

A big year for the Countryside Bird Survey

It has been an exciting year for me as the new CBS Coordinator, and it is great to have the first year under my belt. The team of Lesley Lewis, Brian Burke and John Kennedy, and Niamh Fitzgerald from I-WeBS, has guided me with confidence. I have followed Dick Coombes' notes closely; the Countryside Bird Survey is all about consistency – the same squares surveyed at roughly the same time each year. It's also been wonderful getting to meet so many of our dedicated volunteers, some taking part for the first time, others who have been surveying for the whole 25 years. I have had the pleasure of meeting many of you at workshops, others via email and phone. To all of you, a huge "thank you!"

It is amazing how much excitement we get from learning about the species that you have found in the survey. Seeing a **Spotted Flycatcher** in the field is always a cause for celebration, but I had no idea that my seeing the letters 'SF' on a form could bring such a thrill! Believe it or not, I can almost see it leaping off the yellow Count Summary Sheet, and I'm sure I hear **Swifts** screaming when I read the letters 'SI'!

I hope you all relished the fieldwork last year, with the satisfaction of knowing that you were putting your bird identification skills to good use, while noting the changes you saw in your square.

On page three, you can see the trends up to and including the 2023 season; this is thanks to your hard work and dedication on those early spring and summer mornings.

The trends show that populations of our common and widespread birds are continually changing. While most species are quite stable, some, such as **Goldfinch** and **Blackcap**, have increased substantially over the last 20 years, while others, including **Kestrel**, **Skylark**, **Stock Dove** and **Swift**, are showing worrying declines.

The CBS aims to detect and quantify such changes using robust, scientific and easily-implemented methods. Over time, reasons for decline may be identified and there will be opportunities to provide advice to help reverse such trends.

Later in the year, the data you gathered will be included in Ireland's report to the EU Commission under Article 12 of the Birds Directive, which aims to protect all naturally occurring wild bird species present in the EU, and their most important habitats. So, rest assured: your hard work really is making a difference.



Spotted Flycatcher. Photo: Shay Connolly

There are a few things to bear in mind when you are out in the field. Record all adult birds seen or heard during your early morning walks, one in early summer (April 1st to May 15th), the second about four weeks later (May 15th to end of June). Please supply all data, habitat codes, and any transect route adjustments for your survey. Please record only those species you are confident you have identified. Please do not rely on apps, as they regularly misidentify some species, such as picking up **Blackcap** as **Garden Warbler**. And try to record each bird only once. If there is one **Cuckoo** heard calling from a particular location, and it can be heard from many transect sections, record it under one transect section only.

Please only record adult birds. For example, if there is a flock of **Rooks** in a field and you observe adults feeding juveniles, record your estimate of the adult birds.

Birds are most active early in the morning, so it is best to start between 6.00am and 7.00am and finish up around 9.00am. If your square is difficult to access, such as a mountain site, a slightly later start is acceptable. Thanks again to you all, and enjoy the fieldwork!

Andrew Lynch,
CBS Coordinator

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Square with great variety of birds

CBS volunteer **Tom Lynch** describes counting his square in County Clare

I started surveying the CBS square R0070 after attending a training workshop organised by **Dick Coombes** and the **Clare Branch** of BirdWatch Ireland, held in Ennis, Co Clare, in 2015.

A number of squares were available and I chose R0070 because of its potential; I was aware of the abundance of natural habitats it contained. My decision has been well rewarded.

The area has been surveyed 19 times since 1998, and 83 different species have been recorded there.

The square includes views of a section of the Atlantic Ocean, Lough Donnell Lagoon, Annagheeragh River, reed beds, hedgerows, dwellings, gardens, derelict buildings, ditches, dykes, farmyards, and farmland with natural and improved grasslands.

On my visits, I am always accompanied by my wife **Nuala**. We try to visit on a morning when the breeze from the Atlantic is not too strong, and better still if it is bright and sunny. This is easier to gauge with modern forecasting.

We begin close to

Carrowmore Point, where **Meadow Pipits** are often the first bird recorded. A scan of the sea and shore may produce a **Great Northern Diver, Gannet, Dunlin, Oystercatcher, Cormorant, Shag, Ringed Plover, Rock Pipit** and various gulls.

Onwards then to scramble along the cobble barrier overlooking Lough Donnell, which protects it from the sea. The Annagheeragh River, which drains the large catchment area, enters the lough in the east and a sluice gate controls the water flow at its exit. It is here we encounter flocks of **Whimbrel** on their spring migration route, the odd **Curlew, Little Egret, a Kingfisher** whizzing past, **Shelduck, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Mute Swan** and the sound of **Water Rail. Hirundines** skim the water surface as they hawk for insects.

The second half of our walk leads back to the public roadway, with reed beds to our left, where the reeling of **Grasshopper Warbler** is expected. Here, also, the **Sedge Warbler** indicates its arrival with a loud, excited mix of phrases. **Reed Buntings** sway gently on

the exposed reeds. From here to the end, the **Stonechats** are obvious on fences and posts.

The competing songs of the **Skylarks** to our left and right are the abiding memory of the morning – a throwback to our childhood when this species was as common in farmland nationwide as it is here now. They serenade us from high in the blue sky, where they are but tiny specks.

The low hum of an old small-farmer's milking machine brings us to a farmyard and haggard with lots of nesting **House Sparrows, Starlings** and a few pairs of **Swallows**. Again, a reminder of days of yore.

Suddenly in the distance, the two-note call of the **Cuckoo** is heard, the familiar sound of summer. It comes closer and, there he is, on the branch of a lone Ash tree! **Meadow Pipits** in the nearby fields are not as impressed and rise to mob the intruder.

As we amble along, the scratchy song of the **Whitethroat** emerges from the hedgerow, **Wheatears** occasionally alight on the quiet road, **Willow Warbler** song rises to a crescendo and fades

suddenly, little flocks of **Linnets** and **Goldfinches** bounce along the Elder hedge and **Swallows** flit in and out of a derelict house. Usually on our second visit, busy **House Martins** and **Sand Martins** fly by, carrying mouthfuls of insects.

One is always on the lookout for an unexpected bird of prey. From time to time, **Kestrel** and **Sparrowhawk** cause a flurry of fear and excitement among the smaller birds, while the **Rooks, Jackdaws** and **Magpies** are busy ensuring this threat does not remain in their territory for long.

From beginning to end, the song chorus of **Blackbird, Song Thrush, Robin, Wren, Blue Tit** and the odd **Blackcap** and **Chaffinch**, along with the sights and sounds of the countryside, brings joy and contentment in this unique, unspoilt habitat.

What species will be number 84 or 85 for the square? A **Buzzard**? A **Spotted Flycatcher**? Who knows! It would be delightful to see a **Tree Sparrow** pop out of the hedge once again.

We look forward to next April as we head for home after a positive experience of citizen science.

Workshop news

Spring was in the air at our annual training workshops this year. Sessions were held at the **Creggan Court Hotel**, Athlone, Co Westmeath, and at beautiful **Cabragh Wetlands** in County Tipperary, where attendees spotted a Long-tailed Tit busily constructing a nest from mosses, spider webs and lichens. These workshops demonstrate the Countryside Bird Survey (CBS) methods for new participants.

Sessions were kindly supported by the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** and resulted in over twenty squares being taken up by attendees. These training sessions really are an effective way of finding new surveyors to fill in gaps in the coverage.



Participants at the CBS workshop in Tipperary. Photo: Andrew Lynch

It's all in the numbers!

Lesley Lewis (CBS team) presents the species trends calculated from the CBS data for the period 1998 to 2023

We are delighted that we are on track and have just calculated updated trends of our common and widespread breeding species, up to and including the 2023 season. Thanks to everyone for getting their data in to meet the new deadlines! So, hot off the press, see below for the latest species national trends within the CBS.

For more information on our trends analyses, please see the **CBS webpages** at www.bit.ly/CBSpages or go directly to the species trends at www.bit.ly/CBS-trends.

And for information on how our CBS data are used by the **Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme** to help generate trends for bird species across Europe, please see here: www.bit.ly/pan-europe-trends.

Species Name	Latin Name	BoCCI-4*	Average no. squares per year	Mean Annual Change	Trend
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		232	-0.1	Stable
Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	Red	31	-3.2	Moderate decrease
Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		72	1.8	Moderate increase
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		36	2.5	Moderate increase
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		267	1.5	Moderate increase
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		68	3.3	Moderate increase
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		39	16.9	Strong increase
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Red	33	-2.2	Moderate decrease
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		246	-1.0	Moderate decrease
Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		223	0.6	Moderate increase
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		242	0.3	Stable
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		241	2.2	Moderate increase
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		70	1.2	Moderate increase
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		172	0.5	Moderate increase
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		242	1.3	Moderate increase
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		224	2.2	Moderate increase
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Amber	117	0.1	Stable
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	Amber	33	1.9	Moderate increase
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Amber	264	-0.9	Moderate decrease
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Amber	95	2.1	Moderate increase
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		52	1.5	Moderate increase
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	Amber	224	2.1	Moderate increase
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		145	3.6	Moderate increase
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		62	-1.0	Moderate decrease
Grasshopper Warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>		35	-0.4	Stable
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		140	13.0	Strong increase
Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>		65	1.3	Moderate increase
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Amber	155	0.5	Moderate increase
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		285	0.7	Moderate increase
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Amber	220	1.6	Moderate increase
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		253	0.1	Stable
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		135	1.0	Moderate increase
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		279	0.6	Moderate increase
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		280	0.0	Stable
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		64	0.4	Stable
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Amber	153	2.6	Moderate increase
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		227	0.8	Moderate increase
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Red	34	-2.2	Moderate decrease
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		155	1.6	Moderate increase
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Red	172	-0.1	Stable
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		275	1.1	Moderate increase
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		138	2.2	Moderate increase
Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	Amber	147	-4.7	Moderate decrease
Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	Amber	124	1.6	Moderate increase
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		60	1.8	Moderate increase
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		158	5.5	Moderate increase
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Red	74	0.3	Stable
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		86	-0.1	Stable

* Gilbert, G, Stanbury, A & Lewis, LJ (2021) Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 4 2020-2026. *Irish Birds*, **43**, 1-22.

Species Focus

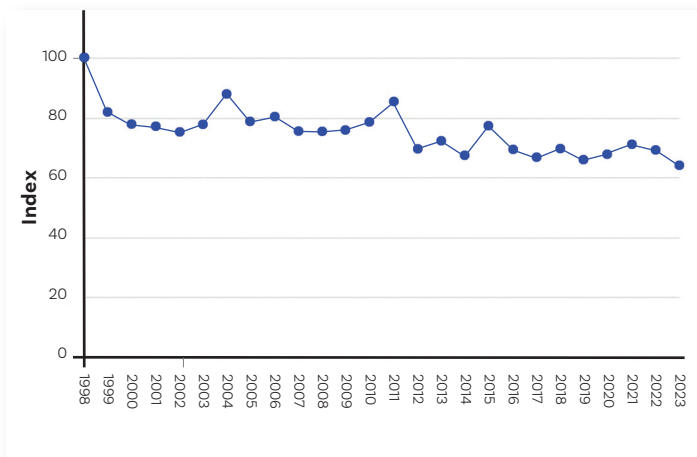
Magpie

Magpie
Photo: Richard T Mills

There is no disputing that the **Magpie** *Pica pica* is one of Ireland's most strikingly beautiful birds, with its combination of black, iridescent purplish-blue and green feathers. But it is a contentious species too, blamed for predated young vulnerable chicks of other bird species, taking eggs and damaging crops. As a consequence, Magpies are subject to control in order to prevent the spread of disease, preventing damage to livestock, and protecting the nests and young of game and other birds.

The Magpie's success as a species is at least partly down to its omnivorous habit. Magpies will eat almost anything, and they live successfully in a wide range of habitats too, from the open countryside to urban areas.

The results of our most recent **Irish**



National trend for Magpie within the CBS, 1998 to 2023.

Garden Bird Survey¹ show Magpies were ranked the fourth most commonly occurring species, present in over 90% of gardens. While the actual impact Magpies cause to other bird populations is unquantified, it is worth bearing in mind that they are just playing their natural role in the food chain.

Magpie
Photo:
Richard T Mills



The Magpie is '**Snag breac**' in Irish. In English, the 'pie' part of the name originates from the word 'pied,' denoting a mixture of colours. The 'mag' likely arose from 'Mag,' a word used in the 18th century to describe someone who chattered a lot.

Magpies are, of course, a noisy, chattering bird, giving rise to alternative names such as 'Chatterpie' and 'Chattermag.'

In Chinese culture, the Magpie is a symbol of happiness, but, more commonly, the Magpie is branded as a bringer of bad luck. In Biblical times, it was the only bird that refused to enter Noah's Ark, preferring instead to perch outside and cackle its defiance at the rising waters.

The most common superstition, of course, is that seeing a single Magpie brings bad luck. While no one knows for sure why, perhaps it is because they are known to mate for life.

Like other members of the crow family,

Magpies are clever and adaptable birds. The **Bird Atlas 2007-2012** reported Magpies from 96% of 10 km squares in Ireland, making them one of our most common and widespread bird species. There has been an increase in the Magpie's breeding abundance since **Bird Atlas 1988-1991²** (see map).

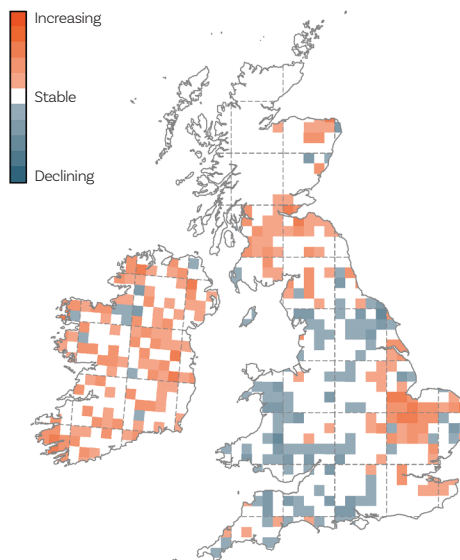
Within the CBS, however, Magpies are showing a trend of long-term decline in abundance ('moderate decrease') (see graph), while our last comprehensive status assessment³ reported a long-term trend of

decline in abundance, and a relatively small increase in distribution.

Why are our Magpies in decline? Of note is that, while the species' trend is stable for the UK as a whole, the breeding population in Wales has declined by over 25% in the past 25 years, purportedly due to habitat loss and impacts of pesticides.

On January 1st, 2024, it became an offence to kill or take a Magpie in Wales, due to the species now having an Amber-listed status there. Are our Magpies heading for Amber status too? Or are the declines observed within the countryside linked to the species' reported success as an urban and suburban coloniser?

Lesley Lewis,
CBS Team



Magpie breeding abundance changes, 1988-91 to 2008-11. From the **Bird Atlas 2007-11²**, courtesy of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

¹ Irish Garden Bird Survey results, winter 2022/23. Wings, Winter 2023.

² Balmer, D, Gillings, S, Caffrey, B, Swann, B, Downie, I & Fuller, R (2012) *Bird Atlas 2007-11: The breeding and wintering birds of Britain & Ireland*. BTO Books, Thetford.

³ Lewis, LJ, Coombes, D, Burke, B, O'Halloran, J, Walsh, A, Tierney, TD & Cummins, S (2019) *Countryside Bird Survey: Status and trends of common and widespread breeding birds 1998-2016*. *Irish Wildlife Manuals*, No 115. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Ireland.

As ever, the CBS team welcomes requests for use of CBS data from research institutes and individuals. See birdwatchireland.ie/publications/cbs-data-request-form or email ljlewis@birdwatchireland.ie