



CBS News

NEWSLETTER OF THE COUNTRYSIDE BIRD SURVEY • ISSUE No 25 MARCH 2026

Out in the field again

Spring is here again, and with it comes one of the highlights of the year for many of us, the start of a new CBS season. By the time you read this, the early migrants will already be trickling in. Wheatears and Chiffchaffs lead the way in late March, and through April and May, Blackcaps, Willow Warblers, Swallows, Sedge Warblers and Spotted Flycatchers will follow. It's a wonderful time to be out, and your surveys are timed to make the most of it, catching birds at their most vocal and active.

If you haven't already, it's well worth taking some time before the season begins to brush up on your bird calls. Most of us get to know birds by their songs first, but calls are equally worth learning. I know it can seem daunting, but it really does open up a new dimension to your surveying and, once it clicks, it's enormously satisfying.

Start with the basics: the Wren's sharp "check" call, the Robin's metallic "tick," the Blackbird's rattling "chink-chink-chink." The Redpoll will often give itself away with a rapid "chit-chit-chit" in flight. The Mistle Thrush gives a harsh, dry, staccato rattle, like a finger being drawn over a comb.

A simple trick is to think of one-syllable calls as 'one word' and two-syllable calls as 'two words.' Luckily, we have a guide to songs and calls with audio on the CBS section of the BirdWatch Ireland website that's well worth a listen to.

The more familiar you become with calls, the more complete your counts will be. Birds that were always there start to reveal themselves, and your square feels richer for it. That detail really matters. The data you collect each year shapes conservation policy, helps us track how species are faring, and gives us a clearer picture of how Ireland's birdlife is responding to a constantly changing environment. None of that would be possible without the effort you put in, and we are truly grateful for it.

On that note, we are delighted to share that we are putting the finishing touches to a new publication that is underpinned by your CBS data collection. *CountrySide Bird Survey: Status and Trends of Common and Widespread Breeding Birds 1998-2023* will be published later this year and it will be a landmark moment for the survey, a testament to over 25 years of your hard work in the field.



Redpoll. Photo: Richard T Mills

Team news

We have some changes to share within the team. First, a heartfelt thank you to **Lesley Lewis**, who has moved on from the project. Lesley's hard work and dedication made a real difference and she will be missed. We are very pleased to welcome **Helen Boland** as our new Programme Manager. Many of you will already know Helen, who has been with BirdWatch Ireland since 2003. She brings a wealth of experience to the role, including ten years as National Coordinator of the Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS). **Cian O'Flaherty** joins the team as Scientific Officer, working alongside our Data Officer, **John Kennedy**. Cian takes on the role previously held by **Brian Burke**, who is now BirdWatch Ireland's Senior Seabird Conservation Officer.

We would also like to extend our thanks to colleagues from the Birds Unit of the **National Parks and Wildlife Service**, particularly **Sinéad Cummins** and **Fionn Ó Marcaigh**, for their ongoing help and support.

This issue of *CBS News* features some wonderful contributions – Fionn writes about rookeries (page 3); Cian has an article on the Great Spotted Woodpecker (page 4); and volunteer **Michael Ryan** has written a lovely piece about his CBS square in Wexford (page 2). We hope you enjoy reading them all.

It's shaping up to be a great season. Enjoy the fieldwork!

Andrew Lynch,
CBS Coordinator

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The CountrySide Bird Survey (CBS) is coordinated by BirdWatch Ireland under contract to the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.





Michael Ryan's wife Luzy overlooking their CBS square
Photo: Michael Ryan

Scenic valley survey

CBS volunteer **Michael Ryan** on surveying his CBS square in Wexford

My CBS square is on farmland in a quiet picturesque valley in the northernmost part of Wexford, the nearest big town being Aughrim, a few miles over the border in Wicklow.

Years before sat nav, finding my allotted CBS square was a bit of a challenge, and I wasn't too confident relying on an Ordnance Survey map to find it. But I found a farmhouse and outbuildings that corresponded with my allotted CBS map and I knew I was in the right place.

My square is mostly on one large livestock farm which spans a main road, extends up a steep hillside on one side and then runs down to a stream bordering the other end. I introduced myself to the farmer, who was very welcoming and told me to wander where I wished and visit any time. A promising start and the beginning of my CBS survey over 25 years ago.

If I had picked my transects to run north to south, one transect would have run along the main road, but there wasn't much habitat there apart from hedgerows bordering grass fields. I opted instead to go east to west, beginning my first transect up the steep slope, which seems to have grown steeper over the years.

There are some birds whose absence on a survey day would always be a cause for concern. I'm always relieved when we hear a **Raven** 'cronking.' The farmer had a benign attitude to wildlife in general, but since he kept sheep he had a very poor opinion of Ravens, who can do very unpleasant things to farm animals.

The farmer passed away just over a

year ago and the farm has passed over to one of his sons, who is as friendly and accommodating as his dad was. His daughter was bottle-feeding over twenty lambs and had names for all of them.

I felt privileged a few years previously when the older farmer and his son were happy to let me watch them help a sheep give birth in the barn. I was glad I was up that remote hillside when I found a sheep that had got its head caught in a wire fence and was able to release it.

On some early season counts we'd hear a **Cuckoo** calling across the valley, though we never got to see him. Our most surprising record was of a pair of **Woodcocks**, who exploded out of the grass a few feet ahead of us. It's years since we saw a **Spotted Flycatcher** on the farm, a trend sadly replicated nationwide.

Meadow Pipits, initially common on the high slopes, became very scarce for a few years, possibly as a result of cold winters, but happily seem to be making a recovery.

A Red Fox relaxing in a sunlit field with cubs playing around her was a lovely sight, but not one I was going to share with the



Red Squirrel seen on the survey. Photo: Michael Ryan



Wren
(Michael Ryan)

farmer, who bred **Pheasants**.

One low field, when cleared of conifers, became very damp and for a few years in spring we'd regularly see Orange Tip butterflies flitting around their host plant, Lady's Smock, but new trees now tower over us there. The track through the conifers often has Common Blue butterflies bathing in the sun on our second survey visit.

A gently descending, tree-shaded driveway down to the farmyard is bordered by an old moss-covered dry stone wall, crammed full of Primroses for our first survey, decorated with Foxgloves on our second and almost inevitably a singing **Dunnock**.

Passing a birch tree, a **Treecreeper** shot out from a tiny split in the trunk, then seconds later a female **Sparrowhawk** flew into a conifer on the opposing side of the track. She was on a nest as well.

When my then partner, now my wife, **Luzy**, began to join me for the survey, I was very glad and not just for the company, as she's very observant, with great eyesight and hearing. It was she who spotted the Red Squirrel motionless in a Hazel tree.

Age has reduced my capacity to hear in the high-frequency range, and now Luzy hears the **Goldcrest** song coming from the conifers.

We finish our second transect on the same steep slope and, job done, we sit down and gaze over the scenic valley below us.

Rookery counts

Do Rooks nest in your CBS square? If so, we'd like you to take a closer look, writes **Dr Fionn Ó Marcaigh**, CBS Project Officer in the NPWS Scientific Advice and Research Directorate

Rookeries are among the most conspicuous ornithological phenomena of the Irish countryside. These are the treetop nesting colonies of *Corvus frugilegus*, a sociable and highly intelligent member of the crow family, of which Ireland holds nearly a quarter of the total EU population.

Internationally, the English common name used for this species is **Rook**, but Rooks are often known here simply as "crows." In Irish, a Rook can be called either **Rúcach** or **Préachán Dubh**, ie "black crow," or else simply **Préachán**.

The CBS is designed to monitor trends in the populations of common birds in the Irish countryside, and the Rook is one such species whose fortunes we, in the NPWS, are particularly keen to examine.

CBS transect surveys are one part of this, so if you see any Rooks on your transects, record them like any other species.

You can identify a Rook by its uniformly dark plumage, the patch of grey skin at the base of its bill, and the feathers around its legs that resemble a pair of baggy trousers. When seen up close, their plumage can be seen to have a purplish gloss. They are vocal, with a call similar to a Hooded Crow's but even more croaky and dry. The way the

Collins Bird Guide puts it is that Hooded Crows roll their Rs and Rooks don't!

Look for rookeries

While doing your transects and exploring your square, watch out for any rookeries nearby. We are particularly interested in data on rookeries as it can tell us how the breeding population is faring.

At the end of your **CBS Count Summary Sheet**, you will find a section for **Colony Counts**, where you can record nest numbers in any rookeries you find. Rookeries are often found near villages and small towns, and they can be so busy and noisy, particularly in the evening, that you may hear a rookery before you see it.

Make a count

When you've found a rookery, make a count or estimate of the number of apparently occupied nests. You might find it helpful to look at the colony from multiple positions. You don't need to spend time ascertaining whether a nest is occupied or not; the overall number is what's important.

You might not be able to stop and count nests when you're doing your main CBS transect counts, so your colony counts can be done separately from the transects and don't have to be on the same date. You aren't restricted to your transect routes, either: you can count colonies anywhere within your 1 km x 1 km square.

Visit early

CBS visits take place in the period when Rooks are busy nesting, but the emerging leaves will make counting nests difficult, especially on your late visit. So if you do have a rookery in your square, consider visiting it specially and making a count before the leaves have hidden the nests. The first couple of weeks in April are often suitable.

We're grateful for the colony counting that CBS surveyors have already undertaken. In the 2024 CBS, the largest rookeries counted were in counties Laois and Wexford, each with 220 nests. Now we're hoping to get more and more counts, and we'd also be glad if people who have counted rookeries previously would return and count them again each year, to show any changes over time.

In a way, a rookery is like a town in itself, being built up by a community of birds over years. Rooks are industrious, clever builders, and in old Irish rookeries some nests have been measured at nearly two metres wide.

Our countryside provides ample food for these bird societies. A 1984 National University of Ireland PhD thesis by **Ron Macdonald** found 66 rookeries in a 100 km² area of Co Kildare, containing nearly 5,000 nests.

With typical corvid resourcefulness, Rooks are adept at providing for

themselves, and this sometimes involves a bit of pilfering of the local produce. In their 1900 book *The Birds of Ireland*, **Ussher and Warren** describe mobs of Rooks walking along drills of turnips during crop thinning, pulling the plants up one by one, until they had gone through entire acres of them. In fact, the scarecrows that are put up to protect crops are largely aimed at Rooks. I have also seen Rooks foraging in quite different habitats, for example picking through small shellfish on the seashore.

European decline

Conflict over crops has caused trouble for the species. As abundant as they are in Ireland, you might be surprised to learn that Rooks are on the decline across Europe. In the latest *European Red List of Birds*, published by **BirdLife International** in 2021, the Rook was put in the Vulnerable category, a serious change from its listing as of Least Concern in the 2015 edition, which the authors attributed to persecution.

Even here in Ireland, CBS results indicate a moderate decrease in their population since 1998. This is why we are so keen to collect data on our rookeries. These birds are a quintessential part of the Irish landscape, and the data that we provide through the CBS is an important part of understanding and protecting them.



Workshop news

Our annual training workshops were held this spring to introduce new participants to CBS methods and encourage others to get involved. Sessions took place at Cabragh Wetlands in Tipperary and Lough Key in Roscommon, targeting areas where gaps remain in our survey coverage. We were delighted that attendees took up several new survey squares following the workshops.

We also ran two training days for National Parks and Wildlife Service staff at Wild Nephin in Mayo and Coole Park in Galway. A huge thank you to everyone involved for helping make these events a success. These workshops provide a valuable opportunity to connect with new birdwatchers and support the ongoing work of CBS.



Workshop at Cabragh Wetlands, Co Tipperary. Photo: Aisling Kinsella

Species Focus

Great Spotted Woodpecker

Woodpeckers are a well-known group of species, even amongst those who aren't familiar with birds. They went extinct in Ireland following mass deforestation in the 17th and 18th centuries. Over two centuries later, the **Great Spotted Woodpecker** has made a return to Ireland - they were first recorded breeding here in 2005 and, since then, have greatly expanded their range throughout Ireland.

The Irish name for this woodpecker is **Mórchnagaire Breac**, which translates as "big spotted hitter," a rather fitting description. Their hitting sound, known as drumming, is what they are known for. The Great Spotted Woodpecker is notably the fastest-drumming woodpecker in Europe, achieving about 12 to 16 hits per second.

Drumming typically lasts one to two seconds, so that's 32 hits in two seconds - quite an impressive feat for a bird about the size of a Blackbird.

In folklore, the woodpecker was often linked with rain and poor weather. Their vocalisations and drumming were believed



Great Spotted Woodpecker
Photo: Colin Rigney

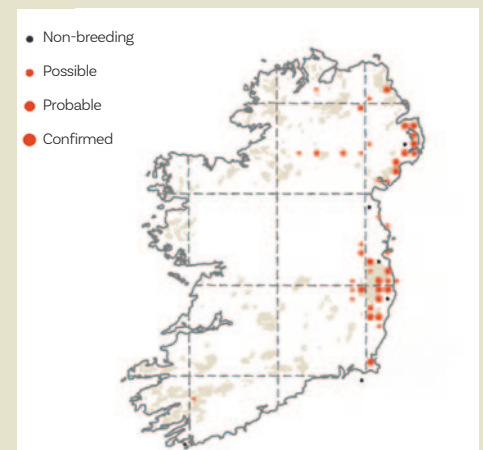
to act as an omen, heralding rainfall - so they fit in perfectly in the Irish landscape.

The recolonisation and resultant range expansion of Great Spotted Woodpecker has aligned quite well with the inception of the Countryside Bird Survey (CBS) in 1998. The survey has provided us with a detailed timeline of their expansion westward through the early years of the 21st century, and they are now considered widespread - they have been reported in almost all counties.

The most recent *Bird Atlas*, conducted in 2007-2011, doesn't reflect their current range in Ireland. However, the highest

population density is still found in the east of the country. Since 2021, they have been recorded in 10 or more CBS squares per annum, spiking in 2023 when they were recorded in 20 squares. This does not yet meet the minimum threshold to make statistically robust estimates of their population. However, if their population growth and range expansion continues at the current rate, it won't be long before we can make such estimates. According to the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)**, the population trend for Great Spotted Woodpecker is decreasing across Eurasia, though they are currently categorised as of "Least Concern."

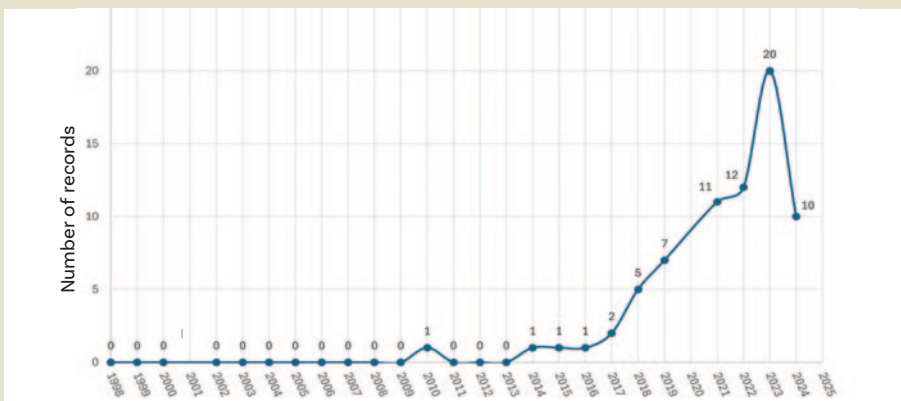
Cian O'Flaherty (CBS Team)



Great Spotted Woodpecker breeding distribution, 2008-11. From the *Bird Atlas 2007-11*,¹ courtesy of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

¹ 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

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



National trend for Great Spotted Woodpecker within the CBS, 1998 to 2024.