day leisure boats are snaking up and down the river. There are not too many species here, but we regularly spot a **Kestrel**, **Buzzard** or **Sparrowhawk** from our lofty height and we often hear the iconic call of a **Cuckoo**.

We finally drop off the esker onto the fringes of a massive raised bog covered with sally trees, gorse and heather. There is usually a choir of birds singing from a hawthorn copse in section 8 – this is where our birdsong identification skills are put to the test. We get many regular songbirds here including **Blackcap**, **Long-tailed Tit**, **Chiffchaff**, **Willow Warbler** and **Goldcrest**, and usually a **Redpoll** and a **Bullfinch** to complete our finch list.

There has been no change in the habitat in eight of the sections since I started surveying in 2000. But the last two sections were

scraped almost clean a few years ago, leaving a much thinner border of sally and gorse. Fortunately, some fields nearby are left to nature's own devices, so numbers of songbirds have remained fairly constant.

Foot-and-mouth disease got in the way in 2001, and twins born in May got in the way in 2004, but I have surveyed the square biannually every year since. It has been a real family event, with my Dad, both my brothers, my niece, my nephew and of course my own children all coming for different visits.

Not surprisingly, as Joe got older, our species numbers improved: our best year was 2019 when we had 57 species on the early visit and 54 species on the late visit. We are still getting new species most years, **Jay** being added in 2019, **White-tailed Eagle** in 2018 and both **Siskin** and **Fieldfare** in 2016. To date, we've had a total of 84 species.

Clonmacnoise is a magical, mystical place, especially at first light with not a soul or sinner about. And although I dread the alarm clock on those mornings, there is always a sense of thrill and excitement as I start off on section 1 and do my first scan of the river and floodplains.

So, roll on April, when we will hit the road yet again and do our bit for conservation, and you never know what might fly up the river this year.



Bullfinch
Photo: Dick Coombes

The County Swift Surveys

Ricky Whelan reports on how BirdWatch Ireland, its branches and citizen scientists everywhere are documenting Swifts in our towns and villages.

The severe declines in **Swift** populations are by now well documented: these summer migrants are facing a housing crisis of their own throughout Ireland. BirdWatch Ireland has been collecting nest site records in counties around the country for the past number of years to help inform our conservation efforts in response to these worrying declines.

BirdWatch Ireland conducted its first **County Swift Survey** in the summer of 2017,



Swift
Photo:
Richard T Mills

in Offaly, and since then six more counties – Laois, Tipperary, Westmeath, Sligo, Meath and Wicklow – have been fully surveyed by our **Urban Birds Project** team, branch volunteers and citizen scientists.

These efforts have been complemented by surveys undertaken by our branch members in Kildare, west Cork and Dublin.

All of this accumulated knowledge helps the work conducted by the ever-increasing number of Swift activists and groups around the country who are proactively addressing Swift declines through direct conservation action.

In the last three survey seasons, just shy of 1,400 Swift nest sites were identified in over 600 structures in the seven counties. Strong numbers, one might surmise, but we know large colonies can vanish overnight when buildings containing nesting Swifts are demolished and redeveloped without knowledge of the birds or any mitigatory action being taken.

Identifying and protecting existing populations is a vital step in arresting Swift declines, and it feeds the efforts to provide new and permanent accommodation for Ireland's nesting Swifts.



Swift. Photo: Richard T Mills

The **County Swift Survey** effort continues this summer. You can help by entering your Swift sightings or details of nest sites by clicking the Swift button on the 'Submit Sightings' page of the National Biodiversity Data Centre's webpage at: www.bit.ly/swiftrecords.

■ The County Swift Surveys are made possible with funding from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht – National Biodiversity Action Plan Fund, the Heritage Council and the local authorities in each county.

A milestone publication on our countryside birds

A detailed analysis of CBS data from the twenty-year period 1998-2016 has produced exceptional findings. Lesley Lewis reports.

The Countryside Bird Survey (CBS) is one of Ireland's longest annual bird monitoring schemes, with sustained coverage across a wide range of habitats and geographical regions, capturing trends in Ireland's common breeding bird species.

Last December saw the online publication of a new report, *Countryside Bird Survey: status and trends of common and widespread breeding birds 1998-2016*. Using the data collected through CBS, this report provides detailed accounts for 52 bird species, which includes updated population estimates, and both 10-year and 18-year population trends, for each species. Each species account also provides trends in breeding distributions based on comparisons over time, using data from both CBS and previous breeding bird atlases (Balmer *et al*, 2013; Gibbons *et al*, 1993; Sharrock, 1976).

The report concludes with an assessment of the current environmental and man-made pressures and threats facing Ireland's

common breeding birds and provides comprehensive information on the current status of Ireland's commonest breeding birds.

What you might not know, however, is that these CBS data were also used to inform Ireland's national reporting as required under Article 12 of the EU Birds Directive, highlighting the value of these data and the massive contribution made by volunteers, without whom a monitoring scheme such as CBS could not be carried out.

This information should be shared as widely as possible: the report is available online¹ and each current CBS participant will also receive a hard copy in the post in the coming months in recognition of their contribution to this important survey.

■ CBS is funded by the **National Parks and Wildlife Service** and coordinated by the CBS Office, based at BirdWatch Ireland. The volunteer survey effort is also supplemented to a significant degree by both **BirdWatch Ireland** and the **National Parks and Wildlife Service** staff.

1 www.bit.ly/IWM115

References

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SPECIES FOCUS

Cuckoo

“A part from city centres, there is virtually no habitat in Britain and Ireland where Cuckoos do not occur.” That was the opening line of the text for Cuckoo in the first breeding bird atlas, the fieldwork for which was carried out in the years 1968-72. Sadly, that statement no longer holds. The distribution map in that publication shows Cuckoos present in almost every 10km square in the country. Forty years on, the equivalent map in the 2007-11 bird atlas shows a swathe of large gaps, especially in eastern and southern counties, representing a range contraction of over 25%. So, Cuckoos are in a bit of trouble.

However, they are holding their own in the west of Ireland, the highest densities being in Galway and Clare, and the latest CBS trend shows numbers to be stable since the survey began in 1998 (declines would have occurred before CBS started).

Cuckoos command quite large territories and so are not common anywhere. Their high dependency on hairy caterpillars as a food source means that Cuckoos are now mainly found in marginal habitats such as bogs, mountains and coastal dune systems. Today's intensive agricultural practices result in a reduced abundance of insect life, so much of our lowland farmland areas no longer support Cuckoos.

Cuckoos spend the winter in the humid zone of Africa, well south of the Sahara, and their main arrival in Ireland takes place during the second half of April. The earliest on record is April 2nd and any claims of earlier dates in the letters' pages of newspapers are always suspect. A badly heard Collared Dove could just about pass for a Cuckoo, but the real deal is unmistakable and indeed the bird's common name is the ultimate example of onomatopoeia in action. The Cuckoo's song is an iconic sound of the countryside and to hear it is a welcome sign that spring has arrived.

Aside from its characteristic vocalisations, the Cuckoo is equally renowned for its reputation as a brood parasite. While the male sings from bushes and fence posts to stake out the territory, the female watches for and finds nests of other, smaller birds. She will remove one egg and lay one of her own in each of up to 25 different nests, all this timed to when the host clutches are being laid. At this point, the adult Cuckoos relinquish all parental responsibilities.

The egg colour mimics that of the host's eggs and has a shorter incubation period. The newly hatched chick, bald and blind, instinctively heaves the other eggs or chicks out of the nest and is fed till it reaches monstrous proportions by its “adopted” parents.

In Ireland, the Cuckoo's main host species is the Meadow Pipit, another species found mainly in marginal habitats nowadays. In Britain, Dunnock and Reed Warbler are also widely used, while in Europe, over 100 different species have been recorded. Adult Cuckoos begin their departure southwards in July – the juveniles will follow a month or so later, completely unaided.

Research into why Cuckoos are in decline has identified depleted food availability (caterpillars) on the breeding grounds as one factor. But what might be happening during their migration? The loss of half the Cuckoo population in Britain over the last twenty years has prompted the British Trust for Ornithology



Cuckoo
Photo: Colin Rigney

(BTO) to launch an innovative project to find out. Each summer since 2011, the BTO has been fitting male Cuckoos (80 so far) with satellite tracking devices. The results are fascinating. Cuckoos spend a mere 15% of their year in the UK, almost 50% in Africa and, significantly, 38% on migration.

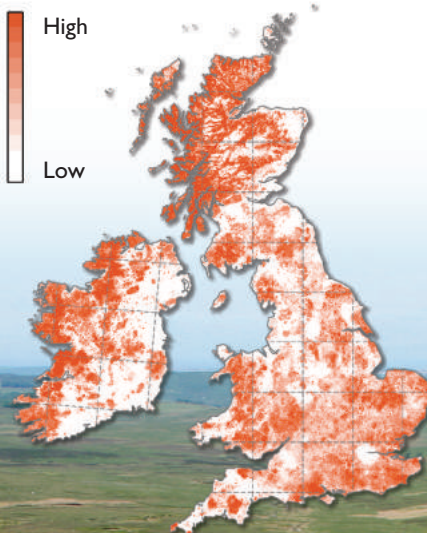
The birds take two distinct southbound routes – some going via Italy and the eastern Mediterranean, others via a westerly route through Spain, looping around west Africa before heading further south. Birds taking this latter route were found to suffer higher rates of mortality on migration. So, do some unfavourable environmental conditions prevail in the countries along that route? The work goes on. Amazingly, all tagged birds eventually converge on the Congo River basin – in relative terms, quite close to each other.

These revelations just add to the catalogue of amazing facts that surround this interesting bird whose lifestyle could, at the very least, be described as “colourful.”

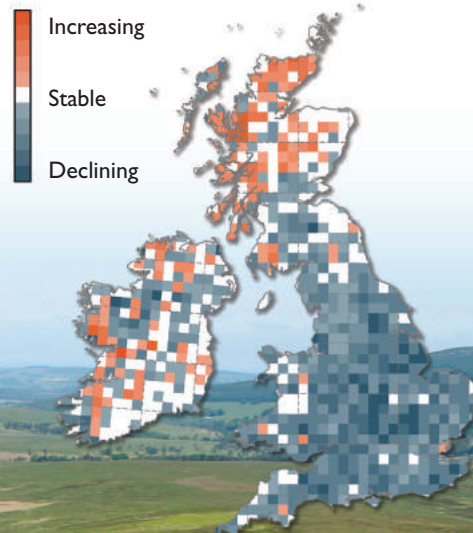
Dick Coombes,
CBS Co-ordinator

In flight, the Cuckoo resembles a Sparrowhawk. Host birds may betray the location of their nests as they react to the perceived predator threat.

Photo: Richard T Mills
Background photo:
Dick Coombes



Cuckoo breeding abundance 2008-11.
From the Bird Atlas 2007-11, courtesy of BTO



Cuckoo abundance change from 1988-1991 to 2008-11. From the Bird Atlas 2007-11, courtesy of BTO