



Protecting Ireland's
wild birds and
their habitats



Why Birds Count

Policy and Advocacy Priorities
BirdWatch Ireland





Setting the Scene

Policy and Advocacy Priorities

There are many threats facing Ireland's wildlife and countryside that require urgent action. We believe it is now more important than ever that our natural environment is taken into account and protected. Many birds have been, and continue to be, seriously threatened by changes in our landscapes and seascapes that adversely affect their habitats and endanger wider biodiversity.

Birds count in their own right, and the health of our bird populations provides a way of knowing whether our natural environment is properly protected and whether development is sustainable. Birds, and the habitats they rely on, are crucial components of our environment and also provide a network on which people and all of our flora and fauna depend.

At a time of unprecedented economic growth, our shared responsibility to safeguard our natural environment urgently needs to be addressed through the provision of resources, by engaging people and by taking action in an organised manner. We look forward to working with all stakeholders to help secure an environmentally sustainable future for Ireland.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oran O'Sullivan'.

Oran O'Sullivan, CEO, BirdWatch Ireland, 2008

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
1 Introduction: Protecting Wild Birds and Their Habitats	3
Wild Birds: Making Social and Economic Sense	
Irish Global Biodiversity: Halting the Loss	
2 Building on Achievements for Birds	7
Networks for Birds	
Management and Monitoring	
3 Sustainable Management of Land and Sea	10
Protecting against Invasive Species	
Safeguarding Our Seas	
Wetlands: A Precious Watery Edge	
Farming and Wildlife	
Upgrading the Uplands	
Providing Wilder Woods	
Dealing with Climate Change	
4 Delivering Bird Conservation	17
A Strong Legal Framework	
Providing Adequate Resources	
Enabling Others to Deliver	

Cover photograph (main): Greenland White-fronted Geese at Ashton's Callow, Co Tipperary (Padraig Kavanagh; inset by John Carey).

Cover photographs (panels): On the East Coast Nature Reserve, Blackditch, Co Wicklow (Oran O'Sullivan); Fulmar (Lars Soerink); Hen Harrier (Daniele Occhiato). *Photograph on this page:* Common Tern (Clive Timmons).



Introduction

WE ALL DEPEND ON OUR natural environment and must find ways of protecting it while also providing a basis for social and economic wellbeing. To make a difference, our politicians need to grasp the opportunity and address national and international obligations to protect wildlife and habitats. This document highlights the main areas of concern for wild bird conservation and puts BirdWatch Ireland’s work into wider context. It will be used in our advocacy work, and it provides a framework for developing policy. We are developing detailed policies that target conservation issues, including those outlined in this document, and which identify solutions and targets. Policy and advocacy needs to continue developing in order to preempt and respond to the changing pressures on, and new opportunities provided by, wild birds and our wider natural environment.

While policy continually develops, many principles that are core to our policy work stay the same.

Some core principles that guide our work are:

- Transparent and informed decision-making is better for everyone, and individual decisions can make a big difference.
- Birds and wider biodiversity deserve and need protection in their own right, and offer solutions to some of the most serious threats to sustainable development.
- Addressing the needs of our natural environment goes beyond administrative or sectoral, social, political, geographical and economic boundaries.
- Birds and biodiversity are undervalued. Truly sustainable development must have the natural environment at its core.
- Engaging people through proper consultation and partnership is crucial, allowing information sharing, raising awareness and allowing people to make a difference.
- Strategic approaches help to identify integrated solutions and help to avoid future problems.
- The health of our natural environment, including that of bird populations and habitats, is an indicator of whether human activity is sustainable.
- Transparency and access to information are basic requirements for making progress in a democratic manner.
- Public benefit needs to be delivered from public money.
- Sustained commitment and resources from individuals and from all sectors will deliver positive results for our natural environment as well as significant public benefits.
- The natural environment contributes to everyone’s quality of life.

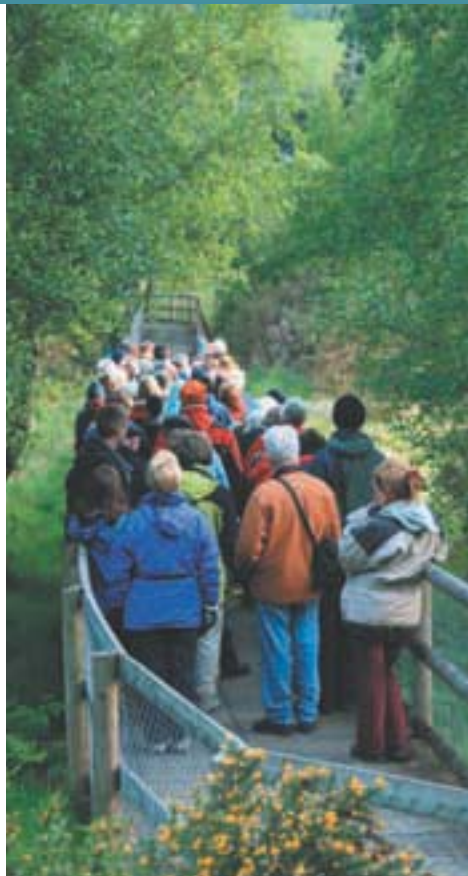
Top left: Jay (Terry Flanagan). Top right: Puffin Island, Co Kerry (Lars Soerink). Below left: Bullfinch (Daragh Owens). Below right: Ringed Plovers and Dunlins (Clive Timmons).





Protecting wild birds and their habitats

BIRDWATCH IRELAND is the largest conservation organisation in Ireland. Established in 1968, it currently has over 14,000 members and a network of over 20 branches nationwide. Many members are active volunteers in our survey and monitoring work. Our aim is to conserve wild birds and their habitats. We own and manage a nationwide network of reserves that protect threatened birds and the habitats they rely on. We are actively involved in research and education and, through policy and advocacy work, we act to influence others who have the ability and power to protect and enhance the living world for future generations. Much of our work depends on volunteers and on our branches who are actively involved in survey, education and awareness-raising initiatives and are most familiar with local conservation issues. We take part in a number of



Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) forums, such as the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN), Environmental (Ecological) NGOs Core Funding Ltd (EENGO), Working and Educating for Biodiversity (WEB) and the Irish Uplands Forum (IUF).

One of our objectives is to build on existing partnerships with NGOs, with Government departments, the European Commission and farming organisations, and to establish new partnerships with other sectors. Working in partnership provides us with opportunities to share experience, target resources, and to progress common conservation objectives.

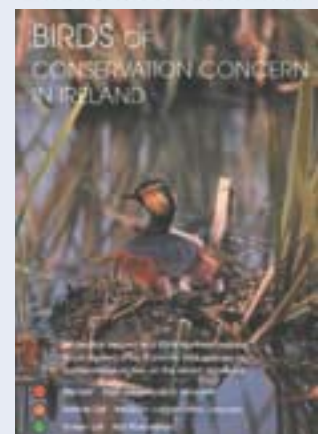
Top left: Kilcoole Marshes SPA, Co Wicklow (Oran O'Sullivan). *Top right:* Data collection (Lars Soerink). *Left:* Dawn chorus watch, Glendalough, Co Wicklow (Oran O'Sullivan).

All-Ireland and global partnerships for birds

BirdWatch Ireland is the Republic of Ireland partner of BirdLife International, a partnership of over 100 bird conservation organisations across the globe. We are involved in actively influencing global conservation measures for wild birds. Our expertise informs European and global priorities for conservation action and policy development. As a global and European partnership, BirdLife International influences decision-making processes through lobbying and production of robust information and policy material.

We also work in partnership with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in Northern Ireland to take an all-Ireland approach to conserving priority species through:

- Identifying priorities for conservation and policy actions, such as through our joint policy document *Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland* (BoCCI);
- Coordinating submissions on planning proposals with potential to damage important areas for birds, especially sites along or near the border;
- Identifying advocacy opportunities that span both sides of the border; and
- Sharing experience in project work and conservation issues such as Roseate Tern management, the work of the Irish Rare Breeding Birds Panel and the Annual Joint All-Ireland Conference on Bird Conservation.



- High conservation concern
- Medium conservation concern
- Not threatened



Protecting wild birds and their habitats

Wild birds: making social and economic sense

THE VALUE OF wildlife is often hard to quantify, but there is little doubt that wild birds and their habitats contribute to economic growth and social wellbeing in the following ways:

- Green space that is rich in wildlife provides valuable recreational areas for people, promotes outdoor activity and provides opportunities for education.
- Wild birds and their habitats are an important part of Ireland's landscape and of Ireland's identity, providing a basis for tourism and outdoor activities. Outdoor recreation and wildlife tourism are increasingly important motivations for visitors to choose to come to Ireland, supporting communities and helping to



diversify economic activities in a sustainable way.

- Many important bird habitats provide ecosystem services. For example, the value of wetlands in improving water quality, and retaining water to reduce flooding risk, is now being recognised, as is the role of trees, woodlands and hedgerows as windbreaks and for noise reduction along roads.

Birds indicate the condition of our environment by reflecting the presence of other forms of life, habitat quality and pollution levels.

Top left: Recreation in the hills (Tim Orr).

Top right: Upper Lake, Glendalough, Co Wicklow (www.johngriffinphotography.ie).

Left: Coot on nest (Oran O'Sullivan).

BirdWatch Ireland reserves

Important connections between education, conservation management and a healthy environment for people and wildlife can be demonstrated through our reserves. Our East Coast Nature Reserve at Newcastle, Co Wicklow, is a typical example of a fragile wetland complex that has suffered from drainage and degradation. The ongoing restoration of priority habitats on this reserve will provide ideal conditions for wetland birds of particular conservation concern such as Whooper Swan, Greenland White-

fronted Goose and Kingfisher. We are developing education and recreation opportunities for members of the public and local communities, aimed at raising awareness of the importance of protected areas and providing resources to encourage people to become involved in conservation. By developing our reserves, we can provide opportunities for all to learn about biodiversity and sustainability.

Below: East Coast Nature Reserve (National Parks and Wildlife Service)





Protecting wild birds and their habitats

Irish global biodiversity: halting the loss

IRELAND'S WILD BIRDS are important in a European and global context because our lands, waterways and coastal areas support a wide variety of resident and visiting birds. They support species shared with other countries across the globe, some of which are known to carry out extreme migrations between Ireland and other countries and continents. Manx Shearwaters breed in Ireland and migrate to Brazil and Argentina, and Arctic Terns breed in Ireland and travel to Antarctica. Many of our actions as a nation have consequences for biodiversity around the world.

The most recent breeding species to become extinct in Ireland was the Corn Bunting. There are fears that without urgent action, the Corncrake, so long an intrinsic part of our heritage, may soon follow suit.

There are currently 25 red-listed birds (of highest conservation concern), and 94 more on the amber list – this accounts for more than 50% of Irish bird species. The population declines suffered by these birds, and those at risk at a European level, need to be addressed through policy changes, targeted management and active protection.

The Irish Government is obliged to ensure that there is no loss of biodiversity; this was ratified at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit Convention of Biological Diversity, and is detailed in Government policy (the National Biodiversity Plan) and in the European Biodiversity Action Plan.



Extinct in Ireland

The decline of the Corn Bunting since the 1960s was in the main caused by reductions in crop diversity due to farming specialisation, declines in the area of spring cereals and over-winter stubbles, the loss of hedgerows and other non-crop habitats, the switch from hay to silage and increased use of fertilisers and pesticides.

Left: Corn Bunting (Ronnie Martin).

A new National Biodiversity Plan is being developed. It must make sure to specify national targets for priority habitats and species. This plan should also incorporate principles of environmental protection into all sectors, to help achieve a truly sustainable approach to our terrestrial and marine environments.

By protecting birds and their habitats we are also helping Ireland's wider biodiversity through the protection of entire ecological systems, spanning a wide range of Irish landscapes and seascapes.

Top left: Arctic Tern (Ken Kinsella).
Top right: Golden Plovers (Clive Timmons).

What is biodiversity?

Biodiversity (short for biological diversity) means the variety of life, the range of living things in the world from the smallest insect to the largest whale. It takes into account the interdependency and interactions between plants and animals, as well as their genetic diversity. It also includes natural processes which are needed to establish and develop habitats as well as populations of plants and animals.

The biggest threats to wild birds and biodiversity in Ireland are **habitat loss**, **habitat fragmentation** and **invasive species**.

Right: Whitethroat (Mike Brown).





2

Building on achievements for birds

A SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGE for the Irish Government is to make up for lost time, and to urgently put measures in place that will work to protect and enhance our natural environment. To provide meaningful change, we need to put back much of what has been lost, bolster habitat fragments and create large-scale places for wildlife and for people to enjoy.

In order to ensure we have a secure network of sites protecting Irish and international wildlife for generations to come, there is a need to build on the existing suite of designations that protect the requirements of birds of conservation concern. Unless proper management and monitoring of protected sites is carried out, the designation process is undermined. Clear targets and objectives are also needed to help protect our most vulnerable birds. Similarly, protected species must be monitored regularly to ensure that any significant changes are detected and that management can be tailored. If Ireland is to meet its international obligations, then long-term commitment of resources by the Government is required.

Wild birds and their habitats are afforded protection through national and European legislation, and international agreements and conventions. Amongst other obligations, the Irish Government is required to:

- Maintain a favourable conservation status for all wild bird species naturally occurring in Ireland (EU Birds Directive).

- Protect listed bird species and the habitats they rely on for breeding and feeding, in the wider countryside and through the designation of sites as Special Protection Areas (SPAs). This adds to the network of designated 'Natura 2000' sites, which Ireland has an obligation to protect and monitor (EU Birds Directive and EU Habitats Directive).
- Make special provision for all regularly occurring migratory bird species on land and at sea with regard to their breeding, moulting, wintering and staging posts along migration routes (EU Birds Directive, Bonn Convention).
- Make special provision for wetlands and wetland birds (EU Birds Directive, Ramsar Convention, African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement, Wetlands International).
- Halt the decline of biodiversity on local, national and global scales (Rio Convention on Biological Diversity, Berne Convention).

Native plants and animals form specific communities and habitats. When kept intact, these ecological communities are most valuable for birds and biodiversity, and provide valuable spaces for people.

Top left: Broadlough Marshes SPA, Co Wicklow (Oran O'Sullivan). *Top right:* Whimbrel (Tom Shevlin). *Below:* Newly-created wetland scrape at Kilcoole Nature Reserve, Co Wicklow (Oran O'Sullivan).





Building on achievements for birds

Networks for birds



THE 'NATURA 2000' network of designated sites is comprised of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for birds and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for habitats. This network forms the backbone of nature protection in Europe and provides a system on land and at sea for the longer-term protection of species and habitats. There is an urgent need to develop this network with additional European and national designations, as well as with wider countryside measures, to help protect Ireland's natural heritage.

The total number of European designated sites in Ireland amounts to approximately 11% (10,000km²) of our land area. The wide range of birds covered by these designations includes wintering waterbirds, breeding seabirds, Corncrake and Chough, and recently six sites have been proposed for Hen Harrier. However, some important sites and habitats for bird species remain without designation.

For many birds, appropriate management measures need to be introduced into the wider countryside. Additional designations and extended SPA boundaries are required for Corncrake, Golden Plover and Chough, and for the foraging and staging needs of many seabirds. To date, no marine SPAs have been designated, which is worrying as many bird species rely

on our marine environment. Support from Government departments with an interest in maritime issues is required to identify the most important bird areas at sea.

National designations including Natural Heritage Areas, Nature Reserves and Refuges for Fauna need better recognition, and to play a bigger part in this network by protecting species such as Twite, and habitats such as wetlands and woodlands.

The bird habitats in Ireland facing the greatest threat are wetlands; coastal habitats such as dunes, intertidal areas and machair; as well as bogs and upland heath. Many SACs include these habitats, which are important for breeding, feeding and roosting by birds. The proper protection of these habitats will provide additional protection for many other important bird species.

Many bird species rely on areas that go beyond the boundaries of designated sites. Management measures for low-density or very

dispersed species such as breeding Lapwing, Curlew and Snipe need to be brought into the wider countryside, as well as those for wintering waterbird species using wet grasslands for feeding, and for woodland species including Nightjar and Woodcock, and for upland species such as Red Grouse.

By introducing wider countryside management and protecting European, national and local interests, a robust network of protection for our most important and threatened wildlife can be created. Without such a network, or the provision of adequate resources for relevant authorities, or a strong legislative framework to protect the needs of birds and wider biodiversity on land and at sea, Ireland will continue to fail to meet obligations to protect its natural environment.

Top left: Sandymount Strand/Tolka Estuary SPA, Dublin Bay (*Siobhán Egan*). *Top right:* Lowland wet grassland, Bullock Island, Co Offaly (*Brian Caffrey*). *Below:* Golden Plover flock on farmland (*Brian Caffrey*).



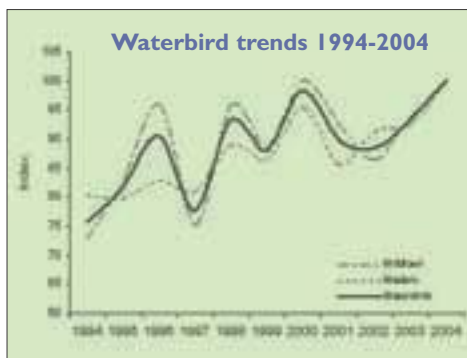
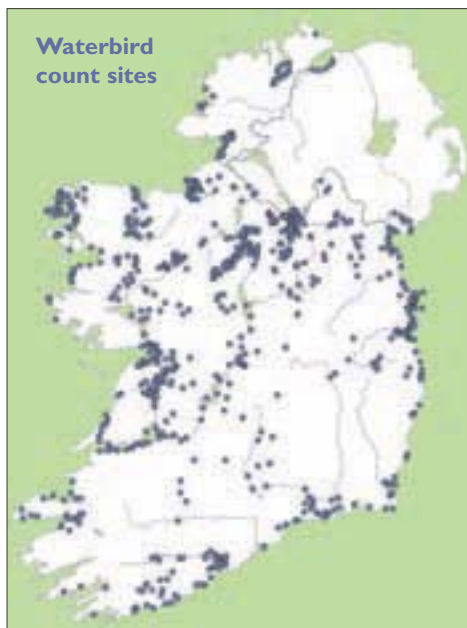


Building on achievements for birds

Management and monitoring

BIRDWATCH IRELAND has considerable expertise in the area of research and monitoring over the last 40 years, and has built up a significant amount of data that is used to direct conservation action in Ireland. This information helps to identify trends, informs conservation management decisions and guides our policy work.

Some of our national surveys, such as the Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS) and the Countryside Bird Survey (CBS), feed into global datasets and allow ongoing assessments of the trends, patterns and migrations of birds. Many surveys depend on the assistance of volunteers and on the professional staff of partner and funding organisations such as National Parks and Wildlife Service, Government departments and the Heritage Council. Many also require coordinated efforts, such as working in collaboration with other bird conservation organisations including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Northern Ireland and the British Trust for Ornithology. This knowledge needs to be built on so that the needs of priority bird



species are determined, especially for those species which occur in low densities or which have both terrestrial and marine requirements. This information helps when assessing the condition of species and habitats, and should determine whether designations and management measures are in fact protecting both birds and the habitats they rely on. It should also help identify problems that may occur due to habitat deterioration, pollution and disturbance.

The development and implementation of management plans that ensure site protection, particularly for sites which are under most amenity, developmental or commercial pressure, such as many of our wetlands and coastal sites, is now needed. Similarly, the production of species action plans and habitat action plans, with the active engagement of stakeholders, along with resources for their implementation and review, is also needed.

Top left: Ringing a Lapwing chick for research (Siobhán Egan). *Top right:* Monitoring Corncrake habitat in the Shannon Callows (Anita Donaghy).

Irish Wetland Bird Survey

The Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS) monitors non-breeding waterbirds in Ireland. It takes place every winter, with more than 300 people participating at over 400 wetland sites throughout the country. As well as monitoring waterbird population sizes and distribution, the results are used to identify sites and species that require protection, and to help determine whether sites qualify as being internationally important and worthy of designation within the SPA network. This work is done in partnership with the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Right: Counting coastal birds (Barry Brogan).





Sustainable management of land and sea

3

THE APPROACH TO sustainability in Ireland urgently needs to incorporate the natural environment to ensure truly sustainable development. The use of our natural resources, such as for aquaculture, wind power generation and recreation, needs to avoid damage to species and habitats.

Best practice models need to be developed for land-use such as agriculture, forestry and biofuel production, as well as for types of rural and urban spatial planning, to ensure that protection and benefit measures for wildlife are included.

Opportunities for large-scale habitat protection and enhancement need to be integrated into policies that are changing our landscapes and seascapes so that they also deliver for biodiversity and public benefit. Similarly, the use of formal assessments such as Strategic Environmental Assessment, and coherent approaches such as Integrated Coastal Zone Management, need to be adopted to ensure sustainable development.

Top left: Puffin Island headland, Co Kerry (Lars Soerink). Top right: Mosaic land-use in the Comeraghs, Co Waterford (Kevin Higgins). Right: Wind turbines, Carnsore Point, Co Wexford (Oran O'Sullivan).



Protecting against invasive species

The introduction of plants and animals into the wild, either accidentally or intentionally, can have serious implications for birds and wildlife in general.

The spread of invasive plant and animal species is one of the main causes of biodiversity loss, as they compete with and prey on more vulnerable native species.

In particular, there is a need for the management and control of animals which pose a threat to ground-nesting birds. Mink and rats need to be controlled on islands and in coastal locations where they feed on the eggs, chicks and adults of ground-nesting birds such as Puffins and terns.

Plant species which threaten bird habitats include *Rhododendron ponticum* in our semi-natural oak woodlands and on some peatlands. This species' fast growth and dense stands prevent native vegetation from establishing and reduces species diversity. There is a loss of feed plants, invertebrates and avian diversity and abundance.

The wide range of invasive species on land, particularly along our waterways, and also at sea, demands a strategic approach to management and monitoring in order to avoid worsening impacts on our native wildlife.

Right: Mink with Eider duckling (Brian Caffrey).





Sustainable management of land and sea

Safeguarding our seas

THE SEAS AROUND Ireland are among our greatest natural assets and are perhaps our last great living wilderness areas, being ten times greater in area than our landmass. Many thousands of seabirds, including Puffins and terns, use our shores to breed, often in spectacular colonies like those on Rockabill or the Skelligs. Ireland's seabirds are an important part of world heritage in their own right and also because we support birds which undertake fantastic migrations, such as Kittiwakes raised in the Irish Sea that migrate to west Greenland in their first year, and Sandwich Terns that migrate to South Africa.

Considering the importance of our seas, the protection of the marine environment is wholly inadequate. Our seabirds face many threats to their survival, notably from fisheries through the loss of food, the destruction of the seabed (which

supports some of their preferred prey), through the increase in inshore and offshore development, as well as through entanglement in marine litter and impacts from pollutants such as oil and chemicals. Although the feeding and chick-rearing needs of seabirds are afforded special protection under the EU Birds Directive, our seas have no legislative protection, and no offshore marine sites have been designated for important birds. Thus, many seabirds and their habitats remain under significant threat.

The limited information on the use of our seas by seabirds makes it difficult to know how they are faring away from their breeding colonies, and how activities at sea affect them and their habitats. Identification of the most important areas for seabirds, as well as effective ways to protect them, is necessary so that informed decisions can be made

about the use of our seas. Improved legislation regulating and monitoring offshore developments such as wind farms and aquaculture is urgently required.

Ireland holds the largest colony of Roseate Terns in Europe. Rockabill off the Dublin coast supports 800 pairs of this charismatic species.

Top left: Roseate Terns on Rockabill, Co Dublin (Lars Soerink).

One of the most familiar of seabirds, the Herring Gull, has recently been red-listed as a result of the loss of about 90% of the breeding population in recent decades.

Top centre: Herring Gull (Mike Brown).

The Blasket Islands off the Kerry coast support the largest breeding concentration of European Storm-petrels in the world. This tiny seabird makes epic migrations to the south Atlantic every year.

Top right: Blasket Islands, Co Kerry (Brian Caffrey).

Seabirds and global warming

The North Sea has become significantly warmer in recent years. This may be causing changes in the distribution and availability of certain prey fish, such as sandeels. Seabird breeding success has crashed in recent years, apparently due to food shortages. In some instances, pipefish abundance has increased; these long, bony fish are given to chicks that are unable to swallow them. Pipefish are appearing more frequently at seabird colonies in the Irish Sea and in Co Kerry, on Great Skellig, where many Puffins failed to fledge young in 2007.

Right: Puffins (Tom Shevlin).





Sustainable management of land and sea

Wetlands: a precious watery edge

ESTUARIES, WET GRASSLANDS, fringe vegetation along open pools and lakes, and peatlands – these are all wetlands which support a wealth of wildlife. Wetlands and the birds they support are a global priority, protected by international agreements and by the European Union principle that there should be no net loss of wetlands.

These important bird habitats also provide benefits to people, to our environmental health and to the economy by filtering out pollution, thereby providing clean water, supporting recreation and reducing flooding by retaining water in catchments. The basic human requirement for water can be delivered without causing damage to these fragile ecosystems, which support such a rich and diverse flora and fauna. Wild birds need to be taken into consideration in managing this shared resource. As a member of SWAN, the Sustainable

Water Network, BirdWatch Ireland works to help secure favourable ecological status for waterways and sustainable floodplain management through Catchment Management Planning, an approach that is required under the Water Framework Directive. This provides an opportunity to secure long-term survival of water attenuation areas, such as wetlands, and to help protect important birds, including breeding waders and wintering waterbirds.

There is a need to shift emphasis from land drainage and hard coastal defences to the sustainable management of watercourses and coastlines by, for example, retaining wetlands and increasing their role in flood prevention. The use of wetlands in such a way, and the use of ecosystem approaches to using our natural resources, such as river system management, need to be developed, along with better

knowledge of the extent and condition of the range of habitats involved.

Amenity, pollution and developmental pressures threaten many wetlands. Infilling and drainage of agricultural wet grassland, and increased inshore activities such as shellfish harvesting, are also of concern.

A review of legislation to ensure sustainable management of inshore areas is needed, along with the use of Integrated Coastal Zone Management approaches, which can take into account the needs of many stakeholders, including wildlife interests.

Top left: Lapwings (Clive Timmons).

Top right: Annagh Marsh, Belmullet peninsula, Co Mayo (Dave Suddaby).

Dundalk Bay: a key wetland

Dundalk Bay in County Louth is among the most important sites in the country for wintering waterbirds. It supports internationally important concentrations of five species and nationally important numbers of a further 15 species. Developmental pressures include substantial development of the shoreline, which will result in the loss of significant roosting habitat, and increased recreational pressure, which can cause disturbance to birds using the area. Additional pressures on the site include increased shellfish collection and proposed offshore and inshore developments.

Right: Dundalk Bay, Co Louth (Brefni Martin).





Sustainable management of land and sea

Farming and wildlife

WITH SO MUCH of Ireland's land area used for agriculture, it is not surprising that much of our natural heritage relies on farmland. With changes in agriculture, many once-familiar birds, such as Barn Owl, Corncrake and Skylark, have become increasingly threatened. During the last forty years there have been declines in a wide range of farmland birds, plants and insects, especially on arable land. Unfortunately, the Corn Bunting has become extinct in Ireland, and for other seed-eating farmland birds, such as Yellowhammer and Skylark, we have seen large declines.

Similarly, drainage, re-seeding, intensive fertiliser use and chemical inputs have destroyed much of Ireland's wet and species-rich grasslands, often replaced with a biodiversity-poor rye-grass monoculture. Declines in many of our lowland grassland birds, such as Corncrake, Lapwing and Curlew, are associated with this change.

Projects that target management for these birds, and engage rural communities, are an important part

of our work. Financial incentives encouraging farmers to manage their land in a more environmentally friendly manner, ensuring that farming continues, have been provided through these projects. This approach needs to be delivered more widely to be effective, and depends on a rural economy that includes farming as a key element.

BirdWatch Ireland works with farmers, rural communities, farming representative organisations, agricultural planners, BirdLife International and the Department of Agriculture to ensure that conservation of farmland wildlife is a priority for sustainable farming. It is important that changes in the use of agricultural land, such as for biofuel production, also take natural heritage assets into account.

Ireland's agri-environment scheme, the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS), is now in its fourth instalment, with funding due to run until 2011. With 70,000 farms expected to participate, it has the potential to bring environmental benefits to farmland throughout Ireland. We have made submissions suggesting ways to develop this scheme, and we welcome it as a way to protect and enhance bird habitats and provide public benefit.

Additional benefits for birds include tailored measures for Corncrake and habitat measures for seed-eating passerines such as Yellowhammer, as well as a range of actions of general benefit for farmland wildlife, including nature corridors, riparian zones and nest boxes.

Much still needs to be done, however, to protect farmland birds and other wildlife, and to identify the reasons behind biodiversity declines. Novel approaches are required to develop sustainable communities and a flourishing rural economy that also provides environmental benefits for people and wildlife.

Over-intensification and abandonment adversely affect farmland biodiversity. Our EU-LIFE funded project, at Termoncarragh Lake SPA in County Mayo, protects endangered birds through active management of Natura 2000 sites and other locations on Mayo's Mullet peninsula. Our work on breeding waders, Choughs and through the Corncrake Conservation Project demonstrates habitat management and engages farmers who can help our most threatened birds.

Top left: Farmer at work (Anita Donaghy).

Top right: Early vegetative cover plot for Corncrakes on Tory Island, Co Donegal (Brian Caffrey).

Below left: Corncrake (Brian Caffrey).

Redshank is now red-listed in the 2008 update of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BoCCI) as, like Lapwing and Curlew, this species has suffered serious declines.

Below: Redshank (Brian Caffrey).





Sustainable management of land and sea

Upgrading the uplands



practices, need to be addressed. While some measures already exist to help upland habitats, such as the Commonage Framework Plan, many large degraded areas still exist, and the populations and breeding requirements of some important birds are not known. Existing initiatives must be delivered more widely and species-specific measures are needed, along with support and training for upland land managers, to restore many upland areas. Resources are required to enforce agreed destocking measures, to monitor upland biodiversity, and to deliver wildlife benefits as part of the sustainable use of our uplands.

The interests of recreational users and land managers, as well as biodiversity, need to be addressed through active stakeholder participation. BirdWatch Ireland is a member of the Irish Uplands Forum, and we believe Ireland's uplands need to be managed in an informed and coherent manner in order to protect birds and their habitat requirements, and secure their long-term sustainable use.

Top left: Glenveagh, Co Donegal (Lorcan O'Toole). **Top right:** Dunlin (Dave Hall).
Left: Red Grouse (Richard Mills).
Below: Golden Plover (Ken Kinsella).

HEATHER MOORLAND, rocky outcrops, peatland, waterbodies and the beginnings of watercourses make up much of our uplands. These habitats, together with mosaic land management practices, characterise some of our wilder landscapes and support some of Ireland's most important breeding birds, including Hen Harrier, Ring Ouzel, Red-throated Diver, Red Grouse and Skylark. The changing demands on our uplands, including management for sheep grazing, forestry, access for outdoor recreation and new forms of development such as wind power generation, all create significant challenges for their sustainable use.

A number of land management issues, including inappropriate afforestation of upland areas and the decline in heather moorland due to grazing regimes and poor burning





Sustainable management of land and sea

Providing wilder woods

PLANTED FORESTRY covers approximately 10% of our land area, a figure set to increase under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. The majority of forestry is made up of non-native conifers, although measures for broadleaf planting and biodiversity exist through the Forestry Biodiversity Guidelines. Forestry standards, and the biodiversity value of forestry plantations and our remaining semi-natural woodlands, need to be enhanced. Additional resources to improve woodland condition through new initiatives and existing schemes, such as the Forest Environment Protection Scheme and the Native Woodland Scheme, need to be provided.

The establishment of a complete national woodland inventory, the integration of biodiversity into forestry policy, and the improvement of management of woodlands, all need to take place to protect important birds such as Nightjar, Woodcock and Spotted Flycatcher.

The adverse effects of forestry on open ground habitats and their associated species need to be avoided. Of particular concern are birds such as Hen Harrier, Merlin and Twite. Upland moorland, peatland and lowland wetlands and marginal or rough grazing areas used by breeding waders such as Lapwing and Curlew are also affected. The obligation to replant felled sites on such habitats is not appropriate, and incentives to avoid planting these areas need to be developed. The assessment and identification of measures to avoid adverse impacts of felling is required



on site and catchment scales, and should include erosion control and water quality measures as well as consideration of biodiversity requirements.

Through the development of management processes that integrate biodiversity and the needs of other stakeholders, including public and private landowners and recreational users, and the use of forestry for biomass and carbon sequestration, Irish woodlands can deliver significant public benefit.

The ecological health of our woodlands, both plantation and semi-natural, needs to be improved by active management for important birds.

Top left: Broadleaved woodland (Oran O'Sullivan). *Top right:* Nightjar (Tom Shevlin). *Left:* Scots Pine stand (Siobhán Egan).

Habitat creation in clearfelled areas should provide benefits for birds and be developed along with measures for pocket woodlands such as riparian woodlands and remnant woodland stands.

Below: Clearfelled area (Siobhán Egan).





Sustainable management of land and sea

Dealing with climate change

CLIMATE CHANGE is one of the most serious threats to people and wildlife worldwide. It is estimated that up to a third of land-based plant and animal species could face extinction within 50 years as a result of climate change. In Ireland, nine of the warmest years on record have occurred in the last ten years, and the rate of warming is growing faster than expected. This is partially due to increases in greenhouse gases produced when we burn carbon fuels such as coal, oil and peat for industry, transport and energy. Climate change effects are predicted to include more floods and storms and higher sea levels, and will have impacts on people and wildlife across the world – affecting our economy and our daily lives.

Energy efficiency is one of the most important responses needed to climate change – ambitious and binding targets are needed for all sectors. Everyone has a role to play: all individuals, all sectors, as well as the Government. Reducing energy consumption in our day-to-day operations, as well as through innovative projects, requires investment and commitment.

Ireland has the potential to become a world leader in the development of alternative energy sources such as wind and wave power. This would reduce our reliance on carbon fuels, create jobs and provide a cleaner environment. It is important, however, that changes in land use, such as for biofuel production, do not compromise biodiversity interests and that they result in truly sustainable solutions.

Our natural environment should be an important part of the Government's strategy for dealing with climate change, as there is a significant role for natural systems. In particular, sustainable flood management policy should include the use of wetlands (for retaining water) and coastal habitats such as estuaries (to buffer flooding). It is important to provide initiatives for large-scale habitat retention and creation, and create ecological networks to deal with the many impacts of climate change, while also making space for wildlife and offsetting predicted habitat losses.

We can expect that the distributions of migratory birds will change, with a predicted shift north and east in response to warmer conditions. Birds with specific requirements for coastal habitats may be especially vulnerable, such as Little Tern and Ringed Plover, which nest on shingle beaches, and wintering waders such as Purple Sandpiper and Bar-tailed Godwit. There will be

gains, too, with the influx of species such as Little Egret and Reed Warbler likely as a result of warmer conditions.

Monitoring species nationally and globally contributes to our knowledge of the changes that are occurring. It is important that resources for research, monitoring and biodiversity conservation initiatives become part of Government strategy for dealing with climate change.

A wide range of habitats have a role in helping to 'climate-proof' communities by retaining water (wetlands) and providing coastal defences such as dunes, estuaries and lagoons.

Top left: Shannon callows in flood (Brian Caffrey).

Birds are important indicators of changes in our environment. One climate change winner is the Little Egret (pictured).

Top right: Little Egret (Brian Caffrey).
Below: Light-bellied Brent Geese (David Dillon).





4 Delivering bird conservation

THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEGISLATION, we believe priority species and the habitats they rely on can be afforded the protection that they now urgently need. Supporting a legal framework for protection with adequate resources, and enabling others to deliver for birds and wider biodiversity, is part of the solution to providing a better environment for people and for wildlife.

A strong legal framework

National legislation that protects birds and all wildlife needs to be updated, to properly transpose European directives and to include the protection of landscapes and seascapes. Better protection mechanisms for birds are needed through improved licensing measures, better management initiatives, and new marine legislation that also brings marine developments into a proper planning control framework. There is a need for:

- The clearer definition of responsibilities of competent authorities (agencies and Government departments) with regard to the natural environment, and the provision of natural heritage advice to ensure the full integration of biodiversity issues.
- Integration of birds and biodiversity protection measures into Government policies and legislation controlling natural resource management.
- Improved environmental assessment and performance in the use of our natural resources on land and at sea, such as the control of shellfish collection and the “industrial” fishing of species such as sandeels and sprats for fertilisers, chicken feed and farmed salmon food.
- Clarification of marine planning that will also allow public participation.

Providing adequate resources

A significant commitment by the Government is required to address the needs of our natural environment and meet obligations to protect wild birds and their habitat requirements. Resources are required to develop legislation and management measures, and to integrate the natural environment into a truly sustainable approach to Ireland’s future. There is a need for:

- Sufficient staff resources to allow the full implementation and enforcement of national legislation and European directives by Government departments, agencies and local authorities. In particular, increased funding and capacity to improve the effectiveness of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.
- Forums for inter-agency and interdepartmental exchanges, and active engagement with NGOs with expertise in the ecological sector. The stability and continuity of the resources available is important for fostering active participation and a culture of buying in for the longer term.



Enabling others to deliver

Proper protection of our environment needs the support of the public and the active involvement of all sectors. The natural environment needs to be highlighted as being important in everyone’s life and in our ability to deal with wider environmental issues such as climate change, flooding, water quality and quality of life. To achieve full understanding and truly sustainable growth of the country, there is a need for:

- Environmental education and awareness-raising for people of all ages, developed through resources for local authorities, local Biodiversity Action Plans, communities, schools and lifelong learning initiatives.
- Increased awareness of, and guidance on, environmental legislation, including European Union directives and the recent Freedom of Environment Information Regulations and Environment Liability Regulations.
- Measures and resources to engage NGO forums and community groups, and to allow active participation in a broader definition of public consultation.

Top left: Working with the farming community (Catherine Keena).

Top right: Government Buildings (Siobhán Egan). *Left:* The Custom House.



Blue Tit (*Eric Doggett*)



BirdWatch Ireland is Ireland's largest wildlife NGO with over 14,000 members and 20 branches nationwide. We form part of BirdLife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

BirdWatch Ireland Headquarters

1 Springmount, Newtownmountkennedy,
Co Wicklow, Ireland Tel: 01 281 9878
E-mail: info@birdwatchireland.ie

www.birdwatchireland.ie

Registered charity no 5703

2008