

Saving birds on blanket bogs

Peat dam on Fiddandarry Bog SAC, Ox Mountains, Co Sligo
Photo: Michael Bell



Curlew
Photo: Richard T Mills

Daniel Connaghan reports on work to restore four listed blanket bogs in the north-west and to help the breeding waders they support, including the iconic Curlew

Ireland's nature matters a lot to its citizens. As a nation, we enjoy outdoor pursuits and, if the experiences of the last year and a half have given us anything positive to celebrate, it seems many of us have reconnected with the natural landscapes around us.

Many of us, myself included, have childhood memories of trips to the countryside, driving past green fields and west to where the tang of peat in sharp, cold, fresh air marked arriving in the family home.

For many, there is no landscape more evocative of the Irish countryside than its broad stretches of peatland, both **blanket bogs**, most typical of western uplands, and **raised bogs**, once found abundantly in the midlands. The plaintive cry of the **Curlew**, a heathery explosion as **Red Grouse** take flight, or the streamlined silhouette of a hunting **Merlin** are wildlife experiences anyone who has visited a healthy peatland may remember. However, these have become much rarer experiences in recent years.

Bog management in Ireland has a complicated and turbulent history, and there is much to unpack when trying to navigate a path forwards for them and the animals and plants which live in them. Peatlands have been interpreted through many different cultural and political lenses through the centuries and are an iconic and integral part of Ireland's rural cultural life. In addition, they have been an essential fuel resource for rural communities.

Unfortunately, the loss of our peat bogs, in particular through industrial-scale exploitation,

has devastated much of the unique wildlife and many of the iconic birds associated with them, including **Golden Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Curlew**, **Snipe**, **Merlin** and **Hen Harrier**, all of which are in decline or disappearing. Many are listed as being of either high (red-listed) or medium (amber-listed) conservation concern, according to the report **Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BoCCI 4)**, published last year by the RSPB and BirdWatch Ireland. Some species are on the very edge of extinction in Ireland. For example, the **Curlew**, which breeds in upland bog and grassland habitats, has declined in numbers from 3,300-5,500 pairs in the late 1980s to probably fewer than 150 pairs in 2021, and is facing extinction as a breeding species in Ireland in the next 10 years. This, and the declines recorded for many other species, has been caused partly by loss of bogland habitat.

The main activities degrading blanket bog ecosystems and affecting their ability to support healthy wildlife populations are overgrazing, erosion, afforestation and the removal of peat for fuel.

A **National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)** review found that the status of blanket bogs nationally was 'bad' and that mechanical removal of peat was of 'high importance' as a contributory factor. The **Irish Peatland Conservation Council (IPCC)** in their 2020 Peatland Action Plan concluded that even the 'traditional cutting of the bogs for turbarry is having a serious impact on blanket bogs.' The IPCC has calculated that, overall, 77% of peatland habitats in the Republic of Ireland has been destroyed through the

commercial and domestic utilisation of peatlands.

Before we discuss how we can restore our bogs to ecological integrity, it is important to remember that only about 28% of blanket bogs are even considered suitable for restoration, as many have already been drained and converted to agriculture, or planted with monocultures of non-native conifers. Up to 27% of the original area of blanket bog habitat in Ireland is now covered in forestry plantations, making it very difficult to return it to positive conservation management. This is a particularly impactful loss, as Ireland is important globally for blanket bog habitat: it contains 8% of the world's blanket bogs, which makes it the most important European country for this habitat type.

These are just a sample of the very real threats to our blanket bogs, and they also go a long way towards explaining the stunning declines in bird populations outlined in *BoCCI 4*. A further, very comprehensive account of our relationship with our natural resources is found in the excellent book *Whittled Away*, written by **Pádraic Fogarty** of the **Irish Wildlife Trust**.

The history of the dialogue around conservation of natural habitats is chequered. In the late 1990s, the NPWS proposed conservation plans for all designated sites in Ireland – **Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)**, **Special Protection Areas (SPAs)** and **proposed Natural Heritage Areas (pNHAs)** – plans which were to be produced in consultation with stakeholders. Unfortunately, the consultation process largely didn't occur, for various reasons. However, this lack of consultation was ultimately to the detriment of these areas, as there was a



Snipe
Photo: Richard T Mills

perception in some quarters that environmental protection could pose a threat to traditions and rural ways of life.

Valuable lessons were learnt, and conservation projects now recognise the imperative of working with the communities who live in and use the landscape. Research has shown that this is fundamentally important to ensuring the likelihood of success for any conservation project.

Conservation work in Donegal

The **Conservation Across Borders for Biodiversity** (CABB) project is now attempting to ensure the early engagement of landowners in the conservation planning for four blanket bog SACs in Donegal.

CABB is a five-year project funded by **INTERREGVA**, part of the **European Regional Development Fund** managed by the **Special EU Programmes Body**. The project consists of six partners across the border counties of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland and focuses on improving conservation outcomes for priority habitats and species in these areas, with a particular suite of measures for blanket bog habitats.

In conjunction with the NPWS, the project has carried out capital works focused on habitat restoration, with measures such as drain blocking to re-wet important blanket bog habitats at **Fiddandarry**, land purchased by the State which is part of the Ox Mountains SAC in County Sligo.

Temporary anti-predator fences to protect nesting **Curlew** from mammalian predators such as fox and Pine Marten, which would eat their eggs or chicks, have also been erected, also in conjunction with the NPWS. There are also plans to provide two permanent predator-proof fences at key breeding wader sites in Donegal, bringing the total number of such fences in that county to five.

Regular monitoring of breeding waders on these sites, also carried out as part of CABB, has shown that populations of **Lapwing** are faring better at fenced sites than at sites without fences.

Within the four Donegal blanket bog SACs referred to above, another crucial element is the design of specific management strategies, which will provide a targeted approach for improving the conservation status of EU priority habitats, as well as associated habitats and species. Plans have been written in consultation with relevant stakeholders and landowners.

BirdWatch Ireland, again as part of the CABB project, also has several management agreements with farmers in counties Donegal and Leitrim. These aim to enhance the habitat for **Curlew** and to protect them during the breeding season. Prescriptions such as stocking rates, no machinery operations during the key breeding months, and the



Cuckoo
Photo: Ita Martin

control of rushes to ensure an open grassy sward (which breeding waders require), are embedded in each individual management agreement, which is tailored to the individual farm. A key element of these management agreements is an advisory role for BirdWatch Ireland to help farmers to protect

this critically endangered species.

The scale of the dangers facing Irish wildlife can easily engender despair, but it is crucial that we do not give up. At the end of the day, nobody wants a countryside devoid of nature or wildlife. We must act urgently to preserve our natural heritage for future generations. This can only be done by recognising that the fate of our blanket bogs is a national issue, and requires cohesive leadership to address the underlying drivers of biodiversity decline and habitat loss in our precious uplands, while remaining inclusive and mindful of the human inhabitants of the same landscapes ■



Board members needed *It could be you!*

We are actively seeking to recruit new board members who believe they can help to guide and support BirdWatch Ireland's important work into the future. We wish to create a panel of diverse candidates who can offer a range of skills and experience to BirdWatch Ireland. This panel could then be used both to fill a number of existing vacancies on the Board, and facilitate Board succession following the 2022 AGM.

Although the past few years have been challenging ones for BirdWatch Ireland, the organisation has already turned a corner by stabilising finances and adapting to the challenges of Covid-19. It is also committed to strengthening the future governance, leadership and management of the organisation.

So, what is expected? Board members must be members of BirdWatch Ireland, and attend approximately ten board meetings per year, as well as the Annual General Meeting. They should also participate actively in the life of the organisation between board meetings, advising the executive management team and acting in an ambassadorial role for the organisation, where appropriate. Board meetings are normally held on weekday evenings at BirdWatch Ireland HQ in Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, with an option for board members to attend via phone or internet. [In line with current public health guidelines, most board meetings are now being held online.]

More details about the key skills and qualities needed, as well as some specific areas of experience that we require, are listed on the BirdWatch Ireland website at www.bit.ly/BWI-board. Please take a look at this, and let us know if you are interested in getting involved.

How to apply

Please send a letter of interest stating why you wish to be considered, together with a current CV, by email to:

secretary@birdwatchireland.ie.

Alternatively, you can send hard copy to: Jonathan Taylor, Secretary, BirdWatch Ireland, Unit 20, Block D, Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, A63 RW83. The deadline for receipt of applications is March 31st, 2022.