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Birds in Central Ireland – 25 years of Mid-Shannon Bird Reports

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Most people are aware of birds around them. But birdwatchers notice them, put names on them and, when they can, visit places where they are likely to see the less common birds.

A smallish black and white bird with a needle-like bill lifted its implausibly long salmon-pink legs as it waded in a peaty pool at Boora. It was a rare **black-winged stilt**, unmistakable to any birdwatcher who had been browsing through a copy of *Collins Field Guide* since their teenage years. This is among the 1,208 instances of 164 bird species contained in the latest *Birds in Central Ireland - Mid-Shannon Bird Report*, the 6th edition since 1992, covering the years 2012-2016 and thereby reaching its twenty-fifth year.

A local Bird Report is an account of birds seen, where, when, by whom and how many. It is about birdwatching. The bird records have permanency in print so that future students of bird-life in the area do not have to rely on memories. It also contains articles of local bird interest, line drawings and photographs.

As all birdwatchers know, birdwatching is enjoyable and exciting, challenging and frustrating, sometimes scientific and even spiritual. Val Trodd produced the first book about the birds of this area called *Birds of the Brosnaland* (by which is meant Little Brosnaland) published by Co. Offaly V.E.C. in 1979. He added that birdwatching educates the mind and sharpens the perception. Over one hundred birdwatchers contributed information to this latest report.

I want this article to be an appreciation of all the birdwatchers that did the watching, noticing and above all *noting down* the birds they have seen and, furthermore, who responded to follow-up calls from the editor to dig deep into their notebooks. The birdwatchers' notebooks are the life-blood of a Bird Report. I have never been one for writing ordinary diaries but I have found no difficulty at all in keeping a bird notebook since 1994.

Leafing back I see I have written thirty words on a **glaucous gull** at Shannon Harbour on 5th April 1994, a very rare sight on the Shannon: “Very large white gull, no black, twice the size of accompanying black-headed gulls...slight light brown mottling on neck, shoulders and folded wings...” Five days later I had written “Female **blackbird** with food, early young to be fed.” The rare and the familiar — what goes into your bird notebook is what you think is worth remembering and writing down.

Around 1990, three things came together to give an impetus to start a Bird Report for this area. The first impetus was the building of a bird-hide on the Little Brosna — Ashton’s callow hide. This was sturdily built in 1988 overlooking a remote part of the callows. It was demolished by a storm in January 2014 and rebuilt in 2016. The hide has yielded, through birdwatchers’ combination of good luck and skill, very many interesting bird records, especially in winter and during migration.

Many of these birds would have gone unnoticed were it not for the hide, which shelters the birdwatcher from inclement weather and often allows a closer-than-usual view of a bird. For instance, a **spotted redshank** in its black summer plumage, a colour unique among wading birds, on its travels from North Africa to nest in the Arctic. But the view from the hide can be fickle. I have seen an expanse of winter floodwater grey beneath grey skies, empty of birds, and I have also seen an expansive palate of yellow, red and white flowers under a blue September sky.

The second impetus for the Bird Report was the setting up of Crank House in Banagher. Exciting times in Banagher and BirdWatch Ireland arrived there a couple of years later in 1990. This heralded almost three decades of **corncrake** and other ornithological research. Over the years a succession of professional ornithologists has been based in Crank House (some thankfully have been long term) and they have all provided not only many bird records but also professional encouragement to me in compiling these reports.

The third impetus was the beginning of the Lough Boora Parklands, now familiar but then a visionary project that provided almost from the start a series of, at first, unexpected bird records from keen-eyed Boora birdwatchers, which continues to this day. The records are

preserved in the Bird Reports. A **little stint**, a diminutive wading bird the size of a greenfinch, was the first among twenty-four wading bird species, long-distance travelers, seen at Boora to date.

J. A. Baker in *The Peregrine* (1967) says “the hardest thing of all to see is what is really there.” This is certainly true of birdwatching. There is no doubt that these reports have reaped the benefit of some very skilled birdwatchers *who saw what was really there*. How else would a single **green-winged teal**, a wanderer from America, be noticed among a mass of hundreds of dabbling **common teal** when the only clear difference is a thin vertical white stripe on the side of the former rather than a horizontal one on the latter?

Bird photography has undoubtedly become easier over the twenty-five years of the Bird Reports but the early editions were not without their arresting two-tone images: a rare **hoopoe** along the Bord na Móna railway line at Shannonbridge; a **treecreeper** clinging to a child’s hair. Later editions have colour plates: a perfect photographic portrait of a **redshank** at Boora; a **merlin** perched on an iconic yellow item of Bord na Móna machinery at Blackwater.



Redshank at Boora (Tom Egan)

A photograph, even a quick rushed attempt with an I-Phone, can be useful in persuading others that the unusual bird you have seen is indeed what you yourself knew it to be. I have an image here showing a large white blob over callows with electricity transformers behind and there is no doubt it is a **great white egret** flying past Shannonbridge power station.

Most birds we see within our local area do not stay there throughout the year. They are either moving through on passage or by accident, arriving here to nest in the summer or to escape harsh conditions in winter, or are young birds wandering around the country looking for a free nesting niche.

A very rare (and now endangered) **sociable plover** was seen with **lapwings** at Shannon Harbour in December 1998. It had accidentally flown west with lapwings from far-eastern Europe that winter instead of flying east to India, its normal destination; a **kestrel** ringed as a chick in a nest at Ardfert, Kerry in June 2012 was recaptured, and released, a few weeks later at Ballydangan, Ballinasloe.



Buzzard (Gordon D'Arcy)

There have been changes, ebbs and flows, in the bird-life of the area since the first Bird Report in 1996 and birdwatchers' observations embedded in these reports lend credence to these. The gradually diminishing sound of the **corncrake**, culminating in its extinction, is

perhaps the change most remembered and felt by local people. Over the twenty-five years the wild sound of **Greenland white-fronted geese** has been heard from fewer birds from fewer places, though it still stops you in your tracks when you hear it on the Little Brosna or the River Suck.

On the other hand, the exciting sight of a soaring **buzzard** in a blue and white sky has passed from an exceptional to a commonplace experience; the small white heron, the **little egret**, is no longer a surprise when seen, though still a delight. Some observations have a reassuring feel: a spectacular flock of over 5,000 **black-tailed godwits**, was witnessed on the Little Brosna in 1993 and a flock of similar number, and a similar spectacle, was again witnessed in 2012.

What will observers be reporting for future Mid-Shannon Bird Reports ? Undoubtedly the ebb and flow of bird-life will have continued. There is good reason to believe that the **great spotted woodpecker** will have taken hold of our Midlands woodland and be adding its resonant drumming to Dawn Chorus days. And birdwatchers will have to look and listen twice before reporting that they have heard a **sedge warbler**, it may really have been a **reed warbler**, which is also expected to spread to the Midlands.

On the other hand, will the next generation of Midlands birdwatchers take it for granted that they are not expected to hear a **curlew** on the bogs, or **yellowhammers** in the hedgerows ? One thing is certain. To minimize the ebbing away of bird species from the area and to facilitate the flows of new bird species into the area we need to keep in good condition all the wonderful variety of habitats that we are lucky enough to have, and that we are responsible for and that we have space to create in the Midlands.

Finally, I want to once again thank all the birdwatchers who have contributed to the Bird Reports since 1992 and to encourage new and existing birdwatchers to keep a **bird notebook**. Entries can be as scanty or as detailed as you please, so long as the minimum is written: what bird was seen, where, when, how many and by whom ? The birdwatching memories resurrected for you in the future will be well worth reading, believe me, and someone will be interested in your notes for future Mid-Shannon Bird Reports.

Birds in Central Ireland - 6th Mid-Shannon Bird Report (2012-2016) was compiled and edited by Stephen Heery and published by Birdwatch Ireland in 2018. Copies may be obtained by sending €10.00 (8+2p&p) to: Stephen Heery, Lawrencetown, Ballinasloe, Co. Galway, giving your postal address.

