



I-WeBS News

The Newsletter of the Irish Wetland Bird Survey

Issue 29 August 2025



Common Eiders John Murphy

A new team, and year of the swan

It is a time of change here at the headquarters of the Irish Wetland Bird Survey. As we enter our 32nd season, we would like to thank **Niamh Fitzgerald, Lesley Lewis, Brian Burke** and **Rhys Gadd** for their recent years of service on the project here at HQ as we welcome some new team members – comprised of both new and familiar faces. For your communications and queries, **Aisling Kinsella** will be taking on the role of National Coordinator. After some time away from the project, **Helen Boland** will be rejoining us as the new Programme Manager. A little bit behind the scenes, but also the brains behind the data, **Cian O'Flaherty** has started as our Scientific Officer, and **John Kennedy** will be staying on as our Data Officer. We're very excited to work with you all this season.

It is also a big year for surveys, as the **9th International Swan Census of Whooper and Bewick's Swans** will take place on the weekend of January 17–18th, 2026. As Ireland plays host to an internationally important number of Whooper Swans, it is essential that we have a reliable estimate of their numbers. The last census saw the greatest volunteer turnout that we have ever had before – a whooping (excuse the pun) 1,133 count units (subsites) were surveyed by more than 263 volunteers – a mammoth effort from all involved and one that we would love to see repeated. As in previous years, we are appealing for help to count the additional areas required for the census, away from the regular I-WeBS wetland sites, where our swans feed during the day. You can find more information on the results of the last census on page two. And we are delighted to include a fantastically interesting article about the Gearagh in Co Cork, written by **John Lynch**, one of I-WeBS's most experienced counters.

Happy counting!

Aisling Kinsella (I-WeBS National Coordinator Incoming)
& **Rhys Gadd** (I-WeBS National Coordinator Outgoing)

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

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Compiled by the I-WeBS Office
Design and layout by C  il  n MacLochlainn
Printed by GPS Colour Graphics Ltd



An tSeirbh  is P  irceanna N  isi  nta
agus Fiadh  ilra
National Parks and Wildlife Service



BirdWatchIreland



Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Lapwing and Oystercatcher *Richard T Mills*

Who uses I-WeBS data, and for what?

By the I-WeBS Office

The data that you collect for I-WeBS helps paint a picture on the whole flyway-level population of a species. The data are not only used by the European Commission to gain an understanding of changes in population numbers and trends, but they can show changes in distribution and habitat type through time as well.

Extensive database

We have an extensive waterbird database that you have helped us to build, and the I-WeBS partners are keen to encourage the use of their data as broadly as possible to help shed light on other conservation issues.

I-WeBS data are often used as part of academic studies, both in Ireland and further afield, for both postgraduate and undergraduate studies, and they have been provided to several academic institutions, including in recent years the **University of Galway** and **Atlantic Technological University**.

I-WeBS data have been used recently by **Leonie Jonas**, of the **University of Turku** in Finland, in their study looking at interactions between climate warming and management actions for protected areas, and how these can determine bird community change. This study used I-WeBS trend data from Special Protection Areas (SPAs) to highlight how community-level management of protected areas provides increased benefits to bird communities compared to management actions targeting a species group directly.

The work demonstrated that management actions not currently focused on climate warming still have the potential to offer resilience to bird communities in terms of biodiversity impacts, if the conservation strategies were originally focused at the community level.

Vital reports

Ireland plays a crucial role in the **East Atlantic Flyway**. Every three years, most recently in 2023, East Atlantic Flyway Assessments are produced – led by the **Common Wadden Sea Secretariat (CWSS)** in partnership with **BirdLife International** and **Wetlands International** – using data from the various countries. Reports of this nature are vital to understanding how birds are faring along this key migratory route.

I-WeBS data, provided by BirdWatch Ireland annually, act as the principal source of data for Ireland in these reports, outlining the utility of the dataset.

I-WeBS data are not only used in academic studies, but are also frequently used by various Government departments, State organisations and local authorities around the country to inform research, policy and planning. The **National Parks and Wildlife Service** uses the data to inform SPA Management Plans. The **Office of Public Works** has used the data to help prioritise study areas for Managed Coastal Realignment. The four **Dublin local authorities** are using the data to understand how waterbird species such as geese use the open spaces.

With over 30 seasons of data collected from over 450 sites, the I-WeBS dataset is the most robust dataset available for wintering waterbirds in Ireland, and is delivering insights at local, national and international levels.

To use I-WeBS data...

➡ Whether you are an academic, or would like to use I-WeBS data in a professional or personal capacity, please fill out the relevant form linked from the project website <https://irishwetlandbirdssurvey.ie>

➡ You can also get in contact through iwebs@birdwatchireland.ie if you have any queries.



Whooper Swans Richard T Mills

International Swan Census – January 2026

By the I-WeBS Office

The results of the last **International Swan Census** in 2020 showed an increase in **Whooper Swan** numbers in Ireland – up 24.9% in the Republic of Ireland and up 32% in Northern Ireland – compared to the previous census in 2015. At 19,111 birds, this was the highest number recorded in Ireland to date (14,467 in Republic of Ireland and 4,644 in Northern Ireland).

Nevertheless, the proportion of the overall Icelandic-breeding flyway population of Whooper Swans that winter in Ireland is actually decreasing. This is largely due to an increase in the number of birds at sites in England, where there were rapid rises recorded at some key sites.

All of the Icelandic-breeding Whooper Swan population winters in Ireland and Great Britain (with a very small number wintering in the Channel Islands and Isle of Man), while a proportion remains in Iceland. A total of 43,255 birds was recorded across this region in 2020, with ~49% occurring in Britain, ~44% on the island of Ireland, and ~7% overwintering in Iceland. With Ireland supporting such a significant proportion of the international population of this species it is critical that we regularly assess how the birds are faring.

The last census also highlighted how dispersed the population is across Ireland when compared to Britain, where enormous numbers are concentrated at relatively few sites. And previous censuses also inform us that the swans are using habitats across the country that would not be covered during standard I-WeBS surveys, such as pasture fields and grasslands, and that a concerted effort to survey these widely

distributed – and otherwise possibly overlooked – sites will be important.

The census is only conducted every five years, making it essential that we get the best picture of the current status of the population – only achievable by covering as many sites as

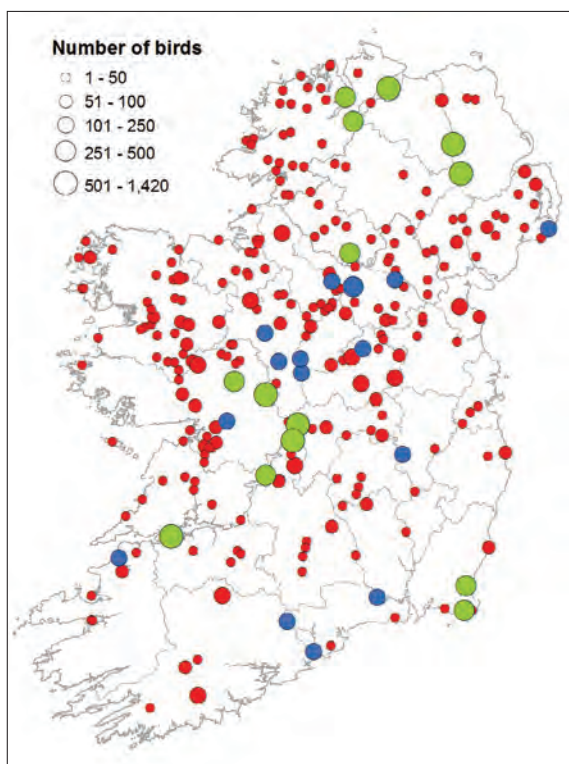
we can throughout the country. For this, we will need your help over the weekend of 17–18th January 2026!

The last census recorded Whooper Swans in every county in Ireland for the first time ever, so no matter where you live there may be swans for you to count.

There may not, however, be many **Bewick's Swans** to be counted. In 2020, just 12 individuals were recorded, representing an almost 50% decline since 2015. They were recorded at only two sites, with one bird observed in Roscommon, and 11 in Wexford. They are a species whose migratory patterns have been influenced by climate change, with many Bewick's Swans 'short-stopping' closer to their Russian breeding grounds, and numbers in Ireland are not expected to recover.

We will be in touch again in due course with more details and to arrange coverage for all of the key areas for January 2026. The International Swan Census is a great way to be a part of an important international scientific survey effort. It is a great survey to participate in, and one that is well-suited to any novice birdwatchers amongst you.

The International Swan Census is a collaboration of many organisations and individuals, with much of the survey effort being delivered through I-WeBS in the Republic of Ireland and WeBS in Great Britain, with particular acknowledgments to the **British Trust for Ornithology**, the **Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust**, **Northern Ireland Environment Agency**, **RSPB**, **JNCC**, **NPWS**, the **Irish Whooper Swan Study Group** and **BirdWatch Ireland**.



Distribution of Whooper Swans in Ireland in the January 2020 census, at site level. Sites exceeding the international 1% threshold are illustrated in green, those exceeding the national 1% threshold are in blue and other sites are shown in red. This map appeared in the journal *Irish Birds* (2021).*

* B Burke, JG McElwaine, N Fitzgerald, SBA Kelly, N McCulloch, AJ Walsh and LJ Lewis (2021) Population size, breeding success and habitat use of Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* and Bewick's Swan *Cygnus columbianus bewickii* in Ireland: results of the 2020 International Swan Census. *Irish Birds* 43 pp57-70.

A landmark publication on Ireland's wintering waterbirds

By Rhys Gadd (I-WeBS Office)



I-WeBS is the primary tool for monitoring wintering waterbird numbers and their distribution in the Republic of Ireland. The data collected provide the basis for reporting on the status of our regularly occurring waders, wildfowl and ally species in the non-breeding season, and for selection of **Special Protection Areas** (SPAs) under the EU Birds Directive. The Irish Government, through the **National Parks and Wildlife Service** (NPWS), are then required to report every six years to the European Commission under Article

12 of the Birds Directive about the status of our wintering waterbirds.

Using the incredible dataset collected by I-WeBS volunteer surveyors as well as NPWS and BirdWatch Ireland staff, an up-to-date analysis of the status of our wintering waterbirds has recently been completed and is due to be published soon as an *Irish Wildlife Manual*.

The report – *Irish Wetland Bird Survey: waterbird status and distribution 2016/17 – 2022/23* – provides detailed accounts for 63 regularly occurring wintering waterbird species, comprising 39 species within the 'wildfowl and allies' category (swans, geese, ducks and their allies), 18 waders and six gull species. We would like to share with you a small selection of these recent results, focusing here on the status of some of our wintering waders.

Since 1984, ten out of the 15 waders assessed have undergone a decline. **Lapwing, Purple Sandpiper, Grey Plover** and **Golden Plover** are the species with the highest rates of decline. These are concerning trends, particularly given how numerous Lapwing and Golden Plover have been in the recent past.

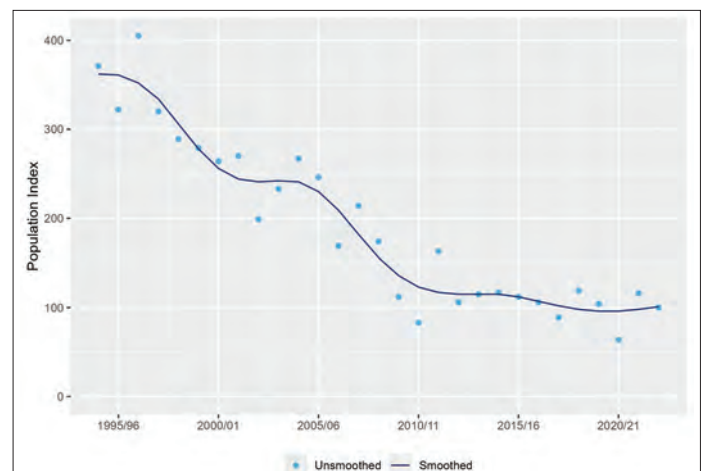
The reasons for these declines are varied and complex and for many species represent 'death by a thousand cuts' rather than

one specific driver. While habitat loss, predation and climate change on the breeding grounds play a part for many of our declining waterbirds, they face a long list of pressures here too, including habitat loss, disturbance, pollution, avian influenza and other pressures from development and infrastructure.

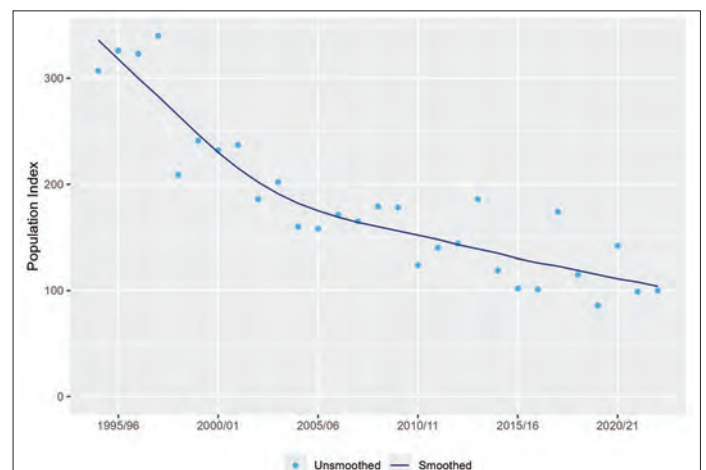
Three species showing a positive trend over this 38-year period are **Sanderling, Greenshank** and **Black-tailed Godwit**, which have all increased by more than 200%, compared to historical records.

The reasons for these increases are also likely varied and complex, though some species may be experiencing short-term benefits of climate change, affecting breeding success and adult survival rates. This is an area that needs more research, however, and, longer-term, many wildfowl and waders are predicted to suffer range contraction and population decline due to climate change.

The graphs here display national (Republic of Ireland) population trends (since the beginning of I-WeBS) for the selected wader species based on either census results or the I-WeBS wintering population index.

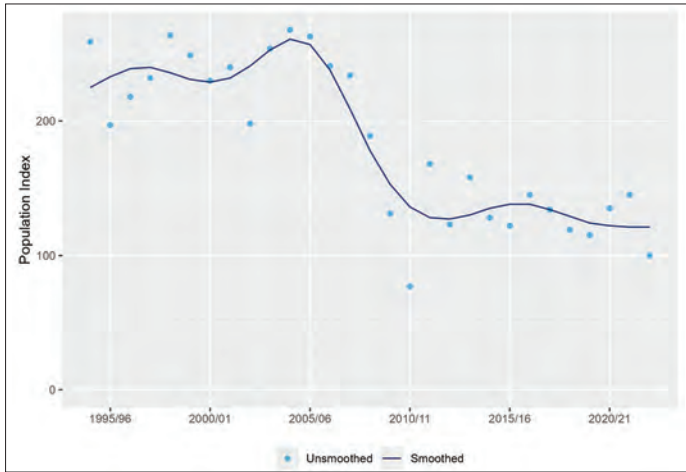


Lapwing – in decline ▼

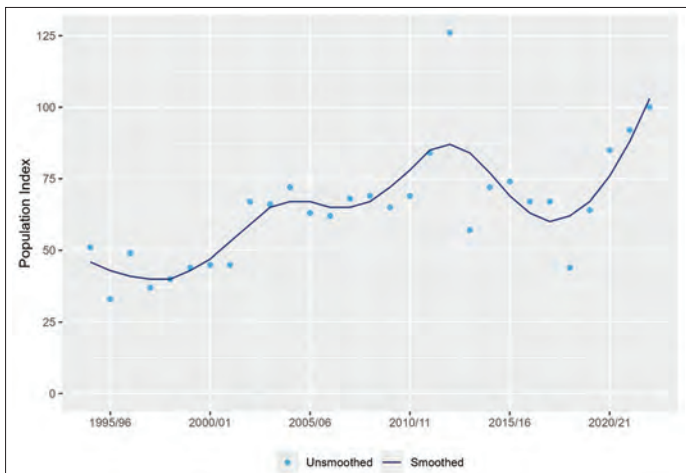


Grey Plover – in decline ▼





Golden Plover – in decline ▼



Sanderling – increasing ▲

The loss of **Bewick's Swan** from Ireland due to both short-stopping and subsequent flyway-level population decline provides a recent warning of how quickly species can disappear from our wetlands.

In the short-term (five-year period), seven of the 15 wader species assessed showed a small to medium level increase in numbers. In some cases this may be the beginning or continuation of longer-term increases, but in others simply a product of multi-annual variation and more cyclical fluctuations. So, while this may offer some hope, it is no time for complacency.



Black-tailed Godwit David Dillon

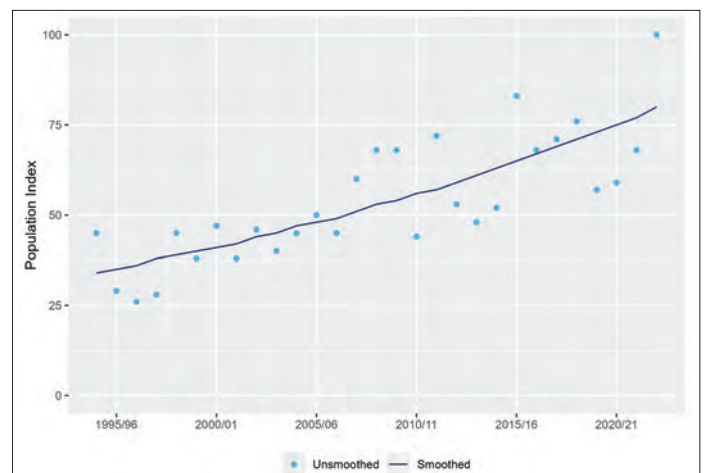


Sanderlings John Carey

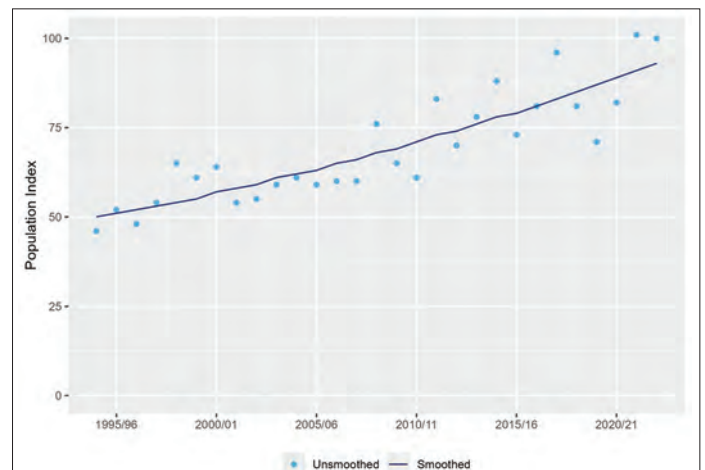
It is essential that we keep championing the cause of our waterbirds and their wetland habitats.

This analysis wouldn't be possible without the hours and hours of tireless work you have all contributed to the project. We are all extremely grateful for the work you continue to put in every year. And I can say personally, to each of the volunteers I have been lucky enough to meet, it has been an absolute pleasure working with you, a truly great bunch of eggs who made my job as I-WeBS coordinator that much easier. Here's to carrying on the work this winter, and hoping for those sunny, calm and cool winter days out by a lake, a river, a lough, the sea or elsewhere counting the birds we all love.

Keep an eye out for the upcoming *Irish Wildlife Manual*, to be released soon by NPWS and which will contain full detailed analysis of our regularly occurring wintering waterbird species.



Black-tailed Godwit – increasing ▲



Greenshank – increasing ▲

Port Road, the Gearagh,
Co Cork. Unmanaged
public access along this
route causes disturbance
to birds *Richard T Mills*

Challenges at the Gearagh

Several waterbirds are in decline at this ecologically and geologically fascinating Cork wetland. One of I-WeBS most experienced and longest-serving counters, **John Lynch**, reports on the issues facing the Gearagh.



The Gearagh is a post-glacial, alluvial, ancient forest 2km south of Macroom in the valley of the River Lee. It is the largest area of alluvial woodland in Ireland, having developed since

the last ice age on an inland delta of anastomosing islands of outwash sands and gravels.

The area covers approximately 560 hectares and is a designated Ramsar Wetland site, a Special Area of Conservation, a proposed National Heritage Area and a Special Protection Area (SPA).

The woodland rather than the wetland, which was shot until the winter of 2024/25, is designated as an SPA.

In the 1950s an extensive lower section of approximately 50% of the woodland was felled by the ESB for the Lee hydroelectric scheme, which generates 27 MW of electrical power between Carrigadrohid and Inniscarra dams. This scheme resulted in an extensive wetland developing, which I have been fortunate to count as an I-WeBS counter for the last 30 years.

Natural and anthropogenic change in the area has been significant. Natural vegetative succession on the felled and flooded area has been evident, with exposed bare mud developing into rough grassland, willow scrub and eventually mixed woodland.

Species declines

I-WeBS counters nationally have documented the decline of several species of waterfowl, largely postulated as a result

of milder winters and declining populations, disturbance and habitat loss.

At the Gearagh in the early 1990s peak counts of up to 400 **Tufted Duck**, 200 **Coot**, 35 **Goldeneye** and up to 1,200 **Eurasian Wigeon** were noted, but by the winter counts of 2019/2020 spectacular change had been noted, with declines of 94% in **Pochard** (now locally absent), **Coot** (-80%, now maximum of four birds), **Goldeneye** (-73%, now 1–2 birds) and **Tufted Duck** (-48%, now absent), and in 2025 just 80 wintering **Eurasian Wigeon** were present.

Data and trends are viewable on the I-WeBS site at bit.ly/gearagh-trends.

Increased disturbance

The reasons for these declines are complex and varied, but, removing climate change as a causative agent, it is evident that unmanaged public pressure at the site has

had a significant impact. The lack of a management plan over several decades, particularly since Natura 2000 enactment, has led to unhindered access and increased disturbance over the whole site from dog walkers, hikers, paddle-boaters, kayakers, fishermen and campers; This to such an extent that birds periodically vacate the site, particularly at weekends.

Increasingly, as an I-WeBS counter, I am finding myself as an educator raising awareness of the impacts of disturbance, and disseminating knowledge on subjects such as which birds use the site, impacts of disturbance, what apps to use (Merlin and the Collins Guide in particular), what optics to buy and, of course, promoting BirdWatch Ireland!

But what I am not seeing is action on the ground through issuance of a management plan by the designated authorities that local conservationists have been told is in preparation, for over 15 years. Meanwhile the pressures on the site have increased and the situation as regards the trends speaks for itself.

Across several I-WeBS sites that I 'bird,' such as Rosscarbery and Ballycotton SPAs, disturbance from the public, particularly dog walkers, is not controlled and is having an impact.

Small measures such as educational leaflets, information boards, fencing and



Pochard Shay Connolly

controlled access to areas, highlighting with signage a "bird conservation area: no access," can reduce this disturbance.

While common in the UK and the continent at important bird sites, these small measures of awareness, education and access control are largely absent here in Ireland, and in particular at the Gearagh.

The emerging danger is shifting baseline syndrome – the phenomenon where each generation accepts a new, lower standard of environmental quality or biodiversity as

the new normal. This shift in perception can lead to a lack of awareness regarding the extent of environmental degradation and bird diversity decline.

To me, as an I-WeBS counter, we are identifying the baseline against which effective conservation and regulatory controls shall be measured. The challenge for everyone is how the data are applied to effective conservation and site management.

'Ognips'

Aside from its importance for flora and fauna, the Gearagh is characterised by important geological features worthy of conservation. Circular periglacial depressions called '**ognips**' are visible across the site, formed at the end of the Midlandian/Devensian glaciation in south-west Munster over 10,000 years ago, and seen beautifully here in the photo by **Richard T Mills**.

These began as **pingos**, which are dome-shaped hills, actually mounds of earth-covered ice. They formed by freeze/thaw action under the permafrost surface, pushing the overlying soil up into a dome-shaped hill. Every time the ground froze and then thawed, the pingos grew, and the extra weight pushed their base deeper underground. When all the ice melted the pingos collapsed, leaving large circular depressions which are the ognips you see at the Gearagh today and, because of their fine sandy shores, are areas favoured by waders.



Circular depressions called ognips at the Gearagh. Ognips are collapsed pingos. They show how the Gearagh has fascinating and geologically important features, as well as being important for flora and fauna *Richard T Mills*

I-WeBS Scheduled Count Dates 2025/26

East Coast & Inland Counties			South & West Coast Counties		
Weekend			Weekend		
		High Tide (Sunday) Dublin ¹			High Tide (Sunday) Cork Hbr ²
Sep	06 th -07 th	12:11	13 th -14 th		10:57
Oct	11 th -12 th	16:00	18 th -19 th		17:34
Nov	08 th -09 th	13:52	15 th -16 th		15:14
Dec	06 th -07 th	12:52	13 th -14 th		13:29
Jan	10 th -11 th	17:36	17 th -18 th *		17:32
Feb	07 th -08 th	15:49	14 th -15 th		16:35
Mar	07 th -08 th	14:27	14 th -15 th		15:17

¹ Based on high-tide time predicted for Dublin

² Based on high-tide time predicted for Cork Harbour

International Swan Census

*January 17-18th 2026

Icelandic Greylag Goose Census

November 2025 – the I-WeBS Office will be in touch when the dates are confirmed.

Light-bellied Brent Goose Census

Dates to be confirmed, likely in October.

Barnacle Goose Census

There will be a Barnacle Goose Census in February 2026. Much of this will be covered by aerial survey by NPWS, but ground counts of flocks will be gratefully accepted. More information will be circulated when the dates are confirmed.

Here are the recommended dates for the 2025/2026 I-WeBS count season. These dates are chosen based on tidal conditions around Ireland's coastline, to allow coastal sites to be counted on a rising or high tide and to help maximise synchronisation of counts across the country, be they inland or coastal.

As always, we try to select dates that suit as many tidal states as possible, so that coordination of counts can be achieved.

If any dates are unsuitable, for whatever reason, please select the next most appropriate date and try to coordinate with any nearby sites, where relevant. Please refer to your *Counter Manual* for how best to cover your site.



Barnacle Geese Richard T Mills

Post-breeding terns

The post-breeding period represents a vital stage in the life-cycle of terns, as they stock up on the energy required for the *circa* 6,000km journey back to their wintering grounds. During this period, they require disturbance-free, prey-rich areas where they can roost and forage safely. Between mid-August and late September, please report any sightings of tern flocks to iwebs@birdwatchireland.ie. Your assistance is invaluable in helping us understand and protect these birds during this critical period.

For more information on post-breeding terns, you can access a paper published in the journal *Irish Birds* at this web page:

www.bit.ly/post-breeding-terns

Upcoming workshops

Both experienced and new counters are invited to come join the I-WeBS team in person at one of the most rewarding days on the I-WeBS calendar. While exact dates and locations are still being determined, we wanted to let you know that interactive and informative workshops will again be delivered, in both 2025 and 2026. The workshops are designed to help I-WeBS volunteers gain, or expand upon, their skills and confidence when it comes to waterbird identification and counting, as well as to recruit new counters to our ever-expanding network of devoted volunteers. They will comprise a classroom element where the team will run through the I-WeBS survey methods and provide some tips and tricks for counting and identification, with hopefully an opportunity to head outside and put your new-found skills into action.

These workshops are an important opportunity for volunteers to network in person – both with other surveyors and the I-WeBS Office – and for volunteers and NPWS staff to ask any questions they may have.

Details on dates and locations will be provided soon through the website, mailing lists and social media platforms.

The I-WeBS Office

I-WeBS Coordinator: Aisling Kinsella

Data and science: John Kennedy and Cian O'Flaherty

Programme Manager: Helen Boland

For queries about site coverage, counter coordination and for general I-WeBS queries, please contact Aisling at iwebs@birdwatchireland.ie. You can also visit our website, bit.ly/IWeBS, for other resources.

The Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS) is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the Republic of Ireland, which aims to be the primary tool for monitoring their populations and the wetland habitats on which they depend. The data generated are used to assess the sizes of non-breeding waterbird populations, identify trends in their numbers and distribution, and assess the importance of individual sites for them. 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.



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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