



# CBS News

NEWSLETTER OF THE COUNTRYSIDE BIRD SURVEY • ISSUE No 24 MARCH 2025

## Celebrating the commitment of our volunteers

Since the last issue of CBS News, Storm Éowyn and Storm Darragh each left their mark with fierce winds and heavy rains. Yet, despite the wild weather, the birds adapted, finding shelter and continued their routines. Nature's resilience reminds us that, even in the face of storms, life moves forward. The local Ravens are already busy building their nest, one of the perks of pairing for life being that they don't waste time searching for mates. Meanwhile, the first notes of the spring chorus are filling the air: the distinctive patchwork melody of a Dunnock and the simple, familiar song of the Robin, who has hardly stopped singing since the last CBS season. These steadfast birds may not be as thrilling as the summer migrants, but they are no less important, heralding the return of a new season with their unwavering presence.

And so, another CBS season is upon us. Indeed, you are part of a unique and vital network of over 250 volunteers, NPWS Rangers and BirdWatch Ireland staff ready to head out into the fields, woods, hills and bogs to survey Ireland's breeding birds and monitor the health of our countryside bird populations. Your commitment is the key to making this invaluable work possible.

Thank you for everything you do. You are not just birdwatchers; you are key contributors to scientific research. From mapping your survey squares to setting out on those early morning walks, your efforts form the foundation of this survey. The time you invest, your sharp skills in identifying birds by sight and sound, and the precision with which you record each observation all contribute to one of the most important bird monitoring projects in Ireland. Your work is central to understanding the changing populations of Ireland's common and widespread birds. Your efforts shed light on these shifts, driving our work to understand and potentially reverse any negative trends. The survey data you have collected in recent years is forming a key part of this year's report from Ireland to the EU Commission under Article 12 of the Birds Directive, which focuses on the protection of all naturally occurring wild bird species and their critical habitats across the EU. So, take comfort in knowing that your hard work is truly making a difference.

With the introduction of new survey squares in 2024, we achieved our best coverage to date. However, some species, such as the Sparrowhawk, Treecreeper and Spotted Flycatcher, are still on the cusp of



Sparrowhawk. Photo: Shay Connolly

the minimum number of squares needed for meaningful trend analysis. Every record counts, and your data can make all the difference in ensuring we can continue to track these species effectively.

While technology, like apps such as Merlin Bird ID, continues to evolve, it is your expertise and judgment that ensures the accuracy and reliability of our data. Check out page 3 for other tips and tricks on identifying and recording birds in your square for maximum scientific value.

Thank you for maintaining the high standards that make CBS a trusted resource for bird monitoring in Ireland. Your field recording sheets are key to our understanding of Ireland's bird populations. Your efforts do more than count birds – they help us understand how species are adapting to environmental changes, which informs vital conservation work. Without

you, this work simply wouldn't be possible.

As we embark on another survey season, we want to thank you once again. May your mornings be filled with birdsong, your field recording sheets filled with valuable observations, and your hearts full, knowing that your work is making a real difference for Ireland's birdlife.

Happy surveying!

**Andrew Lynch,  
CBS Coordinator**

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Wet heath and bog in square  
M 70 00, Woodford, Co Galway  
Photo: Tristram Whyte

# 'On seeing Hen Harrier, I was hooked'

**Tristram Whyte**, Policy Officer with the Irish Peatland Conservation Council, on surveying his CBS square

One of the things I enjoy most when returning to square M 70 00, in Woodford, Co Galway, is seeing and sensing the habitat's different tones. Each visit is different, and the weather involuntarily varied – it can and will change, many times, even during a single visit.

I first started this transect in 2017 after learning about the CBS while helping the Irish Peatland Conservation Council with the Irish Garden Bird Survey. Like many, I attended an information talk in Limerick and was interested when I learned that a square near home needed to be surveyed. I already knew the area and was able to get word to the locals, before I started my first run, to not be startled if they saw me walking around early in the morning!

The transect is situated within the **Slieve Aughty Mountains Special Protection Area** and starts beside afforested and farmed upland – dry heath and blanket bog. The birdsong reflects the afforestation and farmland, with **Robin, Wren, Chaffinch, Blue Tits, Great Tits** and **Coal Tits**, and in some years

**Treecreepers** make an auditory appearance.

The Woodford River and the trees that follow it have brought with them **Long-tailed Tits**, and as I move upland and away from the forestry we get a good soundscape of **Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps, Willow Warblers** and **Song Thrushes**.

The **Whitethroat** can be well represented (though I didn't hear many in 2024) and it was here I also saw my first **Whinchat**. Within the whole transect it is possible to see **Collared Doves** and **Woodpigeons** propel themselves across the landscape with strong aerial breast-strokes.

The afforested and agricultural bogland turns to human grounds and more farmland – with **Maggies** and **Hooded Crows** – and then it plateaus to a gorgeous view of blanket bog with a small area of fen and upland, reflected in Lough Derg in the distance.

This is where the Special Protection Area (SPA) overlaps with a **Natural Heritage Area**, and while the NHA is designated for the presence of globally unique blanket bog and heath

habitats, the SPA's qualifying interests include bird species which are under threat of extinction, one of which is the **Hen Harrier** – I was fortunate enough to see one on one of my first visits, and of course I was hooked then.

The odd tree harbours **Reed Bunting** (perched and calling indiscriminately) while **Meadow Pipits** flitter about the bog surface with **Skylarks** aloft – somehow condensing what sounds like the entire works of Shakespeare into a small and sweet descending song as they fall to the bog surface.

I have often thought of **Starlings, House Martins** and **Swallows** as peatland species, as they can be seen on the upland portions of the transect, flocking above and on the bog surface, maximising their use of the habitats and food sources around them.

In 2019, I was lucky enough to hear and see a pair of **Cuckoos** following each other across the farmland and an area of forestry on the boundary of the blanket bog. I thought I was looking at two birds of prey at first, but the constant calling back and forth

was unmistakable. A hovering **Kestrel** and a soaring **Buzzard** have both been seen from the blanket bog too.

I would like to say that this transect is perfect, but the inappropriate afforestation has taken its toll on the landscape; it surrounds the peatland and is encroaching, spreading, drying out the peat soils through drainage and transpiration. It is also unfavourably giving cover and vantage points to predator species, which is bad for ground-nesting birds. I hope the reason I have only seen the **Hen Harrier** here once is because of my poor timing or the weather, but it is more likely because of intensive land use. Even with multiple **Hen Harrier Threat Response Plans** published by the Government, the species is still in decline nationally, even when important areas like M 70 00 are doubly designated.

As a CBS volunteer, I cannot wait to get back out in 2025 and collect the data which I know is of great value to BirdWatch Ireland and the national attempt to monitor and track human-imposed changes on the environment.

## Workshop news

This year's annual training workshops marked the arrival of spring, bringing new participants to learn the methods of the CBS. We were grateful to the **National Parks and Wildlife Service** for hosting us at **Clara Bog Visitor Centre**, and we also held a second workshop at the **University of Limerick**. During the sessions, we enjoyed sightings of Meadow Pipits, Skylarks and a hovering Kestrel. The bog pools were full of frogspawn, adding to the springtime magic.

A warm thank you to everyone involved for making these workshops a success. They provide a valuable opportunity to connect with new birdwatchers and continue the important work of the CBS. We look forward to seeing the impact of our new participants on bird monitoring across the country.



Participants at CBS workshop on Clara Bog, Co Offaly. Photo: Andrew Lynch



# Bird identification tips for your square visit

**Andrew Lynch** has some useful tips for those who need a little advice on getting the best results from their survey

## What to look for

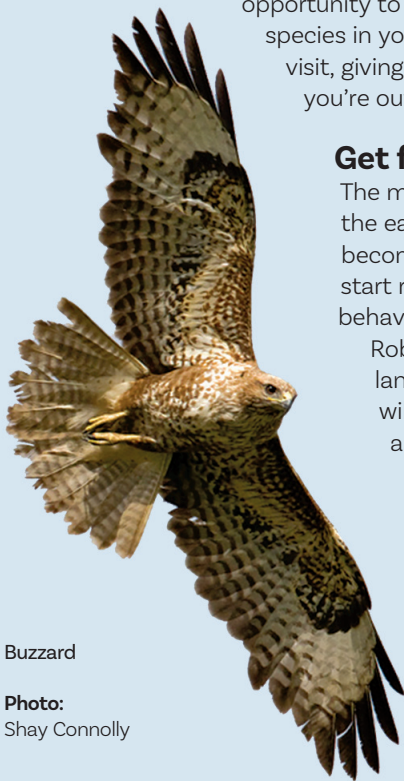
When identifying a bird, start by observing its size, shape and colours – both in its feathers and in key features such as the bill or legs. Consider the bird's location, the habitat it's in, and any unique behaviour or sounds it may make. For example, if you see a bird with a yellow flash in its wings, it could be a Goldfinch. Similarly, a bird with a white wingbar might be a Chaffinch. Paying attention to these features will help you narrow down the possibilities.

## Know what to expect

Familiarity with the species common in your area makes identification easier. To assist with this, your birdwatching pack includes a list of all species recorded in your square since 1998. This list provides an excellent opportunity to brush up on the main species in your square before your visit, giving you a head start when you're out in the field.

## Get field experience

The more you observe birds, the easier identification becomes. Over time, you'll start recognising certain behaviours. For example, a Robin may bob its tail after landing, while a Chaffinch will pump its tail and look around. A Great Tit may dart its head before hopping to another perch. These behavioural clues can help you identify birds more confidently.



Buzzard

**Photo:**  
Shay Connolly

## Birds in flight

Flight patterns can provide useful identification clues. For instance, Mistle Thrushes often fly high with an undulating motion, while Song Thrushes fly more smoothly at lower altitudes. Greenfinches tend to fly in a chaotic zigzag pattern, and Rooks soar with slow, powerful wingbeats.

Plumage differences can also be observed in flight – for example, a Woodpigeon has a distinctive white wing patch that contrasts with the plain grey wings of a Stock Dove.

Birds that are simply commuting, like Herring Gulls, should be recorded as “flyover” birds. However, some quite mobile species such as Skylarks and Kestrels may well be nesting in your square, so try to assign a distance band to them based on where you observe them.

## Counting birds accurately

When conducting your survey, remember to count each individual bird only once. The sound of some bird songs, such as the Cuckoo's, can carry over long distances. So, if you hear



Cuckoo. Be careful not to count the same bird more than once

**Photo:**  
Ita Martin

the same Cuckoo calling throughout your survey, only record it in the section where you first hear it.

Similarly, if a pair of Buzzards is soaring overhead for the duration of your survey, only count them once. This ensures more accurate data and prevents overcounting.

## Only count adult birds

Do not record birds identified as juveniles (those born in the current year). If you are unable to distinguish between adults and juveniles, simply record the bird as normal. On the late visit, juveniles will likely be present. For example, in a flock of Starlings, Swallows or Long-tailed Tits, if it's difficult to tell adults from juveniles, provide your best estimate of how many adults are present.

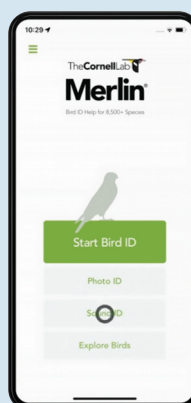
## Why bird sounds matter

Birds are incredibly vocal, and for many species, their calls and songs are just as important for identification as their appearance. For species like Wren, Blackcap and Grasshopper Warbler, many sightings are based on sound alone, as these birds are more often heard than seen. Familiarity with bird calls is crucial for accurate identification.

## Bird sound tips

If you hear a sound you don't recognise, try to track down the bird and get a good look at it. Listening to bird call recordings and matching them to what you hear in the field will help you remember the sounds. With practice, you'll gradually build your knowledge and gain confidence in identifying birds by sound.

## Auto-ID tools and bird identification



Auto-ID tools like the Merlin Bird ID app are becoming more popular and can help with learning bird calls. However, there's a risk of over-reliance, which may lead to misidentifications, such as confusing Blackcap with Garden Warbler or Hooded Crow with Carrion Crow.

While these tools can be useful, their accuracy isn't yet reliable enough for robust data. We ask volunteers to avoid relying solely on these apps and to only add records confirmed by sight or sound.

# Song Thrush

Song Thrush  
Photo: Shay Connolly

The **Song Thrush** is a common resident species in Ireland, well-known for its beautiful song and distinctive behaviours. Originally a woodland species, the Song Thrush has adapted remarkably well to Ireland's parks and gardens, farmland hedgerows, scrublands, and any area where open ground meets bushes or trees, making use of these spaces for both breeding and foraging.

During the winter, additional birds arrive from continental Europe, supplementing the resident population.

In Irish, the Song Thrush is called **Smólach Ceoil**, which literally means “thrush of music,” a fitting name for such a melodious bird. The Song Thrush has also been a part of Irish folklore for centuries, often associated with the arrival of spring, thanks to its cheerful, early-morning song. The poem *Crédhe's Lament* by **Oisín** of the **Fianna** mentions “the sweet-voiced thrush of Gleann an Sagáil.”

Their diet is varied and includes insects, invertebrates, earthworms, berries and other fruit. Snails are a key part of their diet, and the Song Thrush is known for its unique feeding technique: smashing snail shells against stones, known as “thrush anvils,” to break them open. In *The Hobbit*, **JRR Tolkien** describes the dwarves finding the secret door to the Lonely Mountain as the sun's last rays reveal the keyhole “when the thrush knocks.”

This charming species has been steadily recorded in an average of 265 CBS 1km squares each year, and its breeding distribution has increased by 4.9% over the long term. Despite some fluctuation in distribution trends – showing a 4.5% gain over 11 years, and a slight loss of 1.4% over 23 years – the overall trend remains stable.

The Song Thrush now breeds in 95% of 10km squares across the island, a remarkable achievement for a bird that was once more closely tied to broadleaved forests.

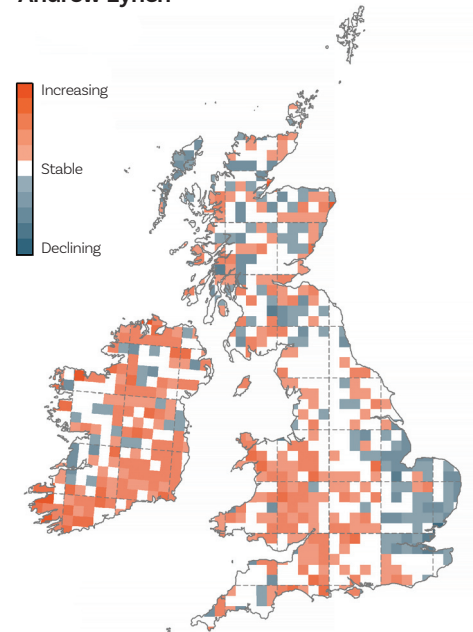
The Song Thrush is one of the top garden birds in Ireland, appearing in nearly 70% of gardens. However, despite its wide distribution, the species has experienced a slight decline in abundance of 6.4% across the CBS between 1999 and 2022. The Song Thrush's population tends to fluctuate, particularly after harsh winters, which can result in the death of many first-year birds due to extreme cold or dryness. Other factors contributing to its population challenges include land drainage and the use of pesticides, which can have a detrimental effect on bird numbers.

On a more positive note, the Song Thrush has shown an encouraging trend in the UK, where its abundance has increased by 30% over 27 years, with a 22% rise in the last decade.



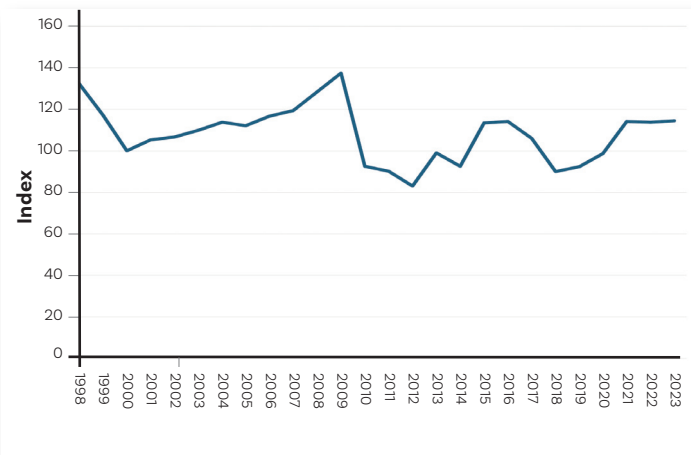
Across Europe, the species has increased by 3% over the long term (1980–2022), with a significant 22% rise in the last 10 years. These increases, particularly in the UK and Europe, suggest that while the Song Thrush faces challenges in certain areas, its overall population is thriving in many parts of its range.

Andrew Lynch



Song Thrush breeding abundance changes, 1988-91 to 2008-11. From the *Bird Atlas 2007-11*,<sup>1</sup> courtesy of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

<sup>1</sup> 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.



National trend for Song Thrush within the CBS, 1998 to 2023.

Similarly, the warrior **Cael** mourns with the words, “Pitiful the cry, pitiful the cry the thrush is making in the pleasant ridge.”

The bird has also inspired generations of British poets – **William Wordsworth**, **Thomas Hardy** and **Ted Hughes** were all inspired by the bird, incorporating its symbolism of natural beauty and harmony into their poetry.

The Song Thrush is a close rival songster to the **Blackbird**, though its song differs mainly in its repetition of each phrase two, three or even four times. Typical phrases include “*cherry-dew, cherry-dew, cherry-dew*” and “*knee-deep, knee-deep...*”

The Song Thrush's song is loud, fluty and far-carrying, making it an easy bird to identify by ear. Its distress call is an agitated loud rattle, and its contact note is a short “*swick*,” often given in flight.

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](https://birdwatchireland.ie/publications/cbs-data-request-form) or email [CBS@birdwatchireland.ie](mailto:CBS@birdwatchireland.ie)