

Offaly County Council Biodiversity Project – Case Studies

1. Citizen Science

Positive collaborations between the Offaly Heritage Office, the National Biodiversity Data Centre, ENGOs and specialist groups has increased citizen science activities and resulted in greater biodiversity recording in Offaly.

Following the publication by Offaly County Council of the “State of the Wild” by John Feehan in 2007 and the establishment of the Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) in the same year, Offaly Heritage Office has supported citizen science initiatives by promoting national species surveys and helped upskill local volunteers through, providing survey and identification materials, hosting training events and workshops together with the NBDC and under the Offaly Naturalists Field Club annual programme.

Offaly County Council has commissioned a number ENGOs and specialist groups on ecological + species, such as BirdWatch Ireland on County Swift Surveys in 2017 and 2023, surveys which depended on local knowledge and input from citizen scientists.

Further to this the development of a moth trap loan scheme by Offaly County Council and the formation of a network of citizen science moth trappers in the county has led to a huge increase in the number of moths and other insect species being recorded in Offaly, including many new species to the county being identified.

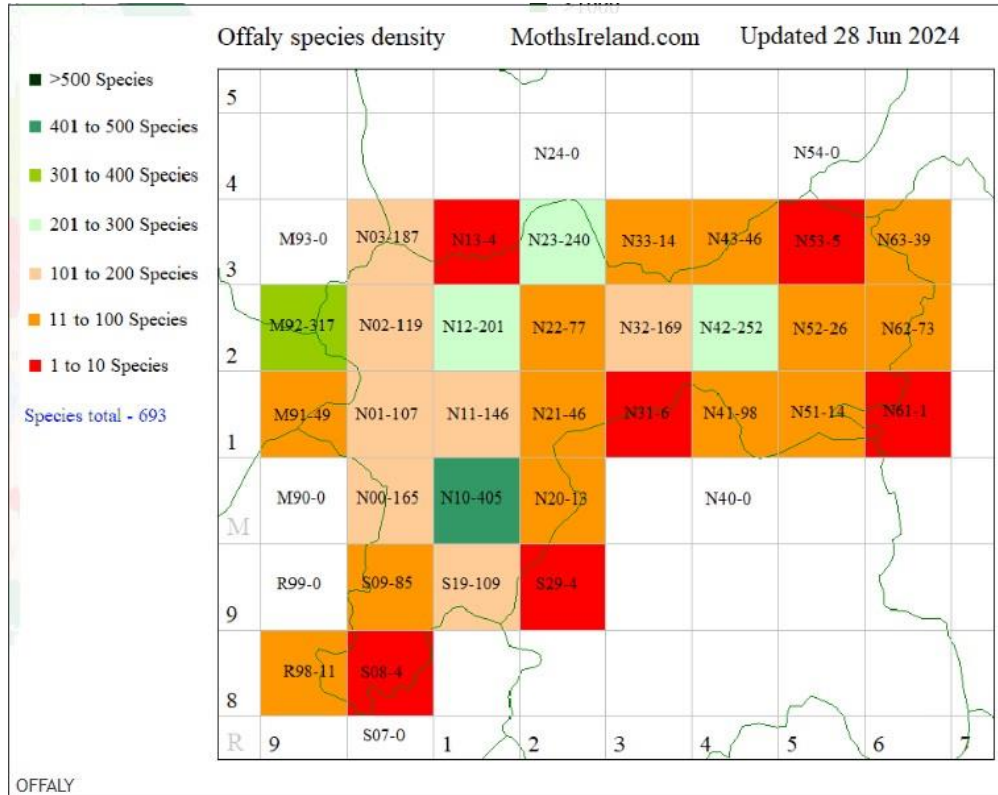


Image: Moths Ireland Offaly 10km species density map – mothsireland.com

2. Barn Owl Project

The Barn Owl project is a great example of collaboration between an ENGO with BirdWatch Ireland, the County Council, citizen scientists and landowners. A comprehensive county survey was carried out first which assessed the current number of active nests, while also identifying suitable nesting sites which can be assisted with a nest box.

With funding from the Local Biodiversity Action Fund (LBAF) administered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Offaly County Council have been able to support the provision of Barn Owl nest boxes and the monitoring of Barn Owl broods throughout the county.

The funding has enabled BirdWatch Ireland together with local expert volunteers and landowners to choose and install specialised nest boxes in suitable safe locations on properties throughout the county. Following uptake of the boxes by owls, identified by monitoring by landowners and local volunteers, sites are revisited in the nesting season. Barn Owl nestlings are ringed under licence and biometrics recorded which allows conservationists to track populations locally and feed into national census figures and conservation efforts.

In recent years and reflecting the national trend, Barn Owl populations in Offaly are on the rise with ecological reasons, improved awareness and conservation efforts being cited as the main drivers of the increase.



Photo: Barn Owl Chick in hand – *Ricky Whelan*

3. Tullamore Wetlands

This project shows the importance of collaboration across departments in Offaly County Council and the positive impact across the board of developing a wetland project which has resulted in improved water quality, a new green area to walk in Tullamore, and increased habitats for biodiversity.

Tullamore Wetlands is a new c4 acre habitat developed by Offaly County Council in recent years and is located on the edge of Tullamore, off the R443 across from Tullamore Fire Station. Originally developed to improve the water quality and to enhance the environmental and amenity value of the area, the benefits of this new habitat are many. In a cross-departmental approach between the Climate Action Team the Biodiversity Officer and Municipal District colleagues, Tullamore Wetland is managed to maximise the benefit to biodiversity.

The wetland habitats include areas of open water suitable for roosting and foraging waterbirds, whilst the emergent vegetation such as the reeds give cover for nesting birds including, Mallard, Coot and Sedge Warblers. The network of pools and shallow water areas host hawking dragonflies and damselflies and provide suitable habitat for aquatic invertebrates such as water beetles that form an important part of the overall wetland ecosystem.

Some other features include a large and diverse wildflower assemblage derived from natural regrowth and planting of native wildflower species such as Yellow-rattle, clover and Ox-eyed Daisy together with many more. This diverse sward is an important food source for pollinating insects from early spring, through to the autumn and supports a massive range of bumblebee, butterfly and moth species as well as a myriad of other insect life.

Finally, hundreds of native tree species have been planted on site to increase tree cover which has many advantages in terms of climate action and biodiversity.



Photo: Tullamore Wetland – *Tom O’Hanlon*

4. Syngesfield Demesne

Syngesfield Demesne is a c16 acre site which forms part of the original Syngesfield Estate at the edge of Birr town. Much of the remaining parkland is in the ownership of Offaly County Council and is managed to protect its demesne parkland features, such as the veteran Oak and Horse Chestnut trees and the vista looking towards the ancient castle ruins from the perspective of the original house which is in private ownership; Syngesfield is also managed for biodiversity and public access. It contains a number of important habitats including the Camcor River which forms its north-eastern boundary and associated riparian habitats. There is a ribbon of mature riparian woodland that separates the river from the extensive grass and parkland area. This grassland is being managed in cooperation with local graziers to improve the sward diversity through a low grazing density.

It is envisaged that the grassland will improve with the diversity of wildflower species increasing over time with the sympathetic grazing pattern and the policy to not allow nitrogen fertilisers or other artificial inputs on the land. This will benefit the site botanically and will create a positive impact for pollinating species and other invertebrates further benefitting other wildlife such as the birds found locally, including breeding Stonechat.

Worlds collide at the western boundary of Syngesfield, where a large industrial area was developed over recent decades. This has been partially screened by an embankment and a newly planted native hedgerow which will mature over time to give further separation between sites. There are plans in place to create a wetland area on this boundary to manage surface run-off from the associated neighbouring hard surfaced areas. The wetland will act as a buffer collecting and filtering surface run-off before the water finds its way to new wildlife ponds. These ponds will create a new aquatic habitat introducing new areas for amphibians, aquatic invertebrates and plants to flourish.



Photo: Aerial photo – Paul Moore