



I-WeBS News

The Newsletter of the Irish Wetland Bird Survey

Issue 30 August 2026



Turnstone Aisling Kinsella

A lucky year for our rocky shores

Welcome to the 33rd season of the Irish Wetland Bird Survey. In many cultures, the number three is considered lucky. In spirituality it represents harmony and completion, and in numerology it symbolises joy and abundance. I cannot think of better words to represent time spent in nature, particularly when birding. I will be bringing these sentiments with me into the coming season and I hope you will too.

Last season was a notable one, with the 9th **International Swan Census** having taken place in January. Thank you to everyone who contributed swan counts – we had excellent coverage with over 1,000 submissions. You can read more about the census on page 2.

There's no rest for the winged, and this season we will be conducting the 4th **Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS IV)**. NEWS is particularly important for certain wading species, such as **Purple Sandpiper**. To get you into the spirit of the survey, you can read all about this charming species on page 3. Taking place in December and January, NEWS IV only requires one count along predetermined sections of shoreline. To find out more about NEWS IV and how to take part, please see pages 4-5.

Long-term monitoring of sites benefits not only nature but also the people who care for it. It helps us build a lasting connection with our local patch, deepening our understanding of its natural processes and the changes that unfold across seasons and years. Long-term I-WeBS counter **Peter Capsey** tells his story of connection, after 28 years of I-WeBS at Rahasane Turlough, Co Galway on pages 6 and 7.

In the spirit of completion, we would love to welcome new counters this season. We will be running **volunteer workshops** in Waterford and Donegal and these are open to both new and current counters. Please spread the word to anyone you think might be interested. For **National Parks and Wildlife Service** staff, we will have dedicated workshops at Ballinacorney, Co Sligo and Dundalk, Co Louth. Please see the back page for more information.

The scheduled **count dates** can also be found on the back page, so pop them in your calendar, and happy counting!

Aisling Kinsella (I-WeBS National Coordinator)

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BirdWatch Ireland, Unit 20, Block D,
Bullford Business Campus, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow
T: +353-1-2819878
W: www.birdwatchireland.ie



@BirdWatchIE



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agus Fiadh  ilra
National Parks and Wildlife Service



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Whooper Swans *Brian Burke*

Results from the 2026 swan census

The 9th International Swan Census achieved extensive coverage. **Cian O'Flaherty** (I-WeBS Scientific Officer) reports



Ireland hosts thousands of wintering swans each winter, comprising two species – predominantly the **Whooper Swan** *Cygnus cygnus* from the Icelandic-breeding

population and, to a lesser extent, the **Bewick's Swan** *Cygnus columbianus bewickii*, which breeds in northern Russia and winters in north-western Europe. To evaluate their population status, the **International Swan Census** was developed and previously undertaken every five years, though it shifted from a five-year interval to a six-year cycle starting with the count in January 2026.

The survey aims to estimate the total number of wintering Whooper Swans and Bewick's Swans in the Republic of Ireland (RoI), the United Kingdom (UK) (including the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands) and Iceland by coordinating a synchronised count across their flyway. The 9th International Swan Census was undertaken on January 17-18th.

Since the completion of the census, number crunching of the data has been a top priority for the I-WeBS Office. Thankfully, we are reaching the final stages and we have a figure of just over 13,500 Whooper Swans as a provisional estimate for the Republic of Ireland. Full results from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland will be presented next year in a report in the BirdWatch Ireland journal *Irish Birds*.

One thing we can say is that coverage

was thorough thanks to efforts from our volunteers and **National Parks and Wildlife Service** (NPWS) staff alike. More than 1,000 count units (subsites) were visited during the 2026 census. A greater level of coverage increases our confidence in the results, so we'd like to thank you all again for your commitment to making this possible.

January was a cool, wet month and most counties experienced rainfall above their long-term average. Fortunately, the infamous Storm Chandra hit late in the month, on January 26th, so it's unlikely to have had an impact on the census.

While we cannot be certain at this stage, it looks as though the Whooper Swan population has slightly decreased in the Republic of Ireland following the sizeable

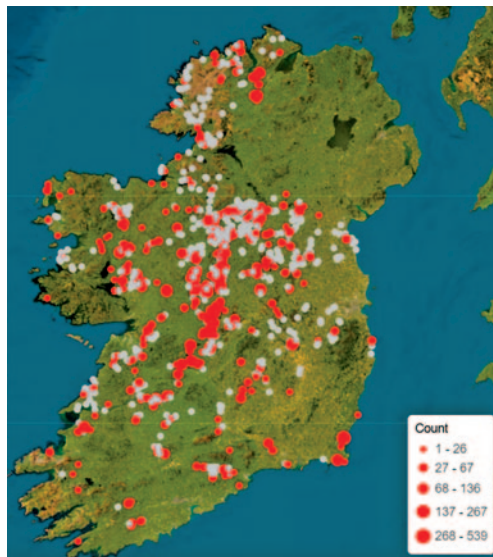
increase recorded between the 2015 and 2020 censuses. We are in the early stages of acquiring the flyway census totals; however, a minor decline would not be unexpected given the threats posed to wild bird populations in recent years by avian influenza.

Counties Roscommon, Mayo and Galway boasted the highest numbers of swans, whilst no swans were recorded in counties Carlow or Dublin.

As expected, swans heavily favoured improved pastures, natural permanent lakes, and turloughs (transient, seasonal lakes with improved pastures). These three habitat types made up about two-thirds of their total habitat usage during the census.

When we include the data from Northern Ireland, we will be able to see the full picture for the wintering swan population across the island of Ireland. Later down the line, the all-Ireland data will be combined with data from elsewhere, namely Iceland, Scotland, Wales and England, in order to assess the Icelandic-breeding flyway population.

As expected, the Bewick's Swan population has continued to decline – a total of just four Bewick's Swans was recorded during the census period. Two birds were recorded at Wexford Harbour and Slobs, down from 11 birds in the previous census. This site appears to represent their final stronghold in Ireland. In addition, single Bewick's Swans were recorded at two other sites, one in Westmeath and one in Roscommon. It is possible that this will be the last census in which these birds are recorded.



Coverage achieved during the International Swan Census.
Key: ● Swans present ● Swans absent



Purple Sandpiper Michael O'Clery

The Purple Sandpiper

By Helen Boland, I-WeBS Programme Manager



Of the wading birds that visit Ireland each winter the **Purple Sandpiper** *Calidris maritima* is probably one of the least noticed.

Despite their jazzy name suggesting something very colourful, Purple Sandpipers are camouflaged and covert for the most part, occurring in small numbers in Ireland and readily blending in with the rocky coastline they favour in winter.

But don't let their relative plainness fool you. They are one of the hardest waders that you will encounter on Irish shores with an exceptionally impressive migration story.

Purple Sandpipers have a breeding range across the Arctic, from Canada and Greenland westwards to Siberia, occurring further north than any other wader species. The Purple Sandpipers we see in Ireland in winter mostly originate from breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic and are characterised by slightly longer bills than those breeding further west across the Arctic region.

In winter, they forage on wave-swept, rocky coastlines and are adept at clinging to slippery rocks or the rock armour of harbours, waiting for the tide to recede. At lower stages of the tide, they are often seen in piles of algal wrack, probing for insects and larvae, or picking molluscs from rocks where the waves are breaking, with a brief flutter of their feathers to avoid a breaking wave subtly betraying their presence.

It is through the use of devices called

'geolocators' that the Canadian Arctic was established as the breeding grounds for the Purple Sandpipers wintering in Ireland and northern Scotland, with their spring departure from these locations taking place as late as May, staging in Iceland or Greenland on their way north.

At the other side of the breeding season, they arrive in Ireland between October and December, only beginning their southward migration from the Arctic when most other waders are already on their wintering grounds. It is this autumn migration that is remarkable, as the geolocation study showed they complete it in a single trans-Atlantic flight, without staging anywhere.* It also showed that

they complete this journey in about 2.5 days, meaning they travel at a speed of about 1,400 km per day. For a bird not much bigger in size or weight than a tennis ball this is quite something.

After their audacious migration they proceed to blend in with our rocky coastlines for the winter. Their effective camouflage, and the fact that they prefer rocky coastlines, means they get both overlooked and under-recorded during regular I-WeBS counts.

The all-Ireland population estimate for Purple Sandpiper is currently around 750 birds, with just over 500 of these estimated to occur in the Republic of Ireland, and a whopping 78% occurring on non-estuarine coastline. Estimating their population size was only made possible through using data from the coastal Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey to complement I-WeBS data.

With the fifth iteration of NEWS this winter comes an opportunity to refresh our ID skills for this species and to remind ourselves to seek them out every time we see suitable habitat. If you don't properly look in the right place you may not discover them.

Observing them is rewarding. Despite their seemingly undistinguished appearance they are a very attractive, surprisingly confiding and resilient little bird, full of action and living in a very dynamic coastal winter environment.

* Geolocation study – Summers, RW, Boland, H, Colhoun, K, Elkins, N, Etheridge, B, Foster, S, Fox, JW, Mackie, K, Quinn, LR, & Swann, RL (2014). Contrasting trans-Atlantic migratory routes of Nearctic Purple Sandpipers *Calidris maritima* associated with low-pressure systems in spring and winter. *Ardea* 102(2): 139–152.



Purple Sandpipers Jerry Cassidy



Ringed Plovers *Aisling Kinsella*

NEWS swings around for the fourth time

The fourth Coastal Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS) is scheduled for December 2026 and January 2027. **Aisling Kinsella** (I-WeBS National Coordinator) reports



The fourth coastal **Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey** or “NEWS IV” will take place in December and January of this I-WeBS season. The initial iteration of the survey, known then as the **Winter Shorebird Count**, took place during the winter of 1984/85 around Britain, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. Successive surveys, known as **NEWS**, were then extended to include the Republic of

Ireland, starting in the winter of 1997/98, followed by NEWS II in 2006/07 and NEWS III in 2015/16.

NEWS is an important complementary survey for I-WeBS. While I-WeBS provides excellent coverage of estuaries and inland wetlands, many habitats along Ireland’s open coastline fall outside its scope. Waterbirds that use rocky, sandy and shingle shores therefore require dedicated monitoring, particularly as these habitats make up around one-third of Ireland’s coastline. Species such as **Purple Sandpiper**, **Turnstone**, **Sanderling**, **Ringed Plover**, **Oystercatcher** and **Greenshank** occur disproportionately on non-estuarine coasts. To accurately assess the populations and distribution of these species, periodic surveys of these coastal habitats are essential.

Previous NEWS findings

During NEWS III in 2015/16 a total of 2,095 km of non-estuarine coastline across the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland [where it was coordinated separately, but identically, by the **British Trust for Ornithology** (BTO) in Northern Ireland] was surveyed, representing 63% of the total

all-Ireland non-estuarine coastline, an increase on the 1,694 km covered during NEWS II (51% of the total).

NEWS III recorded 110,061 birds of 72 species, compared to the 102,664 birds of 64 species recorded during NEWS II, likely a reflection of the increased coverage. Both NEWS II and NEWS III showed waders comprising nearly half of the total waterbirds recorded.

In 2006/07, **Oystercatcher** was the most numerous species recorded. It was overtaken in 2015/16 by **Herring Gull**, with numbers that had more than doubled since NEWS II. NEWS III also recorded ten additional waterbird species when compared



Greenshank *Dick Coombes*

Region	Non-estuarine coast length (km)		Total wildfowl		Wildfowl density (birds/km)		Total waders		Wader density (birds/km)	
	2006/07	2015/16	2006/07	2015/16	2006/07	2015/16	2006/07	2015/16	2006/07	2015/16
Northwest	310.4	414.6	3602	5209	11.6	12.6	4996	6911	16.1	16.7
West	504.2	583.7	2369	4095	4.7	7.0	11309	11006	22.4	18.9
Southwest	345.3	475.8	1748	2651	5.1	5.6	4629	6000	13.4	12.6
Southeast	103.4	123.8	857	811	8.3	6.6	3338	2513	32.3	20.3
East	166.7	151.6	7246	3031	43.5	20.0	13684	5857	82.1	38.6
Northeast	259.7/260.1*	330.8	1744	3853	6.7	11.6	18105	15031	69.6	45.4

Results from NEWS II (2006/07) and NEWS III (2015/16) showing the densities of wildfowl (including their allies) and waders within six coastal regions in Ireland. **Green** indicates an increase and **red** indicates a decrease between NEWS II and NEWS III.

*Stretches of coast counted for wildfowl and waders differed in Northern Ireland for NEWS II.

to NEWS II, including **Pink-footed Goose, Greenland White-fronted Goose and Woodcock**.

It is clear that non-estuarine coastal habitats continue to support a broad diversity of waterbirds and support substantial proportions of the national estimates of **divers, sea ducks, Cormorant, Grey Heron** and those waders mentioned above. Overall, the data collected via NEWS is vital for inputting to the population estimates of Irish wintering waterbirds.

Counts at low tide

The methodology for NEWS IV will remain largely the same as NEWS II and NEWS III. The entire coastline will be divided into hundreds of short, manageable sectors with the objective of surveying at least 50% of these in each coastal county. The fieldwork will be confined to the period between December 1st 2026 and January 31st 2027, and observers who choose to take

part will be asked to survey their chosen sectors of coast on one occasion within this timeframe. Unlike I-WeBS core counts that are conducted at or close to the high tide, the NEWS fieldwork is to be carried out around the low-tide period (3.5 hours either side of the low-tide time). Species offshore as well as on terrestrial areas along each sector will also be recorded.

Requests for coastal sectors

As with all previous NEWS, we will be synchronising the survey work with the UK and teaming up with the BTO to streamline the allocation of sectors and data submission process. To request a sector, you will need a **BTO account**. You can use an existing account if you already have one. We will be sending out communications with details on how exactly to register and submit data, so keep an eye out for an email from the I-WeBS Coordinator.



Dunlin (top left), Knot and Oystercatchers Colum Clarke



Rahasane Turlough, Co Galway / Pete Capsey

Twenty-eight years at Rahasane Turlough

I-WeBS volunteer counter **Pete Capsey** reminisces about his time counting waterbirds at one of the most important wetland sites in County Galway.



I moved to Galway from Bristol in 1998. One of the first things that I did was join the local BirdWatch Ireland branch. During the first meeting that I attended I

somehow ended up volunteering to take on the I-WeBS counts at Rahasane Turlough, not far from where I was living in east Galway.

Fast forward to April 2026 and I found myself moving once again, this time with my family to Ballisodare in County Sligo. After 28 years, my time as the I-WeBS counter at Rahasane Turlough had finally come to an end.

Ireland's largest turlough

Rahasane Turlough is the largest turlough remaining in Ireland, covering approximately 250 hectares. It is situated between Craughwell to the east and Kilcolgan to the west. The turlough is

owned by a committee of farmers, each of whom has grazing rights, but public access is allowed.

The turlough is comprised of two main basins and a small number of permanent pools, all of which connect when the turlough floods. The eastern end is a shallow basin, supporting large numbers of dabbling duck in winter. The western basin is deeper and is the preferred haunt of wintering **Whooper Swans**.

The Dunkellin River flows through the turlough, following an artificial channel to its confluence with the Kilcolgan River. Rahasane once formed the natural sink of the Dunkellin, and the original course of the river can be seen in late autumn and early winter, when it is often the first area to flood.

Internationally important

Rahasane Turlough is probably one of the most important inland sites in Galway for wetland birds, with thousands of ducks and waders present in winter when conditions are right. If water levels are too high, birds may move to Inner Galway Bay,

with **Greenland White-fronted Geese** and **Whooper Swans** moving to Creganna Marsh (south of Oranmore) or to the east side of Lower Lough Corrib to feed.

Rahasane is internationally important for the **Black-tailed Godwit** and the **Whooper Swan**. The trend in Black-tailed Godwit numbers has been one of the greatest success stories during my time counting at Rahasane, as numbers have risen from 75 to 2,500 – I should add that such a large flock of godwits is a spectacular sight.

In May 2012, I spotted one with coloured rings on the legs and sent the ring details to the international **Project Godwit**, who informed me that the bird had been ringed in the nest in Iceland in July 2005 and had been seen in Cork Harbour, the Netherlands and Portugal before turning up at Rahasane.

How swans have fared

Whooper Swan numbers have remained reasonably consistent, with numbers peaking at 183 during the 2008/2009 count season. Between 1984 and 1987,

three surveys recorded average numbers of 179, so it is encouraging to see that the species has continued to use Rahasane regularly for feeding and possibly roosting.

The same cannot be said of its close cousin, the **Bewick's Swan**. During the same surveys in the 1980s, the average count was 134, an internationally important number for this species. Unfortunately, the species has declined rapidly since then, with single figure flocks present on three occasions during the late 1990s and early 2000s. This decline has been replicated throughout the country, most likely due to climate change reducing how far west they need to migrate in winter due to warmer conditions, combined with low breeding success.

Goose highlight

The **Greenland White-fronted Goose** has been a regular winter visitor throughout most of my time at Rahasane, usually accompanied by small numbers of **Pink-footed Geese**. The surveys from the 1980s recorded an average of 59 birds. I recorded a peak of 175 birds during 1998/1999, my first season counting at Rahasane, and had an average of 80 birds across the 28 years.

In recent years, the Whitefront has been coming under pressure from feral **Greylag Geese**. The occasional wild Greylag would turn up with the Whitefronts, but a flock of up to 73 feral birds has been recorded over the past six seasons. It will be interesting to see if these feral birds end up displacing the Whitefronts from Rahasane.

Numbers of **Golden Plover** have plummeted since the 1980s, with an average count of 17,680 falling to an average of around 4,000 birds. Several factors may have contributed to this decline, including increased human activity and an increase in flooding during the autumn and winter. There are simply no areas that the plover can use for feeding and resting when water levels are extremely high.

Lapwing and **Dunlin** are two other species of wader that have shown a considerable fall in numbers here.

Ducks in freefall

Other wetland species regularly recorded at Rahasane have shown a decline in numbers since the 1980s. **Pochard**, in particular, have fallen dramatically, from an average of 356 to a peak count of only 12 birds. **Teal** numbers have also fallen from an average of 3,000 birds to an



Black-tailed Godwits Colum Clarke

average of 386. This is a pattern repeated in **Wigeon**, **Mallard**, **Shoveler** and **Pintail**.

Human activity is a primary problem at Rahasane. I have encountered hunters out in boats when the turlough has been flooded, horse riders riding through flocks of resting waders, and dog walkers throwing sticks into the water, all of which disturb the birds. People have also used the turlough as a rubbish dump for items such as white goods and tractor tyres.

A fond farewell

Over the years, I have been fortunate enough to meet lots of people through walks I have led at Rahasane. These walks have been for, among others, three national schools – which were great fun – the local branch of the **Irish Wildlife Trust** and the university in Galway.

I hoped that these walks would educate people about the turlough and its wildlife, but it feels as if I have only scratched the surface.

So, after 28 years of amazing birding, great fun and occasional heartbreak – a young **Peregrine** spooking flocks of **Golden Plover** during a count would break anyone's heart – my association with Rahasane has finally come to an end. When I attended that fateful BirdWatch Ireland branch meeting in 1998, I had no idea I would be surveying at Rahasane for such a long period of my life. I-WeBS and Rahasane have changed my life in a lot of ways – I even met my wife on one of the walks!

Many thanks to everyone at BirdWatch Ireland who has supported me over the years ... and here's to some interesting birding and surveying in Sligo!



Rahasane in winter Pete Capsey

I-WeBS Scheduled Count Dates 2026/27

East Coast & Inland Counties			South & West Coast Counties		
Weekend		High Tide (Sunday) Dublin ¹	Weekend		High Tide (Sunday) Cork Hbr ²
Sep	12 th -13 th	13:41	19 th -20 th		12:30
Oct	17 th -18 th *	17:34	24 th -25 th		16:40
Nov	14 th -15 th **	15:00	21 st -22 nd		15:20
Dec	12 th -13 th	13:55	19 th -20 th		13:45
Jan	09 th -10 th	13:00	16 th -17 th		11:45
Feb	13 th -14 th	16:45	20 th -21 st		17:55
Mar	13 th -14 th	15:25	20 th -21 st		16:50

¹ Based on high-tide time predicted for Dublin

² Based on high-tide time predicted for Cork Harbour

Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey IV

From December 1st 2026 to January 31st 2027

*Light-bellied Brent Goose Census

Weekend of October 17-18th 2026

**Icelandic Greylag & Pink-footed Goose Census

Weekend of November 14-15th

Here are the recommended dates for the 2026/2027 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.



Pink-footed Geese *Ronnie Martin*

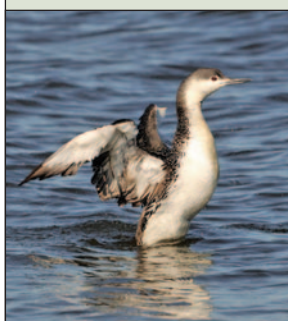
Deadline for submission of data

The deadline will remain the same each year, so please ensure all survey results are submitted by the **end of May**. You can submit your data online by visiting irishwetlandbirdssurvey.ie. We recommend that you enter your results immediately after you conduct your monthly counts.

Upcoming workshops

Both experienced and new counters are invited to join the I-WeBS team in person at one of the most rewarding days on the I-WeBS calendar. Registration for the workshops will be available soon so keep an eye out for an email from the I-WeBS coordinator.

Workshop type	Location	Date
Volunteer	Dungarvan, Co Waterford	October 25 th
Volunteer	Donegal	Date TBD
NPWS staff	Dundalk, Co Louth	November 2 nd
NPWS staff	Ballinacorney, Co Sligo	November 11 th



Red-throated Diver
John Fox

Have your photos featured

We are always looking for photographs of waterbirds and wetlands, as well as photographs of our dedicated bird counters conducting I-WeBS, for use in our media outputs. All photos will be credited when used. If you would like your photos to be featured, please email some of them to: iwebs@birdwatchireland.ie.

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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