



BirdWatchIreland
protecting birds and biodiversity

Annual Report 2023





Participants in the 2023 I-WeBS Workshop in Galway (see Good News, page 4). **Photograph:** Mike Shaughnessy / Galwaypics.ie

BIRDWATCH IRELAND is the largest independent conservation organisation in Ireland. A registered charity, its aim is the conservation of wild birds and their natural habitats. Established in 1968, it has over 15,000 members and a growing network of local branches. It manages nature reserves which protect threatened habitats and the wildlife that relies on them, works to conserve Ireland's biodiversity, produces a range of media to raise wider awareness of nature conservation in Ireland, and carries out important education, survey and research work.

BirdWatch Ireland is the official Irish partner of BirdLife International, the world's largest partnership of conservation organisations, which strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity.

The key aims of BirdWatch Ireland are:

- To maintain and, where possible, improve the conservation status of all Irish bird species
- To prevent the extinction of any Irish bird species in the wild
- To conserve, and where appropriate, improve and enlarge sites and habitats important for birds
- To help through birds to conserve biodiversity (other wildlife) and thereby improve the quality of people's lives
- To integrate nature conservation with sustainable development
- To educate and promote awareness of our birdlife and habitats



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BirdWatch Ireland Directors in 2023

- James Fitzharris** (Chairman)
- Jonathan Taylor** (Secretary)
- Eugene O'Brien**
- Conor O'Brien**
- Des Fagan**
- Alan Mulligan**
- Congella McGuire** (appointed June 24th 2023)
- Frances Threadgold** (appointed Sept 21st 2023)

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



COVER PHOTOGRAPH:
Curlew
By Colin Rigney

Welcome

Report from the Board

We are pleased to report that BirdWatch Ireland had another very successful year in 2023, both from an operational and a financial perspective. This continued the trend from 2022, which was also a good year for the organisation following some difficult years.

The details of the many conservation, monitoring, research and related activities undertaken in 2023 can be found in this report. These illustrate our constant efforts to protect wild birds and biodiversity in Ireland, as part of our major contribution to preserving our precious natural heritage.

While the financial position of BirdWatch Ireland will always be challenging and need constant monitoring, it continues to improve steadily. We once again recorded a healthy, positive surplus of €296,000 in 2023, and the cash position has improved considerably within the last few years.

Our operational and financial success is a clear manifestation of the professionalism, expertise, dedication and commitment of all the staff, ably led by our CEO, **Linda Lennon**, who joined us in 2022 and has had a transformative effect on the organisation.

We would like to express sincere thanks on our own behalf and that of our members to the **BirdWatch Ireland team** for all their hard work in 2023, which has clearly borne fruit.



Linda Lennon, CEO, BirdWatch Ireland



Barn Owl: subject of our main fundraising appeal in 2023

We launched an appeal during the year to support the work we are doing on **Barn Owls**, an iconic but endangered species. Thank you to all our members and supporters who gave so generously to this appeal, which to date has raised over €45,000.

The Board has met for ten Board meetings since the last AGM in July 2023, with the customary excellent attendance record of all Board members.

As is shown in the AGM Notice of Meeting, two existing Board members who retired by rotation at the 2023 AGM are being proposed for election back on to the Board. **Frances Threadgold**, who was co-opted to the Board in September 2023, is also being proposed for election to the Board. All of this is fully compliant with our Articles of Association. We also note that **Des Fagan**, who joined the Board in 2022, is retiring from the Board and we wish to acknowledge his significant contribution to the work of the Board during his term. We are very pleased to have one new candidate, **Yvonne Kelly**, going forward for election to the Board.

Finally, thank you to all our members and donors for all your support, which is crucial to the success of BirdWatch Ireland.

Jim Fitzharris, Des Fagan, Congella McGuire, Alan Mulligan, Conor O'Brien, Eugene O'Brien, Jonathan Taylor, Frances Threadgold



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Good News

Some of BirdWatch Ireland's most notable works and successes in 2023

1 2023 was a big year for the **Countryside Bird Survey (CBS)** as **Dick Coombes** stepped down as National Coordinator after an incredible 25 years. In January 1998, Dick embraced the challenge of leading the then-new survey and, in the years that followed, took it from strength to strength. CBS would not be what it is today without the enormous effort and volume of work that Dick put in over the years. Indeed, today, the survey produces robust population trends for some fifty species.

Dick has supported birders across the country throughout his time in the role and was always willing to share his knowledge and time with others. His legacy is certain to inspire many more for generations to come.

2 Dick Coombe's departure from the role of National Coordinator of CBS saw BirdWatch Ireland's **Andrew Lynch** take the reins. Andrew brings with him a wealth of experience, including a stint as warden of the **East Coast Nature Reserve**, where he was responsible for the day-to-day running of this, our flagship reserve, and as Project Officer of **Birds Connect**, a **Community Foundation Ireland** funded project aimed at connecting people and biodiversity through citizen science, outreach and training. Andrew has already hit the ground running in his new role, and continues to build on the success of CBS.



JOHN KENNEDY

Dick Coombes and Andrew Lynch

3 During 2023, we marked the 25th and 30th anniversaries of the **Countryside Bird Survey (CBS)** and the **Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS)**, respectively, with a presentation at the 8th Ornithological Research Conference in Cork in March. BirdWatch Ireland has been proud to coordinate these projects, two of Ireland's largest and longest-running wildlife monitoring programmes, since their commencement in winter 1994/95 and spring 1998, respectively. The robust and long-term datasets collected through these surveys are vital, as they allow us to identify trends in bird species' numbers over time.

Of course, the success and longevity of these two surveys would not be possible without the indispensable network of counters, or the support and funding provided by the **National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)**.

4 In autumn 2023, we ran two very successful **I-WeBS workshops** in Galway, with a record attendance of 120 people across two days. The high attendance at the workshops highlighted an increasing public desire to learn about and support biodiversity. The events were the result of a collaboration between BirdWatch Ireland, the local **Galway Branch** of BirdWatch Ireland, the Biodiversity Officers of **Galway County Council** and **Galway City Council**, the **Marine Institute** and **Knocknacarra Community Centre**.

Two new sets of 'optics' (top-of-the range Opticron binoculars and telescopes and Manfrotto tripods) were purchased, through the shop, using **Local Biodiversity Action Fund** funding. These are now available for survey volunteers to rent from **Galway City Library**.

DICK COOMBES



Dick Coombes: 25 years at the helm of the Countryside Bird Survey

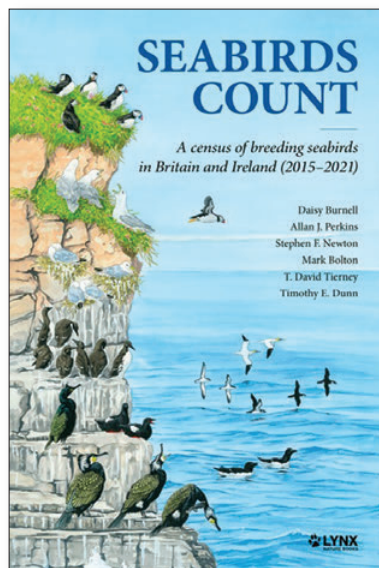


Participants in the 2023 I-WeBS Workshop in Galway

The events were well-publicised before and after, including online by RTÉ. Since the workshops, the **Galway Bay I-WeBS count team** has re-ignited its efforts to survey the bay for the project.

5 In September 2023, Project Manager of I-WeBS, **Lesley Lewis**, and National Coordinator of I-WeBS, **Niamh Fitzgerald**, presented at the **International Wader Study Group Conference** in Sylt, Germany. This presentation marked the 30th anniversary of I-WeBS and focused on the latest trends for wintering waterbirds in the Republic of Ireland. As many of our waterbirds are in decline, these trends were received with some surprise and shock by our international colleagues.

6 2023 saw the publication of *Seabirds Count* – the fourth complete census of breeding seabirds in Ireland and Britain. The counts involved significant input from BirdWatch Ireland staff, who worked alongside NPWS colleagues between 2015 and 2021 to achieve full coverage. And then, together with the **Joint Nature Conservation Committee** and the **RSPB**, we were involved in the analysis of the data and in writing up this mammoth effort. The end product is a beautiful book, published by **Lynx Nature Books** of Barcelona, which was launched at a mini-conference on seabirds in Edinburgh Zoo in December.



7 The **Kilcoole Little Tern colony** had an excellent season, with one of the highest ever numbers of breeding pairs (around 225) as well as excellent productivity, with each pair fledging 1.5 chicks on average. Though avian influenza impacted other tern species, the Little Terns thankfully escaped without any significant impact. The **Kilcoole Little Tern Project** is an **NPWS** project, which was run by **BirdWatch Ireland** under a competitive tender agreement in 2023.

8 We stepped up our **Little Tern ringing and monitoring** at Kilcoole in 2023 through a combination of ring-reading via scope by staff and key volunteers, catching of adult birds in the colony, and nest-monitoring using GoPro cameras. We read the rings of nearly 150 adult Little Terns in the colony, providing really valuable data on age structure and survival rates. The highlight was two 19-year-old Little Terns, both ringed as chicks at Kilcoole in 2004, making them the oldest known Irish Little Terns on record!

9 We increased our ringing efforts in the **Dublin Port tern colony**, to learn more about the survival rates and movements of the **Common** and **Arctic Terns** nesting there. As part of this work, we caught the oldest Common and Arctic Terns on record in the Republic of Ireland, both of which were ringed as chicks 23 years ago!

Good News (*continued*)

Tern numbers and their productivity at the east coast tern colonies wardened by BirdWatch Ireland in 2023.

Site	Species	Pairs (trend since 2022)	Productivity	Bird flu mortality (adults)
Rockabill	Roseate	1,768 ↑	0.92	128 (49)
Rockabill	Common	1,505 =	0.71	430 (187)
Rockabill	Arctic	47 =	0.0	5 (5)
Lady's Island	Sandwich	1,288 ↑	0.13	43 (1)
Lady's Island	Roseate	291 ↑	–	72 (16)
Lady's Island	Common	919 ↑	–	811 (280)
Lady's Island	Arctic	706 =	0.85	212 (41)
Dalkey Island	Arctic	45 ↑	0.0	–
Dublin Port	Common	560 ↓	0.53	553 (195)
Dublin Port	Arctic	21 ↓	1.24	6 (2)
Kilcoole	Little	225 ↑	1.5	2 (2)

Many of the birds caught had originally come from Dublin Port as chicks, but we also caught birds from **Rockabill** (Dublin), **Cork Harbour** and **Anglesey** (Wales) as well as **Liverpool** (England). This illustrates the level of interchange between colonies and the importance of conservation efforts in as many locations as possible to best support the species at national and international level.

10 At least 581 pairs of terns nested in the **Dublin Port tern colony** in 2023, which is the second-highest total found there in the last ten years. No mammalian or avian predation was recorded on any platform. Unfortunately, the colony was badly impacted by avian influenza and many terns died as a result. Our conservation efforts at the Port will be particularly important in future years to help the colony and the species to recover.

The **Dublin Bay Birds Project** is made possible thanks to the ongoing support of **Dublin Port Company**.

11 Our tern wardens working on the BirdWatch Ireland/NPWS **tern conservation programme** at **Lady's Island Lake**, Co Wexford, did a phenomenal job of coping with a major outbreak of **avian influenza**. The outbreak of this viral disease in 2022, which had a serious impact on birds in the North Sea and on the continent, was probably the cause of depressed breeding numbers here.

Some **Black-headed Gulls** were detected with flu quite early on. Although only a few gulls died, it soon developed into a more lethal factor in the terns and prevented us from getting accurate estimates of productivity. It looks as though we will have to brace ourselves for further declines in tern numbers in 2024.

12 On Dublin's **Rockabill Island**, productivity for **Roseate Terns** and **Common Terns** was similar to that in 2022, though our ability to assess things accurately was compounded by the avian flu outbreak that commenced on July 1st. **Arctic Terns** failed in their nesting attempts, despite several re-lays by some pairs. Mortality from the flu was most pronounced in **Common Terns** and in the relatively small population of **Kittiwakes** that nests on the island. Our wardens did an exceptional job of limiting the spread of the disease as much as possible, through the collection of carcasses and careful monitoring.

13 A two-year **coastal management** study, commissioned by the **Office of Public Works (OPW)**, was completed in late 2023. The project aimed to identify suitable areas for **managed realignment** along the Irish coast. Managed realignment is a process that involves intentionally moving coastal defences inland, thereby allowing tides to flood the land (often land claimed from the sea). This usually results in the creation of saltmarsh or intertidal habitat, or both.



BRAN BURKE

Roseate Tern: Ireland is home to Europe's largest breeding colony

JOHN MURPHY



Little Terns: 2023 saw one of their best seasons on record

Managed realignment has become an increasingly accepted method of coastal flood defence in recent decades. Such realignment schemes have several benefits. For example, they can reduce the ongoing costs of maintaining seawalls and flood embankments, prevent flooding of urban or other areas, and lead to saltmarsh habitat creation. All of this is important to mitigate climate change and sea-level rise.

14 Thanks to funding from the **Local Biodiversity Action Fund**, we continued to monitor the populations of **breeding waders** at key sites in Donegal. Our main predator exclusion fence sites continue to support good numbers of breeding **Lapwing**, in particular.

15 In recent years, **BirdWatch Ireland**, with funding from the **Heritage Council** and the **Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine**, has developed a set of hotspot maps to indicate the presence of farmland birds in Ireland. In 2023, the outputs of the **Farmland Bird Hotspot Mapping** project helped secure a €25 million government budget for a **Breeding Wader EIP** focused on addressing the declines in our wader species. Our paper documenting the hotspot project was published in *Irish Birds*.

16 We continued to provide input into the implementation of scorecards and guidance for important farmland birds in **ACRES Cooperation** project areas.

17 2023 saw the completion of the **Irish Breeding Curlew EIP** project – a multi-partnership project involving **BirdWatch Ireland**, the **Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association (INHFA)**, the **Irish Grey Partridge Conservation Trust** and **Teagasc**. The project was funded by the **Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine** through its European Innovation Partnership (EIP) fund.

The project, which developed and trialled new and innovative approaches to stemming the decline of Ireland's **breeding Curlew population**, proved to be a great success. This was in no small part due to the farmers and landowners across the Lough Corrib and south Leitrim areas, who share a strong commitment to saving the biodiversity on their farms and in their local area.

Photograph courtesy of WATERFORD CITY AND COUNTY COUNCIL



Created intertidal habitat at Kilmacleague, Tramore Bay, Co Waterford

Good News (*continued*)

COLIN RIGNEY



Redshank: one of the wader species that benefited from the Curlew EIP

Results from the **Curlew EIP** show that the measures developed and trialled by the project have statistically and significantly improved Curlew breeding habitat in both of the project areas between 2020 and 2023. Populations in the Corrib area stabilised and began to show growth over the lifetime of the project.

Additionally, the project successfully developed its conservation keeping tool, with farmers actively engaging with our **Conservation Keeping Scheme**.

The Curlew EIP concluded in December 2023, with many of its measures being adopted by the **ACRES Cooperation** scheme, either directly or in a revised form.

18 The Curlew EIP also carried out **satellite tagging of breeding Curlews** to learn about their habitat usage and home range areas during the breeding season. In collaboration with the **NPWS**, data from satellite tagging has revealed the Curlews' home ranges during the breeding season. Results may help inform Ireland's afforestation programme. Data from satellite tagging has also helped inform us on the behaviour of breeding and non-breeding birds, and has helped improve population and productivity analysis.

19 The management implemented for Curlew through the **Curlew EIP** also benefits other wader species, including several Red-listed species of conservation concern. In the Corrib project area, where they occur, populations of **Lapwing**, **Redshank** and **Snipe** all showed a marked increase since the project began – total populations increased by 215%, from 27 to 85 breeding pairs. Productivity for Lapwing was above the level required for population growth in both 2022 and 2023.

20 The **Irish Garden Bird Survey**, Ireland's most popular citizen science survey, celebrated its 35th anniversary in 2023. Results and trends from the survey were presented at the Irish Ornithological Conference in Cork.

We also published an article in our *Irish Birds* journal about what we have learnt from the survey about **trichomoniasis**, an infectious disease which has resulted in the **Greenfinch** becoming an Amber-listed species of conservation concern in recent years.

Many thanks to **Ballymaloe** for their continued sponsorship of the survey, and to the many citizen scientists nationwide who send us their data each winter.

21 Our **Irish Starling Murmuration Survey**, kindly sponsored by **Regeneron**, generated over 130 records of tens of thousands of Starlings in 25 counties.

22 We secured significant funding through the **Heritage Council** under the **Community Heritage Grant Scheme 2023** which helped us to make significant improvements at our **East Coast Nature Reserve**. This funding went towards purchasing recycled materials to improve the woodland boardwalk, and a mulching machine to manage the fen habitats more effectively.



COLIN RIGNEY

Bullfinch: an annual favourite with Irish Garden Bird Survey participants



EDDIE HELLEWELL

The BirdWatch Ireland van, kindly donated by Virgin Media

23 We secured funding through the **Local Authority Waters Programme** under the **Community Water Development Fund 2023** towards improving the watercourses and related habitats at **East Coast Nature Reserve**.

24 A **bird-ringing demonstration** held at East Coast Nature Reserve in November gave us the opportunity to showcase our scientific work to the public. It proved to be a particularly popular event, with huge numbers coming out to learn more about why and how we ring birds, and to get a closer look at some common species. This was one of a series of East Coast Nature Reserve events in 2023 funded by **Wicklow County Council** as part of its nature awareness programme through the **County Heritage Plan**.



RICHARD T MILLS

Red-necked Phalaropes: highest number of breeding pairs since the 1930s

25 We are grateful for the significant support we received from **Virgin Media** in 2023, which included the **donation of a van** emblazoned with the BirdWatch Ireland logo, and a number of refurbished laptops for our staff.

26 We secured funding support through **Mayo County Council** as part of the **Local Biodiversity Action Fund 2023** to assist us in monitoring **breeding waders** and **seabirds** in north-west Mayo.

27 We continued to see increasing numbers of breeding waders at our **Annagh Marsh Reserve**, near Belmullet, Co Mayo, with 70 pairs successfully breeding in 2023. These included 42 pairs of **Lapwing** as well as eight **Red-necked Phalarope** nests, the latter being the highest number recorded since the early 1930s.

28 There was an increase in singing **Corncrakes** at our **Termoncarragh Meadows Reserve**, near Belmullet, Co Mayo, with four males holding territory in our fields and at least two other males in adjacent fields.

29 The BirdWatch Ireland **Fingal Branch**, with support from the local community, constructed a raised boardwalk at our **Rogerstown Estuary Reserve** in north Dublin, to provide safe access to our Ger McCann Hide, overlooking the saltmarsh and mudflats on the north side of the estuary.

30 The BirdWatch Ireland **Cork Branch**, with support from the local community, constructed a Sand Martin nesting wall at our **Cuskinny Marsh Reserve**, near Cobh, Co Cork, to entice these summer migrants to breed there.

Good News (*continued*)

TRISH PUNCH



North Harbour, Cape Clear Island, Co Cork

31 **Cape Clear Bird Observatory** welcomed dozens of visitors through its doors in 2023, hosting six **'Weekend with the Warden'** weekends during the season. Guests experienced the wonders of Cape Clear Island and learned about BirdWatch Ireland's work by participating in activities with Wildlife Officer **Steve Wing**. This included wildlife survey walks and observing bird ringing.

32 The annual **'Seabirds to Songbirds'** courses at Cape Clear Bird Observatory are always a huge hit, and the 2023 events were no exception. Birders from across the country flocked to the island in April and September to learn more about the wonders of migration from **Dick Coombes**. Spring visitors had the opportunity to learn about and see spring migrants such as Willow Warbler, Whitethroat and Sedge Warbler, while those arriving in autumn marvelled at migratory seabirds including shearwaters, auks and skuas as they passed offshore.

33 Bird-ringing at the **Constant Effort Sites (CES)** scheme site on Cape Clear was hit badly by poor weather in 2023, but Wildlife Officer **Steve Wing** managed to complete just enough sessions to make it count. The CES scheme provides valuable information on the abundance of adult and juvenile birds, their breeding success and their survival rates at numerous sites around Ireland and Britain.

34 We love getting the opportunity to meet young people with a curiosity for nature. In 2023, **Cape Clear Bird Observatory** had several successful visits from school groups, while the local scout group also made a return.

35 We completed our work on the **Marine Protected Area Management and Monitoring (MarPAMM)** project, which included the collection of seabird monitoring and tracking data in the north-west and eastern areas of the border counties, as well as assisting with the production of two Marine Protected Area (MPA) management plans.

The €6.4 million MarPAMM project saw BirdWatch Ireland work with partner organisations in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. It was supported by the European Union's **INTERREG VA Programme**, managed by the **Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)**. Match funding was provided by the **Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs** in Northern Ireland and the **Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government** in the Republic of Ireland.

36 **Rosalind Skillen**, appointed in 2023 as our Marine Policy and Advocacy Officer, attended the annual Marine Task Force organised by our **BirdLife Europe & Central Asia** partners in October. Rosalind presented on the **Fair Seas campaign** and Marine Protected Area (MPA) legislation during the meeting. It was great to meet representatives from BirdLife partners across the region, also working on marine issues.

37 Head of Advocacy, **Oonagh Duggan**, and Marine Policy and Advocacy Officer, **Rosalind Skillen**, were very busy charting the course to healthier oceans as part of the **Fair Seas campaign**. Both Oonagh and Rosalind have been on the road meeting local groups, politicians and other stakeholders across the environmental sector to build momentum for marine protection in Ireland. Rosalind met

with three TDs from the main political parties in 2023 to ask them to publish the **MPA Bill** without delay.

38 BirdWatch Ireland widely shared and promoted the **Fair Seas petition** calling for effective marine legislation in Ireland. Gathering over 11,000 signatures in three weeks, the petition was a huge success. **Oonagh Duggan** and the former Fair Seas campaign manager **Aoife O'Mahony** handed over the signatures to the Minister for Heritage & Electoral Reform, **Malcolm Noonan**, on October 25th.

After handing the petition to Minister Noonan, Oonagh presented on the need for MPAs, alongside other Fair Seas steering committee members and **Prof Mark Costello** (of Nord University, Norway) in the audio-visual room in the Dáil, an event attended by politicians and government officials, many availing of the ability to join remotely. The day culminated in an 'ocean after-party' in Patagonia, Dublin, with a screening of a Fair Seas film and an opportunity for Fair Seas coalition members to meet the public and discuss how they could get involved in the campaign.

39 **Rosalind Skillen** engaged with stakeholders across the environmental sector, including renewable energy companies, fisheries representatives and eNGOs. She attended the **Energy Future** workshop on November 30th (organised by **Friends of the Earth** in collaboration with representative bodies in the renewables sector) where she presented key information on the ecological impacts of renewables on seabirds. Rosalind gave an outline of the **marine Important Bird Areas (mIBAs)** project and highlighted how the delineation of marine IBAs could assist in nature-positive spatial planning for renewables, especially in the seas around Ireland.

40 **Rosalind Skillen** presented on the **Fair Seas campaign** at three BirdWatch Ireland branch events, to engage local members in south Dublin, Wicklow and west Cork. Each talk was attended by approximately 30-40 people, all of whom showed high levels of interest in marine protection.



HAZEL WATSON

Puffins: Marine Protected Areas are vital for this species



FAIR SEAS

A publicity image from the Fair Seas campaign

41 The **Shared Island Youth Forum** on October 20th 2023 saw **Rosalind Skillen** present on the importance of marine protection. This was also an opportunity to promote youth participation and hear young people's thoughts on protecting the marine environment.

Rosalind also spoke about marine protection at a panel discussion during the **'Bridging the Atlantic' conference** on November 13th 2023, hosted by **Queens University Belfast**. The conference was organised jointly by **QUB, UCD** and **Georgetown University, Washington DC**, and included a keynote speech from US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland, **Joseph Kennedy III**.

42 BirdWatch Ireland welcomed the momentous decision made in June to give additional protection to a giant Marine Protected Area in the North Atlantic, important for **Puffins** that breed in Ireland and a whole host of other marine life. Fifteen governments that are signatories to the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (the 'OSPAR' Convention) designated the sea floor of the **North Atlantic Current and Evlanov Sea basin (NACES) Marine Protected Area (MPA)**, acknowledging the site's unparalleled significance for a multitude of marine species and the extraordinary value of its seabed habitats. In the months preceding this decision, over 16,400 citizens joined BirdWatch Ireland's and BirdLife International's call for better protection of the site. We thank each and every person who signed the petition.

43 In light of the public consultation on the **Open Seasons Order** which opened in April, BirdWatch Ireland carried out an internal consultation on the Order, reviewing the latest available data, including from the Irish Wetland Bird Survey and Bird Atlas 2007-11. We made a submission to the Minister for Heritage & Electoral Reform, **Malcolm Noonan**, proposing the removal from the Order of the five duck species – the Red-listed **Shoveler, Pochard, Scaup** and **Goldeneye** and the Amber-listed **Pintail** – and the Red-listed **Golden Plover**, a wader.

Good News (*continued*)

RICHARD T MILLS



Goldeneyes: one of the four duck species removed from the Open Seasons Order in 2023

For seven other Red- or Amber-listed species in the Birds of Conservation Concern list, we argued that the **National Parks and Wildlife Service** be asked to undertake additional analyses of these species, due to lack of comprehensive data on their populations or conservation status.

In August, changes to the **Open Seasons Order** were announced by Minister Noonan for the coming season. The removal of four duck species – **Scaup, Pochard, Goldeneye** and **Pintail** – due to severe declines in their populations, showed some progress by the Minister to address the vulnerable status of these species. However, BirdWatch Ireland was disappointed that two additional species that we recommended for removal – **Shoveler** and **Golden Plover** – remain on the list though the science clearly shows declines in their populations also. We will continue to advocate for changes based on the latest and most robust scientific data.

44 In August, we welcomed **An Bord Pleanála's** decision to uphold the need to protect sites for threatened bird species by refusing to grant permission for a proposed new section of the **Boyne Greenway**.

This refusal and the reasons behind it are in line with concerns that have been raised by BirdWatch Ireland since the project was initially proposed. We made our first submission regarding the greenway to An Bord Pleanála during the initial public consultation process in September 2020. While, as an environmental organisation, we welcome initiatives that reduce car usage and, consequently, greenhouse gas emissions, we objected to this development due to the significant threat it posed to the bird life of the **Boyne Estuary SPA**.

45 BirdWatch Ireland's Head of Policy and Advocacy, **Oonagh Duggan**, delivered a statement to the **National Economic Dialogue 2023** on behalf of the Environmental Pillar. She spoke about the link between environmental degradation and economic destruction, the free ecosystem services provided by natural habitats and the need for a strong **Nature Restoration Law**. The statement can be read in full at birdwatchireland.ie/destroy-nature-and-you-destroy-the-economy.

46 Running for five days across the June bank holiday weekend, the **Bord Bia Bloom** festival in Dublin's Phoenix Park is BirdWatch Ireland's largest public engagement and membership recruitment event of the year. The 2023 event proved to be our most successful to date, producing in excess of 400 new memberships and thousands of euro in donations. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to our wonderful team of volunteers who so kindly and graciously contributed their time, expertise and effort to making this event such a success and without whom our participation would not be possible.

47 2023 also saw our attendance at the **Dublin Horse Show**, at which BirdWatch Ireland was delighted to run a public engagement and membership recruitment stand. It proved to be another extremely successful outing for the organisation, attracting over 125 new memberships and a significant level of donations. Many thanks to everyone who helped us out at the event.

48 Key media highlights in 2023 included regular public information slots on **RTÉ One's Today** programme and **Virgin Media One's Ireland AM** programme; multiple appearances on RTÉ Radio One's **Mooney Goes Wild** programme; and regular expert contributions to RTÉ programmes such as **Drivetime, Liveline, The Ray D'Arcy Show** and **Morning Ireland**, as well as to multiple prominent radio stations, including **Newstalk, Today FM, East Coast FM, LMFM, Shannonside FM, Ocean FM** and **BBC Radio Ulster**.

49 In May, BirdWatch Ireland staff and branch members participated in **RTÉ Radio One's** live seven-hour **International Dawn Chorus** broadcast, featuring contributors and radio stations across Ireland and in Northern Ireland and Wales. The main broadcast location was BirdWatch Ireland's **Cuskinny Marsh Nature Reserve** near Cobh, Co Cork, with live updates from one of our **Barn Owl** nest sites being presented throughout the programme.

50 In 2023 we received funding from the **Heritage Council** for our **'Communicating the Wonders of Irish Wildlife'** project. This project was developed in response to the markedly increasing interest in nature across Ireland, coupled with growing concern amongst the general public over the twin climate and biodiversity crises. Our organisation has been receiving an ever-growing number of queries about birds, other forms of wildlife and environmental issues. This increased demand on our time

and expertise has been especially notable since Covid, a period which also saw a significant decline in our income as a charity and increased strain on our resources and capacity. A concurrent increase in media interest and requests for expert input and interviews, as well as requests for advice and data from state and corporate bodies, further increased the need for us to increase our capacity in this area.

The project involved two strands. The first was to increase support for our communications and outreach work, involving the recruitment of a dedicated Communications Officer, **Amy Lewis**, and the development of our communications activities. The second strand was the provision of a dedicated **wildlife information helpline** and **online response service**, whereby members of the public could easily pose questions, report wildlife crimes, request assistance with bird identification and obtain advice on biodiversity-friendly actions. In total during 2023, 5,032 such queries were addressed.



51 2023 saw the release of a further 18 episodes of our **'In Your Nature'** podcast, hosted by **Niall Hatch** and **Ricky Whelan**. Topics covered during the year included moths, Pine Martens, Swift conservation, bogland birds, the dawn chorus and even the visitors to Santa's birdtable, as well as an Avian Eurovision Song

Contest and a birding face-off between Ireland and New Zealand. To listen to these and many other episodes of In Your Nature, visit <https://inyournature.buzzsprout.com>.

Edited by **Ann-Marie Kelly**, In Your Nature is supported by **Laois County Council, Westmeath County Council, Offaly County Council, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage** and **The Heritage Council**.



Swift: in 2023, surveys were completed for this species in counties Carlow, Monaghan and Offaly



Amy Lewis: BirdWatch Ireland's Communications Officer, appointed in 2023

52 We launched a new feature in **Wings**, our magazine for members, called **'Sparkbirds.'** In each issue, we invite different people to share what species sparked their initial interest in birds and, ultimately, helped to fuel their passion for birds and the many other natural wonders around us. It has been a great success since its launch, with members, branch representatives, BirdWatch Ireland staff and some well-known public figures taking the opportunity to share their stories.

53 We continued our participation in **Spring Alive**, the migratory bird outreach and education project for **BirdLife International** partners across Europe, Central Asia and Africa. Ireland once again recorded the highest number of observations per capita of the key Spring Alive 'Spring Messengers,' namely **Swallow, Swift, Cuckoo, Sand Martin** and **Ringed Plover**.

54 The **BirdWatch Ireland website** attracted over 346,000 users and more than 1.2 million page-views. The most popular sections were the pages giving an overview of Ireland's bird species, our Irish Garden Bird Survey page and our advice page on what people should (and should not) do if they find a young bird out of its nest.

55 We completed county **Swift Surveys** in Monaghan and Carlow and a re-survey of County Offaly, supported through **Local Biodiversity Action Fund** funding. These surveys help identify Swift colonies in towns and villages, a vital first step in helping to protect Swifts. Further elements of the project involve working with communities to establish Swift nest box projects locally.

56 We led a series of public **Dusk and Dawn Chorus Walks** with **Dublin City Council**. These included well-attended walks in St Anne's Park and Herbert Park.



Good News (continued)

COLIN RIGNEY



Sparrowhawk: our most common urban bird of prey

57 With funding from **Dublin City Council**, we carried out **Raptor Surveys** in Dublin. The focus was on **Peregrine Falcon, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Buzzard, Long-eared Owl and Barn Owl**. As well as focusing on particular parks, there was a public training event and an online portal to submit sightings.

58 On behalf of **Dublin City Council**, we conducted a **Riverbird Survey** of the River Dodder and held public training events in St Anne's Park and Herbert Park. Members of the public were encouraged to send in records of **Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Dipper** and **Sand Martin** sightings on their local waterways.

59 We continued our **Brent Goose Ambassador Project** funded by **Dublin City Council** with Dublin schools. This initiative aims to raise awareness of Brent Geese wintering in Dublin Bay through storytelling and communication between communities. 2023 events included a classroom session with students from **Scoil Áine**, Raheny.

60 The status of Greylag Geese in the Republic of Ireland, mapping of farmland bird hotspots and wintering waterbird trends in Ireland are just some of the many topics covered in the 45th edition of **Irish Birds**, published in September 2023. As Ireland's only ornithological journal, **Irish Birds** is a necessity for all serious birdwatchers and scientists working in the Irish conservation sector.



61 It was a record-breaking breeding season for **Barn Owls** in Cork, with 114 nest sites found in the county in 2023. There was

a 132% increase in Barn Owl breeding range in Cork over the last 10 years, and a 480% increase since the 1980s. The benefits of nest box projects in the county were clear to see, with 40% of recorded nests in 2023 in nest boxes.

62 In 2023, our **Barn Owl livestream** captured the attention of viewers all around the world. Not only did this give us the opportunity to bring people closer to this remarkable species in a safe and responsible way, it also allowed us to shine a light on the many pressures facing this Red-listed bird and raise some funds in the process. Indeed, many people chose to donate to our **Barn Owl Appeal** and it is because of this generosity that we were able to build upon our existing work.

Some of the basic things that the appeal in particular has helped us to do included getting more safety and monitoring equipment. At the core of our Barn Owl work is monitoring and visiting nests, monitoring the population on the ground and protecting nests. The donations to the appeal, totalling more than €45,000, really helped to equip us properly and allow us to do that work. Money raised through the appeal has also allowed us to continue to install nest boxes at sites where they are needed.

63 In 2023, BirdWatch Ireland advocated for a strong new EU law to compel governments to restore nature. Together with 209 other organisations, we signed a statement calling upon all EU Member States, Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission to urgently adopt a strong **Nature Restoration Law** that is fit for purpose to tackle the twin biodiversity and climate crises. We urged the public to get behind our campaign through signing a petition and attending the **Rally to Restore Nature** outside Leinster House in May.

64 In 2023, we commenced work on the **BirdWatch Ireland Strategy 2024-2030**. This involved much collaboration between BirdWatch Ireland staff and a wide range of stakeholders. In early 2023, a questionnaire was sent to all of our branches ahead of our Strategy development. Questions were posed to branches regarding their perception of BirdWatch Ireland's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, while views were also sought on the state of conservation in Ireland in general.

Additionally, strategic planning workshops with BirdWatch Ireland staff and Board members were facilitated by **RSPB** and **BirdLife International** in 2023. Feedback from these questionnaires and workshops, in addition to templates provided by BirdLife International and RSPB, helped to shape the Strategy.

The **first draft of the Strategy** was reviewed by the Board in late 2023. Wider feedback will be sought in 2024 and, following any subsequent changes, the final draft will be launched at our AGM in August 2024.

Curlew custodians

As a vital scheme to conserve rare breeding Curlews comes to an end, **Amy Lewis** talks to participants and discusses what was achieved and what was learned from the programme

A multi-partner project to help stem the decline of Ireland's breeding Curlew population has come to an end after over five years, with mixed results.

The **Irish Breeding Curlew European Innovation Partnership (EIP)** was funded by the **Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine** through the **European Innovation Partnership (EIP)** fund and ran from April 2018 until December 2023.

Farmers were very much at the helm of the project, which trialled new and innovative approaches to protecting Ireland's remaining breeding Curlews.



numbers. We all want to help. When I learned about the Curlew EIP was I was really interested and delighted to be able to join and play my part," he says. "It's up to people to try to do something. We can watch the news and worry, but unless we get up and do something, nothing will change."

A multi-partnership project involving **BirdWatch Ireland**, the **Irish Natura & Hill Farmers Association (INHFA)**, the **Irish Grey Partridge Conservation Trust** and **Teagasc**, the Curlew EIP looked to address factors contributing to the decline of breeding Curlew in Ireland. Working closely with the farming community in south Leitrim and the south Lough Corrib area, the project developed and trialled new and innovative approaches to help stem the decline of our breeding Curlews.

Ger's story

Ger Farragher recalls a time when his farm at the edge of Lough Corrib in Galway was brimming with birds. Species now considered scarce, such as the Lapwing, Curlew and Corncrake, were plentiful, their presence and calls woven into the fabric of everyday life.

"I'm 72 years old and I have been here all my life," says Ger, who is a sheep and suckler farmer based near Muckross on the east shore of Lough Corrib.

"We grew up around the Corrib lakeshore and always saw birds, birds and more birds, back then. There were so many Curlews at that time. There were also a lot of Lapwings, but now you only see them in small numbers. We used to watch the Skylark going up into the sky and disappearing into the clouds.

"We had the Corncrake here, too. I live about a mile away from our farmyard and I remember hearing the Corncrake calling from around there at night."

Observing these changes made Ger acutely aware of and concerned about the issues facing farmland bird populations, and so, when the opportunity to take part in the Curlew European Innovation Partnership (EIP) arose, he was keen to get involved.

Alfred's story

Alfred Moorehead, a suckler and dry cattle farmer based near Longford town, had similar motivations.

"We all like to see rare birds stick around and even increase in



Ger Farragher

KATHRYN FINNEY

The Curlew's decline

Once widespread across Ireland, the Curlew's evocative call was synonymous with summer. Now it is the most threatened breeding wader species we have, and only the privileged few still hear it.

Based on the last national survey, carried out by the **National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)** in 2021, it is estimated there are only 100 breeding pairs left, compared to approximately 8,000 pairs in the late 1970s and 1980s. The Curlew's decline to critically low numbers has taken place over just a few short decades.

Without significant action, the Curlew is likely to become extinct as a breeding species in Ireland within the next 10 to 15 years.

Loss and fragmentation of breeding habitat, agricultural intensification, changes in agricultural practices and increased predation are the main drivers in the decline of this iconic ground-nesting farmland bird.

The farmer's role

Underpinning the Curlew EIP was the belief that farmers play a vital role in the conservation of birds such as the Curlew, and a recognition that they need to be supported in doing so. The support offered, both financial and advisory, together with the farmers' natural interest and love of the biodiversity on their farms, are some of the key elements that made the Curlew EIP so attractive to participants.

"The financial support allowed farmers to amend their farming practices and to farm more sustainably while maintaining their farm and household income," according to the Curlew EIP

Continued next page....

Project Manager, BirdWatch Ireland's **Kathryn Finney**.

The advisory element gave them the 'why, what and how' and was based on the principle of 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.' This understanding is crucial if it is to last for the long term.

"Farmers are interested in the biodiversity and nature on their farm and they genuinely want to do something to help. If you can engage with them, it makes all the difference," says Kathryn.

"The money does influence participation, especially at the start, as farmers see it as a good financial option or as a means of facilitating their participation. Often their participation involves a change in business model, such as a switch to lower-intensity farming or a reduction in stocking rates, and that can affect their income," continued Kathryn.

"As a farmer once said, 'I am too much in the red to be green.' That is the reality. A lot of farmers have families to look after and, if they are going to make changes, they need to be supported in doing so."

Options for farmers

The Curlew EIP offered various options to farmers, and such was the interest that all options were massively oversubscribed. Thirty-five farmers took part in the **Curlew Habitat Option** and thirty-three in the **Conservation Keeping Option**. Many, including Ger Farragher, subscribed to both.

The results-based **Curlew Habitat Option** was supported by specialist advisory and training for farmers, as Kathryn explains.

"The first information meeting under the Curlew Habitat Option was a general one, covering what Curlews needed, their ecology and the pressures they're facing, and it put the local area in the context of the national picture," she says.

"We ran through what the scheme was looking for and how they could go about creating the habitat the Curlew needs."

Subsequent farmer training included site visits and four paid group meetings each year, in which participants could swap knowledge and learnings with each other.

The fields were scored under several elements known to be important for creating suitable Curlew breeding habitat. Breeding season sward height, wet features (suitable for chicks to find food such as invertebrates in), scrub encroachment and predator habitat were some of the elements scored.

The option proved to be a great success. There was a highly significant increase in average field score in each area, year on year. As it was a results-based scheme, when a farmer's field score increased, so too did the farmer's payment rate.

BIRDWATCH IRELAND



Kathryn Finney tagging a Curlew

Over the course of the project, farmers' payment rates increased, and the breeding habitat of the Curlew improved – a win-win for both the Curlew and farmers.

Protection from predators

The **Conservation Keeping Option** was aimed at protecting Curlews from predators during the nesting season. Curlews breed on or adjacent to farmland, and farmers can play a vital role in helping to reduce predator numbers around nesting sites.

An innovative approach, conservation keeping was developed with a focus on conserving critically endangered species such as the Curlew, while also exemplifying international best practice, as well as ethics and standards in predator management.

Satellite tagging

Another element of the Curlew EIP was satellite tagging. Combined NPWS and Curlew EIP satellite-tagging data helped us to learn more about the Curlew's range and habitat usage during different parts of the breeding season.

Tagging also helped with locating nests to fence them from predators, using temporary electric fences, which was another element trialled during the lifetime of the EIP.

The fences proved very successful in reducing predation during the incubation stage and in influencing successful hatching of chicks.

Breeding results

In the Lough Corrib area, breeding productivity (determined by the number of successfully fledged chicks) in most years was at or above what was required for population stability. By the end of the EIP, Curlew numbers had increased, with eleven pairs (either possibly, probably or confirmed to be breeding) recorded in 2023.

However, productivity was much lower in south Leitrim and, unfortunately, populations there continued to decline, with just two pairs recorded in 2023.



Farmers on training workshop for Curlew EIP in Lough Corrib area

KATHRYN FINNEY

There were more pronounced constraints in Leitrim, says Kathryn. Over the last number of years, scrub had become established around the perimeters of the bogs where the Curlews bred. When coupled with an increase in afforestation, the predation pressure on ground-nesting birds, such as the Curlew, was greatly increased.

Forests and scrub support high numbers of predators such as Hooded Crows, Magpies and foxes, and isolated trees in wet grassland areas can provide look-out posts for crows to pinpoint where Curlews are nesting in open ground. This leads to increased predation of chicks and eggs.

“We did manage to successfully fledge two chicks in Leitrim in 2023, which is significant. However, much more needs to be done if we are to save breeding Curlews in Leitrim.”

Benefits for other species

The measures carried out at Lough Corrib and south Leitrim had positive knock-on effects for other breeding waders. For example, **Lapwing** and **Redshank** populations increased in the Lough Corrib area during the lifetime of the EIP.

While we know what is needed to improve the habitat for Curlews nationally, the overall scale of the work is very large and was beyond the scope of this EIP, unfortunately.

The Curlew EIP concluded in December 2023, with many of the measures then adopted in **ACRES Cooperation zones**, either directly or in a revised form. ACRES, the **Agri-Climate**



Curlew

RICHARD T MILLS

Rural Environment Scheme, is Ireland’s latest agri-environment scheme under the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy. Ireland has eight ACRES Cooperation zones distributed across the country, targeted specifically at High Nature Value farmland areas.

However, BirdWatch Ireland **hotspot mapping** has shown that a lot of important areas for breeding Curlews and other waders are located outside ACRES Cooperation zones. The introduction of the €25 million **National Breeding Wader EIP** in 2024, which will provide for these areas, is therefore very welcome indeed.

Thumbs up from farmers

Both Alfred Moorehead and Ger Farragher say they gained a lot from taking part in the Curlew EIP and are keen to continue to be involved in supporting farmland birds, where they can.

“It was a great scheme and really well run,” says Alfred. “I certainly learned things. I learned things before I even started doing the work!

“The training sessions were very interesting and I wouldn’t have missed any of them. I’d love to see a scheme like this continue. I feel like the work I did has to have made a difference.”

Ger says he hopes a scheme like this will come back again.

“I’m retired from farming now, but my son has taken over and he would be involved in a scheme like this, if it came around again; definitely,” he says.

KATHRYN FINNEY



Curlew nest

The Curlew EIP was funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through the European Innovation Partnership fund



**An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara**
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine



Project partners
in the Curlew EIP:



Curlew EIP harnesses people power to help stem population declines

Amy Lewis reports



The **Irish Breeding Curlew European Innovation Project (EIP)** may be wrapped up and the final report written, but its impact is sure to be felt for years to come.

A multi-partnership project involving **BirdWatch Ireland, the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association (INHFA), the Irish Grey Partridge Conservation Trust and Teagasc,**

the Curlew EIP looked to address factors contributing to the decline of breeding Curlew in Ireland. Working closely with the farming community in south Leitrim and the south Lough Corrib area, the project developed and trialled new and innovative approaches to help stem the decline of Ireland's breeding Curlew population.

Innovative approaches

Breeding Curlew represent one of the highest conservation priorities in Ireland, with only 105 confirmed breeding pairs recorded during the 2021 **National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)** survey. This represents a 98% decline in breeding pairs in the Republic of Ireland since the 1980s.

Habitat loss and degradation (as a result of agricultural intensification, land drainage and afforestation) has been identified as one of the primary threats to breeding Curlew populations in Europe and, though multi-faceted, addressing this was a key element of the Irish Breeding Curlew EIP.

Over three years (2020-2022), 35 farmers trialled the **Curlew Habitat Option** – a results-based agri-environmental measure to manage Curlew breeding habitat that was supported with the provision of specialist advice and farmer training. **Capital works** were also developed and trialled to support this measure and improve breeding habitat by, for example, removing scrub or creating chick feeding habitat.

Participating farmers were financially rewarded for delivering high-quality Curlew breeding habitat, with payment levels linked to annual field scores. Breeding season sward height, wet features (suitable for chick feeding), scrub encroachment and predator habitat were some of the elements scored. Project results showed a highly significant statistical increase in field scores (and therefore habitat quality) on fields entered into the Curlew Habitat Option for at least two years, in both Leitrim and Lough Corrib. Farmer training and support was shown to be a key factor in the achievement of habitat improvements (and increasing field scores).

In the first year of the scheme Covid-19 restrictions prevented farmer training from taking place, and 2020-2021 were the only years between which there was no significant increase in field scores.

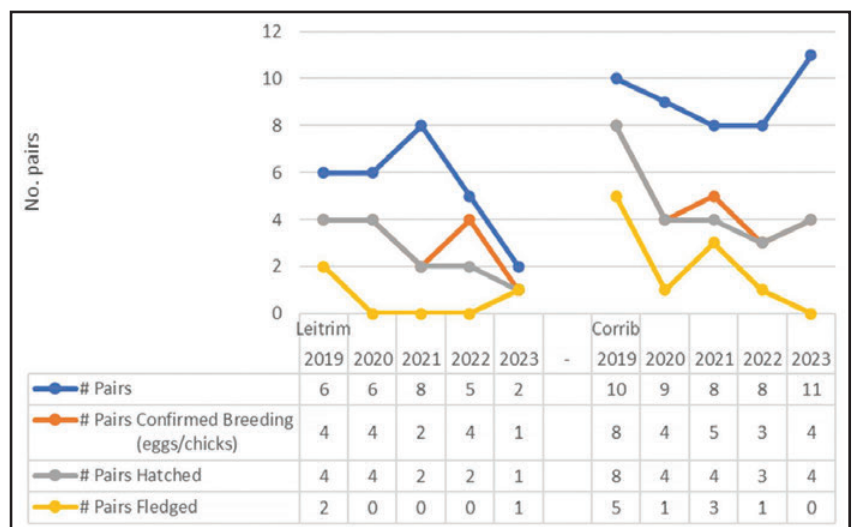
Predation of nests and chicks is also known to be one of the main reasons for the decline of Curlew populations. To address this the Curlew EIP developed **conservation keeping**, a tool which placed international best practice, ethics and standards in predator management at its core. It trialled the **Conservation Keeping Option**, an agri-environmental measure, with 33 farmers over four years from 2020 to 2023. Through this innovative approach, farmers carried out predator management to reduce predator populations in and around important Curlew breeding sites during the breeding season, and provided landscape-level support to the project's Conservation Keepers.

Results of the Curlew EIP

Curlew (and other breeding waders, where present) surveys were carried out between March and May annually to determine the number of confirmed, possible and probable breeding pairs, as well as breeding productivity (measured by the number of successfully fledged chicks). Populations in Corrib were stabilised over the lifetime of the project and showed some growth by 2023, increasing to eleven pairs.

Unfortunately, a complex range of factors led to a different outcome in south Leitrim. Leitrim had poor productivity in most years and, consequently, populations showed continual decline. Predator pressure and fragmented habitat due to afforestation and scrub invasion around the bogs where Curlew were breeding were shown to be impacting breeding success.

Scrub and forestry are known to hold higher numbers of



Total number of pairs, pairs confirmed breeding, hatching, and fledging by area and year.

predators and lead to an increase in predation of breeding Curlew (and other ground-nesting birds) for up to a kilometre from the edge of the woodland. If local populations are to be saved in Leitrim, substantial efforts will need to be made to address these issues.

As an umbrella species, measures carried out to protect breeding Curlew benefit other breeding waders.

Populations of three other Red-listed species of conservation concern – **Lapwing**, **Redshank** and **Snipe** – all showed a marked increase since the project began, with total populations increasing by 215%, from 27 to 85 breeding pairs.

Satellite tagging of breeding Curlew

The project also carried out satellite tagging of breeding Curlew to learn about their habitat usage and home range during the breeding season. Adult (mainly male) Curlew were satellite tagged, allowing project staff to locate their nests and erect predator-proof fences around them, and focus their habitat and predator management work.

The project also collaborated with the NPWS and pooled their data for analysis on the home range size needs of Ireland's breeding Curlew. The results of this show that breeding Curlew need a minimum of a 2km radius free from afforestation around their nest sites. It is anticipated that this work will help influence Ireland's future afforestation policy.

Through satellite tagging and colour-ringing, the project also identified new information on the behaviour of non-breeding birds, which were shown to hold territory and exhibit breeding calls. This was also found to be the case with other satellite projects across the UK and Europe and it is not fully known whether these are juvenile birds learning breeding behaviour, or birds that are attempting to breed but who have not found a mate.

Only two of the twelve birds caught and colour-ringed returned to the project area in subsequent

KIERAN FLYNN



Shane Sweeney with tagged Curlew

years. It is thought that this is a result of high adult mortality in an ageing population. Look out for birds with blue and white colour rings above the knee joint, with an individual marker ring on the LA – yellow and beginning with the letter A.

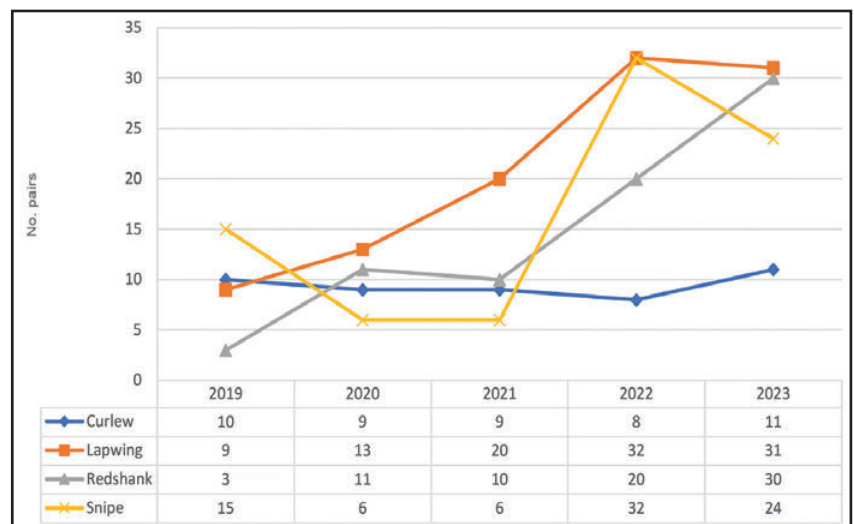
People power

The measures in the Curlew EIP require a team of dedicated and engaged people to carry them out. The project's success is directly linked to the farmers and landowners across Lough Corrib and south Leitrim, whose commitment to saving the biodiversity on their farms and in their local area was key to the project's success.

The interest in nature amongst members of the farming community is unquestionable, but it is vital that this is met with support, both financial and advisory, if we are to help to reverse the decline of threatened farmland bird species.

Looking forward

The Curlew EIP concluded in December 2023, with many of its measures adopted into **ACRES Cooperation (CP)**, either directly or in a revised form. Work by the Curlew EIP and by BirdWatch Ireland using its hotspot mapping showed that many important areas for breeding Curlew and other waders were located outside of ACRES Cooperation areas and was instrumental in securing the inclusion of a **National Breeding Wader EIP** and a **Shannon Callows EIP** in Ireland's new agri-environmental programme under its Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan. The National Breeding Wader EIP came on stream in 2024 and will provide for breeding waders nationally going forward.



Total number of pairs for all species, by year, in the Corrib project area.

The Curlew EIP was funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through the European Innovation Partnership fund



**An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara**
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine



The people who count

We asked some long-time Irish Wetland Bird Survey counters to tell us what motivated them to take part in the survey. **Amy Lewis** and **Niamh Fitzgerald** (I-WeBS Coordinator) report

NIALL O'BYRNE



Three Dublin Bay I-WeBS counters

Since the **Irish Wetland Bird Survey** (I-WeBS) was established in 1994, a huge amount of data has been gathered, which has greatly informed waterbird conservation and management in Ireland.

This work could not be done without the dedication, enthusiasm and knowledge of our network of close to 500 I-WeBS volunteers. Every one of these volunteers has made a contribution. Every one has a story to tell.

Indeed, in addition to gathering vital information about wintering waterbird populations, these volunteers have collected memories throughout the hours of surveying at sites around the country.

* * * * *

Pat Smiddy has been taking part in I-WeBS in Cork since the very beginning, having sharpened his skills through his involvement in **Clive Hutchinson's Wetlands Enquiry** in late 1972. His desire to continue contributing to surveys, coupled with the joy he felt in encountering some of the same birds year after year, encouraged him to get and remain involved.

"I recall nationally minor but locally significant events, such as new peaks for individual species or the occurrence of new species at my study sites. As bird populations using wetlands have changed significantly over the years, I recall the first

Little Egrets and their subsequent increase; the increase in Brent Geese and wintering numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

"Alongside these, the decline of other species brings on a tinge of sadness and foreboding for what the future might have in store, but there is comfort in knowing that we now have a body of data that is of enormous value, which must be continued," he says.

* * * * *

Like Pat, **Derek Brennan** has contributed to I-WeBS since day one and, prior to that, was involved in **Clive Hutchinson's Wetlands Enquiry**. In 2021, he became the Lough Swilly Site Coordinator, a role previously held by **Ralph Sheppard** for almost 30 years.

"It's nice to be able to direct some of the knowledge acquired over the years into something that might make a tangible difference. If the work helps in some way to preserve what we have, it's well worth the effort," says Derek.

Derek's surveying has seen him cross paths with many like-minded individuals, along with a wide variety of birds and several other species. Indeed, some of his fondest memories concern the many unexpected sightings he has had along the journey.

"An Otter approached me once and proceeded to bark and whistle at me. Hasn't happened before or since! A small pod of Bottlenose Dolphins once emerged out of the dense fog. The count was cancelled, but the memory stays. Seeing a field full of newly arrived Whoopers feeding and calling excitedly [is another fond memory of mine]," he says.

* * * * *

Recognising the many pressures facing our natural world, including climate change and habitat loss, **Damaris Lysaght** decided to harness her passion and interest in birds and begin surveying for I-WeBS. She has been surveying in west Cork for 13 years now.

"I learn which species use my sites, where they feed depending on the tide, weather and time of day, and where their high-tide roosts are. I like watching for returning migrants. I never know what I will see on any one day's count. Maybe a rare bird will turn up. Exciting, too, is finding a ringed bird and discovering where and when it was ringed and how far it has travelled."

Indeed, Damaris has had a number of exciting encounters, including a flyover from a White-tailed Eagle while counting in Ardroom; a Spoonbill sighting at Ringarogy Island; and a ringside view of an Osprey catching a fish in its talons at Lissagriffin Lake.

* * * * *

While he considered birdwatching a hobby, **John Fox** was keen to make a greater contribution to conservation, so when he heard that BirdWatch Ireland was seeking I-WeBS recruits, he didn't hesitate to sign up.

That was back in 2008 and, since then, so much has happened for John. As a member of the North Dublin Bay count team, John has expanded his knowledge of birds, as well as his social circle.

JOHN FOX



The late Ger Franck

One of his fellow volunteers, the late **Ger Franck**, became a dear friend to John and the pair often met on the causeway to Bull Island before dawn. While Ger sadly



Paddy Martin on an early morning count

passed away in 2022, he will remain in John's thoughts as he continues contributing to I-WeBS.

"Ger and I started I-WeBS surveying on the same Saturday morning in 2008. [Former I-WeBS National Organiser]

Helen Boland accompanied us that first time, introducing us to everyone, showing us the vantage points for our section and the methodology for the survey itself.

"From then on, Ger and I usually covered that same section together, either by ourselves or with a few others. We often had beginners with us, and we would show them the ropes, just as Helen had done for us," he recalls.

"Ger and I developed a comfortable way of working together. We both knew the other's strengths and weaknesses, allowing us to get the surveys done harmoniously. We would often confer, looking down each other's scopes to see an unusual bird or, in a gale and rain, to try to decide on a difficult-to-identify flock of distant waders. Over the years we spent surveying our section and birding together, I learned a lot from Ger. He was a wonderful friend and, as I continue with I-WeBS since his sad passing in 2022, I continue to miss him greatly."

* * * * *

Pat, Derek, John and Damaris are some of the many people who have helped to build I-WeBS into one of Ireland's premier long-term biological monitoring programmes. Since its

establishment, it has evolved into a key tool in waterbird conservation and management, as **Seán Kelly** from the **National Parks and Wildlife Service** (NPWS) explains:

"I-WeBS underpins a major part of the network of designated Special Protection Areas and is central to our understanding of how over 60 species of waterbird are faring at the local, national and international level.

"I-WeBS also contributes to the understanding of factors driving changes in waterbird numbers and distribution. The power of this is seen in the recently produced site-specific trends and recent scientific publications assessing the impacts of climate change on waterbird distribution across Europe, which utilised I-WeBS data.

"The survey provides vital data to inform the appropriateness of developments in waterbird areas.

"I-WeBS also provides hugely interesting and valuable data to local birders and counters interested in the health of their local wetlands and waterbird species, as well as being a great vehicle for engaging the public in conservation."

"Sometimes, when your fingertips are numb and eyes watering in a cold winter wind, it can be challenging, but the impact, power and value of this monitoring programme cannot be understated – and that is full credit to all the volunteer and professional counters from BirdWatch Ireland and the NPWS who make the survey what it is."

I-WeBS is funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and is coordinated by BirdWatch Ireland.



An tSeirbhís Páirceanna Náisiúnta agus Fiadhúlra
National Parks and Wildlife Service



An Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht
Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

“Ceist agam ort...”

In 2023, the I-WeBS Office sent some counters a short questionnaire, asking for their thoughts on the survey and their fondest memories.

Máirtín Enright, a long-term member of the Sligo Bays count team, responded to the questionnaire as follows:

■ What year did you start surveying with I-WeBS?

30 bliain ó shin; 1993.

■ What was your motivation for taking part in the survey?

Ón gcéad lá riamh, thuigeads gur tionscnamh an-tábhachach é seo, tionscnamh a mhéadóidh go mór lenár n-eolas ar líon na n-éan a chaitheann an geimhreadh ar na gnáthóga bogach. Léiríonn torthaí an tsuirbhé cén stádas náisiúnta agus idirnáisiúnta atá ag speiceas ar leith.

■ What do you like most about surveying your I-WeBS site/s?

Braithim go mbíonn lucht an tsuirbhé ag feidhmiú mar mhaoirseoir ar na lapairí, ar na lachain, ar na h-ealaí agus ar na géanna fiáine. Cuireann sé lenár n-eolas ar ár gceantar áitiúil. Cothaíonn an suirbhé cáirdeas, comhluadar agus cuideachta i measc na mball. Is caitheamh aimsire sláintiúil é; bímid amuigh cois cuain sa drochaimsir agus san aimsir bhreá comh maith céanna. Bíonn fáilte roimh an gcupán tae ag an teacht le chéile ag deireadh an tseisiúin, agus buailimid le héaneolaithe ‘nua’ ó am go ham.

■ What is your fondest memory from surveying your I-WeBS site/s?

Mar a deireann an sean-nath cainte, ‘An rud is annamh is iontach.’ Gealaíonn mo chroí nuair a chím Cruidín (Kingfisher) ar bharr sceiche cois abhainn, lapaire Meiriceánach nó gobadán neamhchoitianta (e.g. Rufachán (Ruff) nó gobadán gann) cois trá nó Gé Shneachta (Snow Goose) i measc na gCadhan (Barnacle Geese). Is díol suntais é ‘míorúilt’ na himirce, na héin ag teacht thar n-ais go dtí na gnáthóga céanna ó bhliain go bliain.

■ Máirtín also commented:

“Mar a tharlaíonn sé, ghlac mé páirt i suirbhé na mbogach [Fiosrúchán na mBogach] i lár na 1970idí in éineacht le mo mheantóir **Noel Murphy**. Is ar an suirbhé sin den chuid is mó a bhunaigh **Clive Hutchinson** (nach maireann) a chuid oibre. Bhíodh mé féin agus Noel ag iarraidh talamh a chlúdach in aon lá amháin – talamh a chlúdaíonn trí nó ceithre fhoireann I-WeBS sa lá atá inniu ann! B’fhéidir nach raibh an suirbhé a rinne muidne chomh cuimsitheach le suirbhéanna an lae inniu, ach leag sé síos bonnlíne do shuirbhéanna eile a tháinig ina dhiaidh.”

Summary of Accounts 2023

FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

The details given below are a summary of accounts for BirdWatch Ireland and BWI Retail and Services Limited in 2023. A full set of accounts for the year ended 31st December 2023 is available from BirdWatch Ireland on request.

	2023 €	2022 €
Income		
Membership subscriptions	334,189	349,215
Donations and bequests	117,160	122,581
Grants	24,886	24,886
Advertising and other income	178,313	74,391
Conservation projects	1,681,175	2,116,684
Total	2,335,723	2,687,757

Expenditure		
Conservation project costs	1,460,816	1,892,120
Administration expenses	579,262	500,189
Total expenditure	2,040,078	2,392,309

Net surplus/deficit **295,645** **295,448**

Gains on revaluation of fixed assets 0 **339,750**
Net movement in funds **295,645** **635,198**

Total funds brought forward 2,611,220 **1,976,022**
Total funds carried forward **2,906,865** **1,611,220**

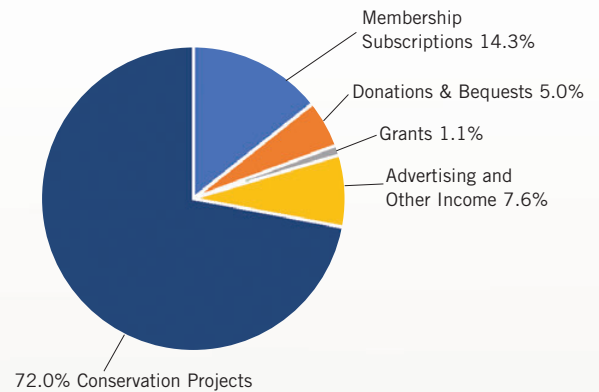
Represented by:		
Fixed assets	3,198,398	3,232,502
Net current assets / (liabilities)	430,153	125,290
Other creditors	-721,686	-746,572
Total net assets	2,906,865	2,611,220

BWI Retail and Services Limited		
Turnover	178,668	184,217
Cost of sales	-107,699	117,949
Gross profit	70,969	66,268
Administrative expenses	-70,969	-66,268
Operating profit	0	0
Total funds brought forward	1,434	1,434
Total funds carried forward	1,434	1,434

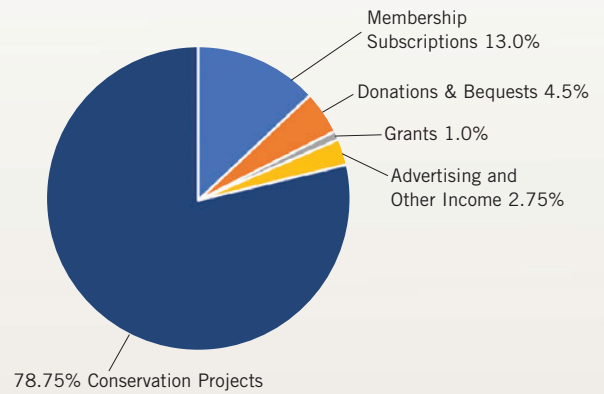
Represented by:		
Fixed assets	976	1,210
Net current assets / (liabilities)	458	224
Total net assets	1,434	1,434

BirdWatch Ireland gratefully acknowledges the receipt in 2023 of Annual Core Funding in the amount of €49,033 from the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, via the Irish Environmental Network (IEN). There were no restrictions on the use of this funding and its expenditure is compliant with all relevant government circulars.

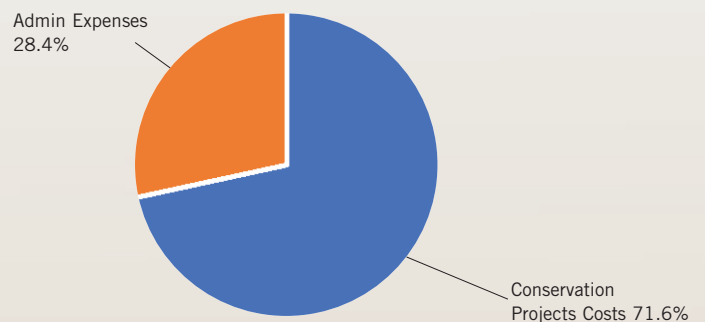
INCOME 2023



INCOME 2022



EXPENDITURE 2023



EXPENDITURE 2022

