



**BirdWatchIreland**  
birdwatchireland.ie  
protecting birds and biodiversity

# Annual Report 2020



# Welcome

## Report from the Board of Directors

The year 2020 was unprecedented because of the Covid-19 pandemic; it affected everyone in Ireland and beyond in their personal, social and working lives. It was also a difficult year for BirdWatch Ireland, both financially and due to the illness and sad death of our recently-appointed CEO **Nick Williams**.

Nick Williams started work with BirdWatch Ireland in April 2020. Despite the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, he tackled his new role with considerable enthusiasm. It quickly became apparent that the financial situation was far worse than the Board had been led to believe.

Acting on the advice of the CEO, the Board had to make a number of very difficult rationalisation decisions, including reducing the working week of many staff and temporarily suspending BirdWatch Ireland's involvement in some large projects. Some of these cuts have since been reversed and projects restarted, but some staff are still on reduced hours.

Regrettably, Nick became seriously ill in the autumn of 2020 and, after a brave battle, sadly he died in April 2021. During his all-too-brief tenure, he showed great dedication and commitment to his role and made a significant, positive impact on the organisation.

BirdWatch Ireland has issued a number of tributes to Nick, but it is appropriate that we once again take this opportunity to extend our deepest sympathies to his partner and family members, with whom he was very close.

Clearly, Nick's untimely death left a large gap in BirdWatch Ireland's management structure. Before he had to go on sick leave, he appointed **Niall Hatch**, our Head of PR and Development, as Officer-in-Charge in December 2020. It is a credit to Niall that he took on the extra responsibility so willingly, and the Board wishes to record its deep gratitude to him for his efforts.

At the time of writing, with the help of the RSPB, we have appointed a new Acting CEO, who will serve for six months, with effect from mid-July. We will commence the process of recruiting a permanent CEO in the autumn, with a view to a new CEO being in place in early 2022.

We are sincerely grateful to our colleagues in RSPB Northern Ireland for their support and assistance during our financial difficulties and following Nick's death.

For BirdWatch Ireland, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that all office-based staff had to work from home, although some of the HQ staff did return to the office after the initial lockdown, while observing the necessary health and safety protocols. The shop had to close its doors to the public, although an online offering was available later in the year. The stock of many items was adversely affected by the introduction of new customs controls as a result of Brexit, but this is being sorted out.

Thankfully, BirdWatch Ireland's core conservation activities were classified as essential under government Covid rules, and this enabled much of our important fieldwork to continue without too much disruption.



*Nicholas Williams*

This **Annual Report** sets out the remarkable conservation and public awareness work undertaken during the year across Surveys, Research & Monitoring, Species & Land Management, Policy & Advocacy, Reserves, Branches, Media, Education and Publications.

Our ongoing work in protecting birds and biodiversity is overseen by the professionalism, expertise and dedication of our staff. We would like to express sincere thanks on behalf of our members to the BirdWatch Ireland team for their dedication and support, especially during what has been a difficult time for the organisation.

One positive effect of the lockdowns has been that members of the public are taking a greater interest in the natural world, particularly in their gardens and local parks. This was reflected in a very large increase in the number of queries received by



CORK BRANCH

Cork Branch members and Glounthane community volunteers constructing a hide at Harper's Island Wetlands Reserve



BirdWatch Ireland, as well as a strong growth in membership: it grew by almost 12% during 2020. This is very heartening in the context of the new, updated list of Ireland's **Birds of Conservation Concern**, which reveals that 54 Irish bird species (26%) are now on the Red list, and 79 species (37%) are Amber-listed, both significant increases.

We launched a major **Covid Appeal** during 2020, and we would like to sincerely thank all members and supporters who gave so very generously to this appeal, which to date has raised over €152,000.

The Board has met for nine Board Meetings since the last AGM in September 2020: below, you can see a schedule of board meetings for the term, and the record of attendance.

There was a greater requirement than normal for substantive Board involvement in the operational management of the organisation, especially during the period of our CEO's illness and subsequent death. This included careful monitoring and management of the continued financial challenges still facing BirdWatch Ireland, as well as sourcing a new Acting CEO to take the organisation forward into 2022.

#### Attendance of Directors at BirdWatch Ireland Board meetings during the latest term (October 2020 to May 2021)

	21 <sup>st</sup> Oct 2020	18 <sup>th</sup> Nov 2020	16 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2020	20 <sup>th</sup> Jan 2021	17 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2021	16 <sup>th</sup> Mar 2021	15 <sup>th</sup> Apr 2021	6 <sup>th</sup> May 2021	20 <sup>th</sup> May 2021
Catherine Casey	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jim Fitzharris	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Breffi Martin	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Andrew McMillan	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Conor O'Keeffe	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Aisling Tallon	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jonathan Taylor	*	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

\* Appointed to the Board on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020



Kestrel: a bird of conservation concern in Ireland, now Red-listed

To this end, the other members of the Board would like to pay special tribute to the leadership shown by **Jim Fitzharris** to both Board and staff – he has worked tirelessly as Secretary, took on the responsibility of staff-Board liaison and acted in place of a Board Chairperson since the last AGM.

As is shown in the AGM Notice of Meeting, a number of existing Board members are stepping down for a variety of reasons. We are pleased to have four new candidates going forward for election to the Board. In addition, Jim Fitzharris has been nominated for the position of Chairperson.

Finally, we would once again like to thank all of our **members and donors** for their support, which is crucial to the success of BirdWatch Ireland.

**Catherine Casey, Jim Fitzharris, Breffi Martin, Andrew McMillan, Conor O'Keeffe, Aisling Tallon, Jonathan Taylor, BirdWatch Ireland**



#### BirdWatch Ireland Directors in 2020

**Gerard Lyons** (Chairperson)  
(resigned on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2020)  
**Jim Fitzharris** (Secretary)  
**Catherine Casey**  
**Breffi Martin**  
**Andrew McMillan**  
**Conor O'Keeffe**  
**Aisling Tallon**  
**Jonathan Taylor**  
(appointed on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020)

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BirdWatch Ireland complies with the  
Governance Code for the Community,  
Voluntary and Charitable Sector in Ireland.  
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COVER  
PHOTOGRAPH:  
**Lapwing**  
by Richard T Mills



BirdWatch Ireland is the BirdLife International  
partner in the Republic of Ireland

## Surveys, Research & Monitoring

For the tenth consecutive winter, the Robin was the bird seen in most Irish gardens during the winter 2019/20 **Irish Garden Bird Survey**. Over 1,550 households across the country took part, contributing to the longest-running wildlife citizen science project in Ireland. The project was again sponsored by Ballymaloe, to whom we are very thankful, helping the project to go from strength to strength.

The 2020/21 winter marked the 27<sup>th</sup> season of the **Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS)**, funded by the **National Parks and Wildlife Service**. Despite the impact of the Covid-19 restrictions, which meant volunteer counters could not survey their sites for most of the winter, a very good proportion of sites were counted at least once during the season, all due to the diligence and commitment of our counter network. In January 2020, we coordinated the **8<sup>th</sup> International Swan Census**, monitoring our migratory Whooper and Bewick's Swan numbers across the country. Thanks to the nearly 300 people who took part, we now know that our Whooper Swan numbers have increased by around 27% over the last five years. Unfortunately, Bewick's Swans continue to decline. The full results have been published in our *Irish Birds* journal. Since a new contract commenced in November 2020, we have been working hard to improve and speed up the method of data capture and have launched a new online data entry system, which has been well received. Workshops, funded by the **EPA**, and training were held online, due to Covid-19 restrictions, and were well attended. Project webpages have been improved with new online training tools.

The 2020 breeding bird season of the **Countryside Bird Survey (CBS)**, funded by the **National Parks and Wildlife Service**, was impacted severely by Covid-19 restrictions, with no fieldwork taking place. Engagement was retained with the counter network and well-attended workshops were held online. 2020 also saw the publication of the latest **Countryside Bird Survey Report**, presenting the trends of common and widespread breeding birds across the period 1998-2019.

BirdWatch Ireland was contracted to undertake several small-scale waterbird projects during 2020. These included a study of waterbirds and disturbance levels at Bull Island saltmarsh, commissioned by **Dublin City Council**, and a winter bird survey of Balbriggan, commissioned by **Fingal County Council**. The **Dublin Bay Birds Project (DBBP)**, supported by **Dublin Port Company**, entered its 8<sup>th</sup> survey year in 2020 and continues to gather data on the wintering waterbirds and breeding terns of Dublin Bay. Almost 600 pairs of Common and Arctic Terns nested on four man-made structures in the Dublin Port area in 2020. The colony's success is at least in part due to the management and conservation measures employed by the DBBP team and Dublin Port Company. The team continued to receive valuable observations of colour-ringed terns hatched in Dublin Port – from England, Wales, Spain, Norway, Mauritania, Namibia and Ghana. Increasing numbers of colour-ringed terns are also being observed in Ireland, as the first tern chicks ringed in 2015 have now returned as breeding adults, having reached reproductive maturity.

The Dublin Bay team kick-started 2020 with a week of cannon-netting of waders in Dublin Bay to bolster our knowledge of how the birds use the bay and to learn about where they breed in



Whooper Swans

BRAN BURKE

summer. A total of 223 waders was safely caught and ringed, with crucial assistance from a fantastic team of volunteers. The wader colour-ringing database now holds in excess of 5,500 observations from over 200 people in countries across the East Atlantic Flyway, including Ireland, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Scotland, England and the Faroe Islands. These observations continue to fill gaps in our knowledge about the movements of Dublin Bay's wintering waders. The project's dataset can inform sustainable decision-making processes regarding developments and activities planned for Dublin Bay. The Dublin Bay Birds Project demonstrates how nature and wildlife can benefit when commercial and conservation stakeholders work together.

The Raptor Team initiated the second phase of its work on Barn Owls. A three-year research study, which assessed the interactions of Barn Owls with major roads, and which was funded by **Transport Infrastructure Ireland**, concluded in 2019. In 2020, the research findings were applied to design evidence-based recommendations for mitigation measures to reduce Barn Owl deaths on roads; these have been adopted by Transport Infrastructure Ireland. The **Barn Owl Conservation Project** continued and expanded its annual monitoring, with some significant milestones in 2020. The monitoring and conservation efforts were funded by **Galway County Council** and **Creative Ireland** in County Galway and also received support from **Tipperary County Council** (Heritage Office) and **Cork County Council** (Environment Directorate), and **IRD Duhallow** through the **Leader Programme** in Duhallow. It recorded the best breeding season for Barn Owls on record, as well as the highest confirmed number of occupied sites and of occupied nest boxes (59).

BirdWatch Ireland also produced guidance on the conservation of wildlife in buildings, which was supported by **Kerry County Council** and **Donegal County Council** through the **National Biodiversity Action Plan Fund**. We also initiated a project funded by **Coillte** (and on-going to the end of 2021) to assess and make recommendations on the current conservation measures to protect **Hen Harriers** and **Merlins** from

disturbance from forest management-related activities. Several scientific papers on Hen Harriers were published in peer-reviewed journals in 2020, which furthered our understanding of Hen Harrier ecology and particularly the pressures and threats that affect Hen Harrier populations in Ireland and across Europe; these were outputs of the **Supporting Hen Harrier in Novel Environments** project, led by **University College Cork**.

We also undertook a survey of **Yellowhammers** in County Galway, where there are remaining and isolated populations in certain areas; this was funded by **Galway County Council**.

In 2020, we initiated a project with **Galway Rural Development** and funded through the **Leader Programme** to develop a biodiversity story map of east Galway, which is on-going in 2021.

Despite the Covid-19-related challenges, 2020 saw further progress in our **County Swift Survey** work, with four further counties surveyed: Leitrim, Roscommon, Clare and South Dublin. The community engagement and outreach elements of the project were adapted and made digital through social media, webinars and videos, to mitigate for

RICKY WHELAN



Pádraig Webb surveying for Swifts in County Clare

the loss of live events due to Covid-19 restrictions.

We hosted the first **Irish Swift Symposium**, bringing together Swift conservation advocates on the island of Ireland. The event was held on February 1<sup>st</sup> in Athlone and had presentations from a range of speakers, including **Jaroslav Majkusiak** (GMIT), **Mark Smyth** (Northern Ireland Swift Group) and **Lynda and Chris Huxley** (Swift Conservation Ireland). Topics such as current best practice in Swift nest box projects, and challenges to protecting nest sites, were discussed among delegates.

A number of smaller-scale projects were managed by the **Urban Birds Team**, including:

- A breeding and wintering bird survey of the River Santry in Dublin, on behalf of **Dublin City Council**
- **OPW Heritage Site Swift Surveys**: five properties were surveyed across counties Mayo, Galway and Sligo
- **Cliffs of Moher Seabird Survey**
- The creation of DIY nest box illustrations for use in outreach and education, with funding from the **Heritage Officer Network** and the **Heritage Council**.

## Species & Land Management

### Our reserves

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the initial lockdown period from mid-March saw the closure of our hides at the East Coast Nature Reserve, Rogerstown Estuary Reserve and Kilcolman Nature Reserve, the closure of the visitor centre, car park and hides at the Wexford Wildfowl Reserve, the closure of the Harper's Island Wetland Reserve (owned by **Cork County Council** and being developed in partnership with **BirdWatch Ireland**, our **Cork Branch** and **Glounthaune community groups**) and the closure of the walking trail at Knockadoon Head. Even so, many visitors continued to take their daily exercise, either on the permissible access paths within a reserve or along adjacent roads overlooking a reserve, until some of the lockdown restrictions were relaxed in the summer.

The contribution of **volunteers** to our reserve work is invaluable to their ongoing upkeep, particularly at reserves where we provide visitor infrastructure. Although Covid-19 regulations impacted on these work parties for parts of the year, they were nonetheless active, and support was provided by our branch networks at our East Coast Nature Reserve, Rogerstown Estuary Reserve and Kilcolman Nature Reserve, in particular. In addition, at the Harper's Island Wetland Reserve, regular volunteers assisted with the continued development of the site for visitors.

During the autumn, several of our reserves burst into life with the arrival of wintering waterfowl: some of our reserves host many

thousands of waterbirds throughout the winter months. At the **Wexford Wildfowl Reserve**, which we established in the past in collaboration with the **National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)**, the numbers of wintering **Greenland White-fronted Geese** (our logo species) increased by nearly 12%, with a total of 8,312 birds being counted during the spring census. This represents over 38% of their global population. Our only other reserve regularly hosting Greenland White-fronted Geese is Sheskinmore, in Co Donegal, where 29 birds were counted during the census period.

Some 2,000 waterbirds were recorded wintering at our **East Coast Nature Reserve**, with counts of 700 Wigeons, 550 Teals, 100 Shovelers, 50 Whooper Swans and 150 Black-tailed Godwits, amongst others, being recorded feeding on the shallow flooded fields, along with regular sightings of a wintering Hen Harrier, which caused mayhem as it quartered the reserve in the latter part of the year. Equally, at our **Kilcolman Nature Reserve** some 1,000 birds were recorded wintering, with counts of 200 Wigeons, 300 Teals, 100 Shovelers, 35 Whooper Swans and 100 Greylag Geese feeding within the fen, again with wintering Hen Harriers or the local Peregrines causing havoc at times. Other such winter spectacles were also witnessed at our **Rogerstown Estuary Reserve** and the flooded grasslands associated with the Shannon Callows.

During the summer, our **offshore island reserves** come to life as seabirds return to breed. We have very important seabird colonies on our offshore uninhabited islands, such as the **Gannet** colony on



## Species & Land Management (*continued*)

**Little Skellig**, Co Kerry, and the **European Storm-petrel** colony, along with **Puffins**, on **Illauhmaistir**, Co Mayo. Some of these are impacted by non-native predators, such as on our **Puffin Island Reserve** in County Kerry, where American Minks were confirmed to be present. With assistance from the **NPWS**, a mink eradication project was instigated, in tandem with a biosecurity review.

Predation, principally by mammalian predators, also impacts on ground-nesting birds on the mainland. At our reserves, many of which are important in summer for breeding waders, we continued work to protect them. Although it can be demoralising at times, we are having a positive impact on their breeding fortunes at some sites. The numbers of breeding waders at our **Annagh Marsh Reserve** on the Mullet peninsula, Co Mayo, increased to over 40 pairs. Of these, 24 pairs (up from 17 in 2019) were **Lapwings**, which successfully reared at least 48 chicks, while breeding **Redshanks** increased to three pairs. **Red-necked Phalaropes** again returned to breed (for the sixth successive year), with three successful breeding attempts resulting in flying chicks being seen from late July. In addition, at least two pairs of **Shovelers** bred successfully. Because of this breeding waterbird assemblage, Annagh Marsh (together with Termoncarragh) has been listed in the top 10 breeding waterbird 'hotspots' in Ireland, using a scoring system based on waterbird species diversity.

At our **Sheskinmore Nature Reserve** in Donegal, following specific management for breeding **Lapwings** on our own lands, two pairs were recorded breeding for the first time in many years, but unfortunately failed due to the ongoing impact of predation by Badgers. Despite a lot of effort trying to stop Badgers, they continue to dig underneath the predator exclusion fence and impact on the birds; no breeding Lapwings reared any young to flying stage. At our **Rogerstown Estuary Reserve**, at least three pairs of **Lapwings** held territory during May, but there was no evidence of breeding activity thereafter. The same was noted with a pair at our **East Coast Nature Reserve**. However, at this increasingly popular reserve, at least two pairs of **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** and increasing numbers of **Reed Warblers**, both recent colonists, bred successfully. **Hobbies** also, although not breeding, are becoming regular summer visitors to this reserve.

Increasing numbers of breeding **Corncrakes** were recorded at our **Annagh Marsh** and **Termoncarragh Meadows Reserves**, with one territorial male at the marsh and four holding territories within the meadows from early May. The meadows were again mown from the centre out in mid to late September, not only benefitting the breeding birds but ensuring that the maximum foraging time was provided for the endangered **Great Yellow Bumblebee**. These meadows and Annagh Marsh Reserve are becoming increasingly noted for holding the largest populations currently known in Ireland for these insects, as well as other rare bumblebee species. During the summer months several active Great Yellow Bumblebee nests were found at these reserves, indicating a continued healthy population.

### The Irish Breeding Curlew EIP

In total, 35 farmers were entered into the **Curlew EIP** (European Innovation Partnership) management schemes for farmers, many in multiple options (21 in the Conservation Keeping Scheme and 27 in the habitat options). Due to Covid-19 restrictions, no survey work, predator control or meetings with farmers took place until



RICHARD T. MILLS

Red-necked Phalaropes

after mid-May. In total, 15 pairs were recorded as "possibly breeding" in the Lough Corrib and south Leitrim study areas. Six pairs were confirmed as having hatched chicks. However, only one pair was suspected of having fledged chicks. Poor fledging is considered to be related to the absence of predator control early in the season and also to poor weather during the breeding season.

Statutory permissions to carry out capital works to improve breeding habitat and reduce the habitat for predators were delayed due both to Covid-19 and to a complicated requirement for dual Ministerial consent. As a result, it was not possible to carry out any capital works to improve breeding habitats at sites in Leitrim or Lough Corrib in 2020.

A number of farmer training and **Knowledge Transfer Group Scheme** meetings were held in advance of increased Covid restrictions in October. In November, the scheme was opened to new applicants for 2021, and applicants were short-listed. The project was publicised widely through podcasts, national and regional media and Twitter.

### Corncrake conservation

Breeding Corncrakes in east Donegal increased to 20 in 2020, from 17 in 2019. Hot weather during April/May contributed to excellent early cover, which was particularly good in the north. Malin Head received nine birds, supporting the idea that Corncrakes are following the best available habitat. Downings recorded four birds – a good number for the area – while Dunfanaghy's diminishing population saw a further decline to three birds, with no calling males heard on the Horn Head Road. Diminishing numbers at this busy tourist destination is a reflection of poor land management and a lack of conservation resources. Hopefully the €4.3 million awarded recently by **EU LIFE** for a new Corncrake project starting in 2021 will help rectify these concerns. This project will need to work hard at engaging the cooperation of landowners and urgently address the availability of ELC (Early and Late Cover) plots and habitat creation. This approach needs to be replicated, particularly in areas outside of SPAs, if the Corncrake is to expand its range on the Irish mainland. A national **Corncrake census** in 2020 found 144 calling males.

## Rockabill terns

### *Final year of EU LIFE Project, in partnership with RSPB and the National Parks and Wildlife Service*

There was continuous wardening on Rockabill island between May 2<sup>nd</sup> and August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020, its onset slightly delayed due to Covid-19 restrictions. A total of 841 nest boxes was deployed. Both **Roseate** and **Common Tern** nests were continually monitored in study area enclosures, with hatch dates and chick survival rates recorded.

Roseate Terns nested in all sections of the Rock, but none were found on the adjacent Bill. In total, 1,615 Roseate and 1,745 Common Tern nests were recorded, an increase of 51 Roseate nests on 2019. Thirty-three **Arctic Tern** nests were found on the Rock and seven nests on the Bill (although, briefly, 64 territorial pairs were present on the Bill on June 10<sup>th</sup>).

The overall nest box uptake was 91.44%, approximately 8% higher than in the previous year. The mean clutch size for Roseate Terns was 1.73, which was slightly lower than in 2019 (1.79 eggs) but higher than 2018 (1.72) or 2017 (1.68). Mean clutch size was higher for pairs using nest boxes (1.84) than those nesting in the open (1.62). Nestbox clutch size was 0.02 lower than last year, and 0.12 lower for open nests. Both nest box and open-nest clutch sizes were above average for the last ten years. Roseate and Common Tern productivities were 0.39 and 0.11 respectively, the lowest on record.

The mean clutch size recorded for Arctic Terns was 1.64; productivity was zero on the Bill and probably zero on the Rock.

Roseate Tern chick mean mass (weight) and linear growth rate was lower than in the previous years.

The low productivity, 0.39 chicks fledged per pair, for Roseate Terns is most likely attributable to the very poor weather conditions throughout the 2020 breeding season. High winds made it extremely difficult for parents to fish and bring back food to the nest. This did not solely affect small chicks, as many chicks that were close to fledging age (i.e. between 20 and 30 days old) were also found dead.

Typically, Roseate Terns on Rockabill feed chicks with sandeels (*Ammodytes* species) and clupeids, including sprat. This year, sandeels were the most common species seen, consisting of 61.2% of all feeding events, with clupeids second at 24% and gadoids at 1.3%.

The majority of disturbance during the season was caused by **Great Black-backed Gulls**. Depredation by this species has intensified over the last four years and has had a significant impact on all three tern species. Twenty-nine Roseate Tern fledgling leg-rings and 13 Common Tern fledgling leg-rings were recovered from **gull pellets** this year. A large amount of **Black Guillemot** remains were also found in gull pellets. Further attention to combat this issue is required. A **Peregrine Falcon** was spotted several times late in the season, and two chicks were found deceased with wounds consistent with raptor predation.

Human disturbance was infrequent in 2020, though there were often a number of small recreational fishing boats seen fishing around both the Rock and the Bill. Two instances were recorded of people landing on the island, and there were two instances of low-flying helicopters, which caused short but whole-colony 'dreads'.

A total of 964 Roseate Tern rings were read on adult birds in 2020, and 144 rings were read on fledged young from Rockabill (including three fledglings ringed on Lady's Island) this year. The origins of all 964 of these adult birds have been traced: they were ringed as pulli at **Rockabill**, **Lady's Island Lake**, **Dalkey Island** and **Coquet Island** (England) and **Île Aux Dames** (France). Five-year-old



Roseate Tern at Rockabill

BRIAN BURKE

birds comprised the largest cohort, with 143 birds resighted from 2015. The two oldest birds were 25 years old (from 1995).

Following the completion of the seabird season, the project manager **Stephen Newton**, volunteer **Steve Carrington** and carpenter **Jerry Wray** worked on the island between September and November, re-roofing and renovating two outbuildings, which we intend to use in future years for the safe storage of approximately 1,000 nestboxes and five hides.

## Dalkey terns

### *Final year of EU LIFE Project, in partnership with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council*

A minimum of 49 **Arctic** and **Common Tern** pairs nested across the Dalkey islands colony in south Dublin in 2020, an increase of 20 pairs on the 2019 season. Thirty chicks were assumed to have fledged from Lamb Island and Dalkey Island, and productivity was estimated at 0.50-0.61 chicks fledged per nesting pair. Core nest numbers on Dalkey Island were more than triple the number recorded during the previous season, and Common Terns nested on Lamb Island for the first time since 2018, and for the first time on record on Dalkey Island. **Roseate Terns** were observed on and in the vicinity of the sub-colony (Lamb Island) on several occasions at the end of June and beginning of July.

Two ringed adult **Arctic Terns** were recorded – they had been ringed at Skerries, Wales, and Maiden Rock, Dalkey. There was no evidence of rat predation this season.

Due to the Covid-19 situation, public engagement events were not possible, although an interactive "infographic" was produced and can be accessed at <http://roseatetern.org/dalkeyinfographic>.

## Kilcoole Little Terns

### *Project in partnership with the National Parks and Wildlife Service*

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the **Little Tern Conservation Project** was able to proceed at Kilcoole, Co Wicklow for the 2020 breeding season. The high numbers of breeding pairs that had been a feature of the colony in recent years were sustained in 2020. Implementation of conservation measures was slightly delayed, given the new operational procedures for working during the pandemic, but were in place from May 6<sup>th</sup>, including fencing, signage, surveillance and public relations. Monitoring and protection of the nesting Little Terns and their chicks continued until August 3<sup>rd</sup>.

## Species & Land Management (*continued*)

The 2020 season saw a peak adult count of 300 individuals on June 13<sup>th</sup>. The breeding population increased to its highest ever level, with 191 pairs thought to have made breeding attempts. There was a total of 312 nesting attempts (713 eggs) over the course of the season. The first two nests were found on the early date of May 14<sup>th</sup>, though laying had probably commenced a couple of days earlier. The mean clutch size was 2.28 eggs and the mean incubation period was 20.05 days. The first chick hatched on June 5<sup>th</sup>, four days earlier than in 2019. Significant numbers of nests were lost to tidal inundation, commencing with the loss of 24 nests on June 3<sup>rd</sup>; there was some subsequent depredation by Rooks. Most of these Little Tern pairs are believed to have re-laid successfully. A total of 426 young hatched and a maximum of 381 chicks potentially were reared, though 258 fledglings is a more realistic estimate of numbers.

A total of 45 chicks died, some of natural causes, with only two known to have been taken by foxes. Birds of prey (Peregrine, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk) were regularly seen but did not hunt in the colony to any significant extent. Overall productivity was estimated at 1.35 fledglings per nesting pair.

Although 341 Little Tern young were metal-ringed, given some were predated, a respectable total of 167 ( $\approx 49\%$ ) also received inscribed green Darvics. An MSc student, **Eilis Hogan** from NUI Galway, conducted an integrated research project during the season, using Go-Pro cameras to read the rings of breeding adults. A total of 69 full-grown birds, with green rings (64), four with yellow Welsh rings, and one with only a metal ring, were identified at the Kilcoole colony. The 64 Irish birds were, bar one from Baltray, all raised at Kilcoole. Kilcoole fledglings have been seen widely in July and August, both on the Irish east coast and in south and south-west England.

### Marine Protected Area Management and Monitoring (MarPAMM)

At the start of the year, 2019/20 winter fieldwork, comprising seabird surveys in Donegal and Louth, was completed before Covid-19 restrictions came into effect in March, when further fieldwork was postponed. The planned cross-border workshops with stakeholders for inputting to the marine management plans (Co Louth/Co Down and North Coast/North Channel) were also postponed at that time.

Limited fieldwork became possible from May, and Kittiwake productivity monitoring was undertaken at Donegal North (Horn Head), Donegal South (Muckross, Dundawoona), Sligo North (Mullaghmore) and County Down (Newcastle).

An online resightings database for gulls was established – see <https://birdwatchireland.ie/our-work/species-habitat-conservation/marine/marpamm>.

Background materials and data for Northern Ireland and border county seabird populations was provided to **Marine Science Scotland** for a population viability analysis. Data from the 2019 tagging of large gulls and Kittiwakes was collated and a report on Kittiwake productivity monitoring was drafted. A report on the first phase of aerial survey work in Donegal Bay (contract by **HiDef**) was completed.

During the summer, Kittiwakes were ringed and colour-ringed in south Donegal and also in Down, where a **Retrapping Adults for Survival (RAS)** scheme was initiated. **European Storm-petrel** and large gull ringing was conducted on Inishtrahull, Co Donegal, and



JOHN FOX

European Storm-petrel

the presence there of a breeding colony of **Manx Shearwaters** was confirmed for the first time – establishing this population as the most northerly on the island of Ireland. Seven geolocators from **Kittiwakes** in the Irish Sea were retrieved (under the Seatrack project).

The **Marine Protected Areas Project Officer**, working closely with his counterparts across the MarPAMM project, progressed regional management plans, as far as possible, being unable to travel, meet or conduct planned stakeholder meetings. Online solutions were sought for delivering this work going forward. Regional plan structure drafts have been developed.

At the end of September 2020, all of our work was suspended on the project due to cash flow issues within the organisation.

### Cooperation Across Borders for Biodiversity (CABB)

Breeding wader survey work was delayed due to Covid-19 restrictions, but from May, seventeen key machair and coastal wet grassland sites in Donegal and Sligo were surveyed, although islands could not be visited. A total of 168 breeding wader pairs was recorded: these consisted of 111 pairs of **Lapwings**, 26 pairs of **Snipes**, 13 pairs of **Ringed Plovers**, nine pairs of **Redshanks** and nine pairs of **Oystercatchers**. Rinmore, Co Donegal, was the top site, with a total of 52 pairs (including 37 pairs of Lapwings), while Magheragallan, also in Donegal, had the second highest total, with 24 pairs (including 13 pairs of Lapwings). Both of these sites, along with Sheskinmore, have CABB-maintained predator exclusion fences. Predator-proof fencing would appear to be key to ensuring that Lapwings, in particular, continue to survive in the north-west.

Four pairs of **Lapwings** returned to breed on our **Sheskinmore Reserve**, after an absence of 20 years. Although seven chicks hatched, unfortunately all were subsequently predated after Badgers breached the fence perimeter.

Five upland sites, including the **Conservation Action Plan (CAP)** sites (see below), were also surveyed. Due to the late start to the fieldwork, it was only possible to visit each site once. Despite covering most of the suitable breeding habitat at each site, only three pairs of **Golden Plovers** were observed (two at Lough Nillan Bog and one at Dunragh Loughs/Pettigo Plateau). One pair of **Dunlins** was recorded at Croaghonagh Bog.

Five of the **Breeding Wader Survey** sites with suitable habitat were surveyed in September and October for **Marsh Fritillary**



butterfly, an Annex I species. These sites were first surveyed in 2019. Larval webs were found at four sites, compared to three in 2019.

Ongoing CABB management agreements with landowners at breeding Curlew sites saw three pairs hatch chicks, with the assistance of temporary electric fences. Unfortunately, two pairs subsequently lost chicks due to predation. A pair on Lough Melvin in south Leitrim successfully fledged at least one chick.

The preparation of four **Conservation Action Plans (CAPs)** in Donegal (Lough Nilan, Croaghonagh and Meentygrannah Bog SACs and Dunragh Lough/Pettigo Plateau SAC) continued. Granular habitat mapping of the sites' Annex I, Fossitt, NSUH and EUNIS habitat classifications was completed and targeted management actions designed. The draft CAPs were written and input sought from stakeholders and statutory partners of CABB, particularly the NPWS; we also liaised with the NPWS on the details of the future monitoring scheme. The development and implementation of the **sustainable grazing management plan** at the Pettigo NNR by NPWS is ongoing, with different grazing regimes being trialled in different sections. A site survey in early 2020 found no evidence or

sightings of **Greenland White Fronted Geese** (a qualifying species for SPA designation) at that time. The south-western portion of the site provides suitable habitat for **Red-throated Diver**, a species which was sighted on Lough Keoran in summer 2020, though successful breeding was not confirmed.

At **Fiddandarry** in County Sligo, plans for drain-blocking on 400 hectares of blanket bog continued. At the request of the NPWS, additional baseline monitoring was carried out to investigate the potential use of active raised bog attributes (*Sphagnum* cover, micro-topographical features, acrotelm thickness) to differentiate between active and non-active blanket bog. Contractors to carry out the drain-blocking work were procured, but the work on the ground was delayed until early 2021.

## Curlew tagging project

In 2019, BirdWatch Ireland received funding from **Donegal County Council** under the **National Biodiversity Action Plan** for a Curlew tagging and ringing project. During winter 2019/20, fifty migratory Curlews were caught: in total, 32 were fitted with BTO metal rings, 14 were fitted with engraved yellow Darvic rings and eight were fitted with geolocators. Subsequently, one of these birds was observed during the 2020 breeding season in Sweden.

During the 2020 breeding season, three adult male Curlews were caught on their breeding sites in Donegal and temporary Pathtrack satellite tags (weighing five grammes) fitted; these stayed attached for the breeding season, giving a position every 45 minutes. This was the first time this has been carried out in the Republic of Ireland. From data received, the otherwise difficult-to-detect nests were located; this allowed conservation protection measures, including the installation of temporary electric fences to protect the nests from predation. Additional invaluable data obtained included egg biometrics (to obtain hatching dates), the location of roost sites, favoured foraging habitats and the behaviour of adults with chicks.

ANDREW KELLY



Curlew

## Advocacy & Policy: Defending our Birds and their Habitats

Every 5-7 years in Ireland the cycles of policies and politics are renewed (unless, of course, there is a snap election). Straddling 2020 and 2021, the Advocacy Team has engaged with the Government on a new Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), forestry policy, fisheries policy, the Climate Bill, the EU budget, and on preparing for a new national biodiversity strategy. All of these policy areas and legislation will have significant ramifications for wild birds over the next several years and will define if, and how, we will meet stringent 2030 targets to address biodiversity loss and restore it, cut greenhouse gas emissions and tackle declining water quality. The general election came at a pivotal point too, with green politics taking centre stage, as the pandemic all but brought economies to a halt but renewed people's love for nature.

Influencing policy at a strategic level is critical, not only because this level sets the stage for the plans and projects which follow, but also because, with limited staff resources, this is the wisest thing to do. Working with our colleagues in the surveys, monitoring and conservation teams, we advocate on the back of an evidence base.

In early 2020, BirdWatch Ireland laid out its policy demands for wild birds and the habitats they require in our **Manifesto for**



**Nature**, which received significant public and political attention and engagement, with some key points being included in the Programme for Government.

**Agricultural activity** is the most significant pressure and threat to biodiversity, climate and water quality in Ireland. BirdWatch Ireland staff participated in the Government's **CAP Consultative Committee**, sometimes on a bimonthly basis, as representatives of the **Environmental Pillar**, feeding in recommendations to steer agricultural policy away from destructive intensification and down a more sustainable route. Working with our German BirdLife partner, **NABU**, we launched the **Speak Up for Nature** campaign, in which hundreds of BirdWatch Ireland members wrote emails and left

## Advocacy & Policy: Defending our Birds and their Habitats (*continued*)

voicemails for politicians, asking them to vote for space for nature, transition for nature, and money for nature in the CAP. These messages can be heard on our **SoundCloud** channel.

Forestry advocacy work included follow-up engagement on the range of issues emanating from the very poor **Forestry Bill 2020**, which has constrained public participation in the submissions and appeals process regarding forestry licences. We are participating in the new **Forestry Policy Working Group** to help steer forestry away from high nature value farmland and important areas for birds. We need more trees in the right places, not at the expense of the biodiversity we currently have, and it must be in line with EU environmental law.

Advocacy with our BirdLife partners on the new **EU Biodiversity Strategy** resulted in a highly ambitious strategy, which must now inform our own **national biodiversity strategy** and, most importantly, be underpinned by the required funding.

We pushed national and EU politicians for much more money for biodiversity in the EU budget and the Recovery Plan for Europe, as well as the national budget. Funding for nature has been insufficient to deal with the scale of the challenge facing us. We need resilient habitats and ecosystems, not only for wildlife, but to mitigate and adapt to climate breakdown.

Through participation in **Stop Climate Chaos**, we worked hard with colleagues to press for an ambitious **Climate Bill** and to ensure that climate targets were reflected in all of our advocacy work.

Over the last year, our **marine advocacy** has remained a key priority. Ireland's marine territory is more than ten times the country's land area. Within this expanse, seabirds and marine biodiversity generally are under unprecedented stress from pressures such as **overfishing** and **climate change**. We continued to work closely with stakeholders, scientists and decision-makers to progress sustainable fisheries management and marine conservation, with the aim of securing a bright future for our marine environment and the communities who depend on it. BirdWatch Ireland led a campaign, in

RICHARD T. MILLS



Hen Harrier

collaboration with Ireland's inshore fishing sector and marine NGOs, to ban large trawlers within Ireland's inshore area. The campaign was met with broad support from the public and across the political spectrum, and we managed to secure a commitment from the Government that the necessary legal steps would be taken to ensure that the ban was brought into force. We worked with partners internationally to ensure that Brexit did not derail the EU's efforts to end overfishing. We managed to secure unprecedented access to the European Commission's head negotiators over the course of the bilateral and trilateral fisheries

negotiations between the EU, UK and Norway. Our work has also taken on an increased focus on the need for Ireland to designate a well-protected, ecologically coherent network of **Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)**, including highly protected sites, in Irish waters.

On too many occasions BirdWatch Ireland is the last line of defence to prevent the destruction of nationally and internationally important areas for threatened birds. Through our planning work, we have managed to halt inappropriate developments, safeguarding protected sites and important populations of breeding Hen Harriers, Curlews and waterbirds.

We continued to collaborate with a range of other environmental organisations, especially through the **Environmental Pillar**, **Stop Climate Chaos** and the **Sustainable Water Network**, to build a strong voice for the environment in Ireland. We can be proud of our efforts to influence policy and decision-makers on a shoestring. If we are to be effective, though, more staff and resources will be needed to advocate and campaign to reflect the increasing demands, especially as we head into the **Decade of Ecosystem Restoration**. In recent years, staff who departed the advocacy team have not been replaced, and this has put pressure on the existing team and our capacity to meet goals, as well as raise much-needed funds.

## Media, Social Media and Publications

BirdWatch Ireland's media profile continued to grow in 2020, with frequent coverage in particular on **Mooney Goes Wild** on RTÉ Radio 1, **The Hard Shoulder** on Newstalk, and the **Today** show and **Ear to the Ground** on RTÉ television.

In May, a special episode of RTÉ One's **Nationwide** programme was presented from our East Coast Nature Reserve in Newcastle, Co Wicklow, with our resident Great Spotted Woodpeckers posing obligingly for the cameras. The reserve also served as the location for a series of weather reports and interviews on Virgin Media One's **Ireland AM** programme.

Filming took place on Rockabill island for a special European Broadcasting Union programme, **Back from the Brink**. Showcasing our tern conservation work, the programme will be broadcast across Europe during 2021.

BirdWatch Ireland also played a major role in RTÉ Radio 1's **Dawn Chorus** programme in May, with 'home base' this year being our East Coast Nature Reserve, Co Wicklow. In addition, staff contributed to live dawn chorus radio programmes in Scotland and Sweden.

Our Barn Owl nest box work on behalf of BirdWatch Ireland's Cork Branch, supported by **Cork County Council**, was featured on RTÉ news programmes in December.

In total, the organisation was featured in print and broadcast media on a record 1,159 occasions during the year. Covid-19 appears to have led to a significant increase in interest in birds and conservation amongst the media and the general public, reflected in the demand for BirdWatch Ireland contributions and take-up of our media releases.

The onset of the pandemic also saw a marked increase in traffic



to the BirdWatch Ireland website, with our garden bird, education and membership pages proving especially popular. 2,080,611 visits were recorded by 653,544 unique visitors during 2020.

By year's end, 28,042 people were receiving our monthly eWings e-zine. Our social media presence grew to a total of 33,244 page

'likes' on Facebook and 29,676 followers on Twitter, an increase of 2,659 and 3,143 respectively since 2019.

Our extensive range of publications includes *Wings*, *Bird Detectives*, *Irish Birds*, *eWings*, *I-WeBS News* and *CBS News*. We also publish a sales catalogue and a calendar and run several project blogs.

## Building & Supporting Our Networks: Branches, Members & the Public

Covid-19 necessitated the cancellation of virtually all BirdWatch Ireland's public events from March onwards. Of particular significance was the cancellation of **Bloom**, Ireland's largest garden and food event, which traditionally is our biggest membership recruitment opportunity of the year. Other key public events which were cancelled in 2020 included the **Dublin Horse Show** and Dublin City Council's **Rose Festival**. We estimate that up to 400 BirdWatch Ireland branch events were also unable to proceed.

Despite the pandemic, our branch network remained resilient and active. The **Cork Branch** initiated a very successful **Stay-at-home Birdwatching Challenge**, gaining nationwide attention and participation. Volunteers from the **Fingal Branch** wardened the **Little Tern** colony at **Portrane** during the summer months, and the **Carlow Branch** launched its **Carlow Swift Nest Box Project**. Several BirdWatch Ireland branches are now undertaking **Swift conservation** and monitoring work, providing much-needed assistance to, and public awareness of, this vulnerable migratory species.

Our membership base continues to provide much-needed support for the organisation, and we were delighted to see a notable **increase in members** during 2020. In total, almost 2,000 new members joined us, the highest number in our 52-year history.

In July, we launched our **Covid-19 Emergency Fundraising Appeal**,



RICHARD T MILLS

Swift

seeking financial support for the organisation's work during a period of great uncertainty. We were delighted to exceed our appeal target of €125,000, and would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed so generously. We would also like to thank all of our **members** for their subscriptions, donations and shop purchases and for their ongoing support.

## Education and Raising Awareness

We continued our 'Seeing the World through Nature' Erasmus+-funded project, run in conjunction with our fellow BirdLife International partners in **Poland, Malta and Cyprus**. This project will run until March 2022, and its aim is to develop environmental educational resources for teachers who work with blind and visually impaired children. These resources, as well as a mobile application to assist with the recognition of birdsong, will be made available free of charge across the BirdLife International partnership.

We would encourage all members to promote the educational resource section of our website, which proved to be so popular with parents and teachers during 2020. This can be found at <https://birdwatchireland.ie/our-work/fun-learning>.

Over 1,500 records were submitted to **Spring Alive**, our migration monitoring project for children and families, sponsored by **Heidelberg Cement (www.springalive.net)**. This project was featured prominently in RTE's *Home School Hub* programming, as were many of our other educational resources.

In December 2020, we published *Golden Wings*, a beautifully illustrated digital book on Irish Barn Owls, in collaboration with **Galway County Council** and **Creative Ireland**. It follows the journey of a female Barn Owl from hatching to raising a family of her own and gives the reader an intimate insight into the lives of Barn Owls in Ireland, the challenges they face and the work



Inside pages from the digital book *Golden Wings*, published in December 2020

undertaken by BirdWatch Ireland to help them. It was written by **Susan O'Donohoe**, illustrated by **Robert Vaughan** and designed by **Sara Sirtoli**, and is available free of charge at <https://birdwatchireland.ie/golden-wings>.

We produced a range of education materials on **Carrownagappul Bog** in Galway, funded by **Galway County Council**, including a video showcasing the birds and biodiversity of the site, an educational booklet on the biodiversity of the bog for children, and a story map to guide people to explore and appreciate the site, while ensuring that sensitive areas are avoided.

# Summary of Accounts 2020

## FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

The details given below are a summary of accounts for BirdWatch Ireland and BWI Retail and Services Limited in 2020. A full set of accounts for the year ended 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020 is available from BirdWatch Ireland on request.

	2020 €	2019 €
<b>Income</b>		
Membership subscriptions	278,953	264,001
Donations & bequests	157,599	120,182
Grants	24,886	67,324
Advertising and other income	57,496	63,404
Conservation projects	1,264,489	1,157,215
Investment income	-	147
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,783,423</b>	<b>1,672,273</b>

### Expenditure

Conservation project costs	1,275,886	1,384,832
Administration expenses	588,207	578,100
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,864,093</b>	<b>1,962,932</b>

### Net (deficit) / surplus

Total funds brought forward	1,666,547	1,957,206
<b>Total funds carried forward</b>	<b>1,585,877</b>	<b>1,666,547</b>
Revaluation reserve	120,000	120,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,705,877</b>	<b>1,786,547</b>

### Represented by:

Non-current assets	3,036,556	3,066,115
Net current (liabilities) / assets	523,303	427,759
Other creditors	807,376	851,809
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,705,877</b>	<b>1,786,547</b>

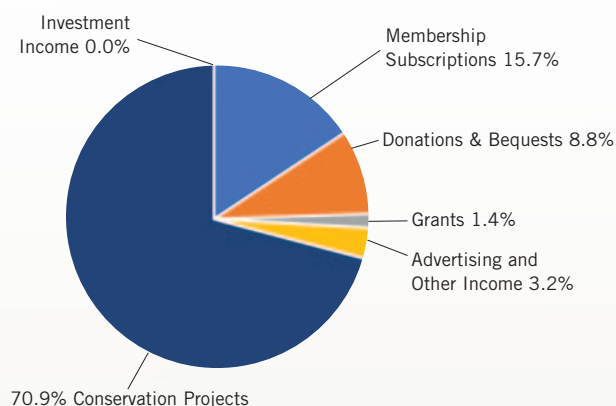
### BWI Retail and Services Limited

Turnover	193,279	128,474
Cost of sales	119,553	79,636
Gross profit	73,726	48,838
Administrative expenses	73,726	48,398
Interest payable	-	161
Profit before taxation	-	279
Tax on profit	-	35
Profit after taxation	-	244
Total funds brought forward	1,434	1,190
<b>Total funds carried forward</b>	<b>1,434</b>	<b>1,434</b>

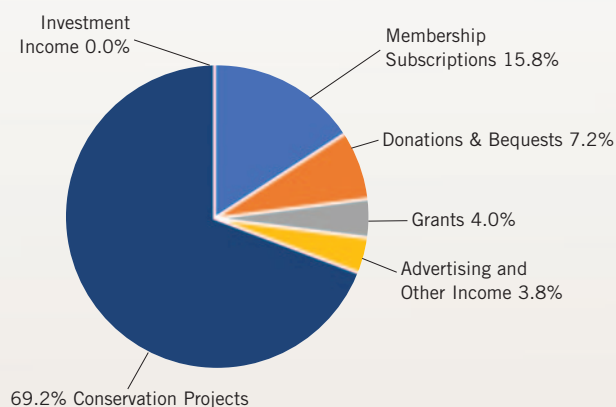
### Represented by:

Fixed assets	744	744
Net current assets / (liabilities)	690	690
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,434</b>	<b>1,434</b>

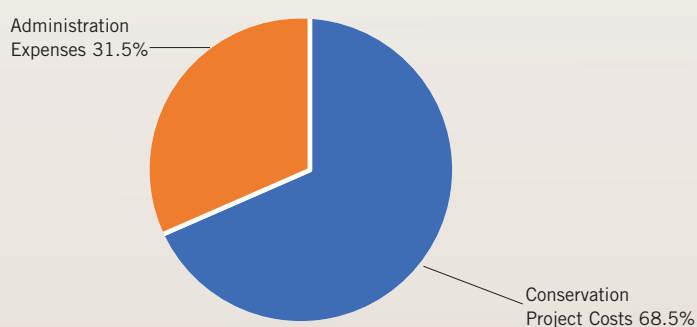
## INCOME 2020



## INCOME 2019



## EXPENDITURE 2020



## EXPENDITURE 2019

