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# BirdWatch Ireland

## *Annual Report 2011*

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# Introduction

## Introduction from the Chairman

2011 was arguably one of our toughest ever. The financial crisis suffered in all sectors also impacted hard upon bird conservation and, in particular, on funding derived from state programmes and projects. Reductions in staff complement were inevitable with the shrinking scale of our funding and in some cases the termination of certain projects. Despite funding restrictions, staff have demonstrated considerable resilience and commitment in continuing to effectively develop and deliver core and new work, much of which was funded from a range of alternative sources or delivered at very low cost. The significant financial loss in 2011 reflects on the one hand the tougher financial climate to which we've had to respond, but also the planned strategic investment in senior management and membership development which are critical to the longer term development and effectiveness of BirdWatch Ireland.

Conservation challenges were abundant throughout the year and we continued to work hard on conservation action for Corncrakes, seabirds and waterbirds through our conservation projects, on our own reserves and in the wider countryside. Work in 2011 included the start of a major project to act on the declines in breeding Curlew numbers, new research on breeding Merlins and Kestrels and the culmination of three years of Action Planning for birds, seeing plans produced for all of Ireland's priority birds. Of course much of this work is dependent upon the support and assistance from volunteers and members and this generosity is gratefully received. The financial support of our dedicated membership enables all of this work to proceed, often by enabling us to lever in funding from complementary sources and that support is vital along with that of our funding partners. In 2011 our membership complement grew to a new peak of 14,540 individuals which is testament to the growing level of support and enthusiasm for birds and nature conservation in Ireland.

*John Cromie, Chairman*

<b>1,200,000</b>	the number of bird records registered to the Bird Atlas for the Republic of Ireland
<b>217,445</b>	hits or visits to our website in 2011
<b>1,125</b>	Roseate Tern nests on Rockabill
<b>500%</b>	increase in Blackcaps recorded on the Countryside Bird Survey between 1998 and 2010
<b>86%</b>	decrease in Stonechats recorded on the Countryside Bird Survey between 2009 and 2010
<b>1,515</b>	the number of new members who joined us in 2011
<b>41,900</b>	volunteer hours given to BirdWatch Ireland in 2011
<b>29</b>	the number of active branches of BirdWatch Ireland in 2011
<b>4,241</b>	Facebook fans in 2011
<b>13,838</b>	E-zine subscribers in 2011

# Contents

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## Report format

### *Sections & headings*

- 3. Policy**  
Advocating messages and working in partnerships
- 5. Media & Communications**  
Promoting our work to the widest base possible
- 6. Science, Surveys & Monitoring**  
Making informed decisions based on scientific findings
- 13. Species & Habitat Conservation**  
Monitoring and tracking changes in our bird populations
- 17. People**  
Working with staff and volunteers to maximise our membership
- 19. Reserves**  
Special places to watch nature
- 20. Finance**  
Extract from the financial statements



*Greenland White-fronted Geese (Michael Murphy)*

# Policy

## Policy

### *Advocating messages and working in partnerships*

#### **Multi-stakeholder bird action plans**

This three year project partially funded by the Department of Environment Heritage and Local Government/Department of Environment Communities and Local Government involved over 40 different stakeholders in delivering 10 plans for Irish birds that need actions to be taken across all sectors of Irish society. With a number of plans launched by Government Ministers, the next step will be most crucial – ensuring the required action actually takes place. The Bird Group Actions Plans are available on our website, [www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie).



**Farming and fishing become even bigger national and European issues** In October 2011 the European Commission published its proposal for the reform of the EU **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**. The CAP uses 40% of the EU Budget and has massive implications for the management of agricultural land across all member states. The commission promised a 'greening' of the CAP which would see the CAP rewarding farmers who deliver public goods; however the proposal has been very disappointing as it mostly fails to live up to the promise. BirdWatch Ireland has been actively liaising with a range of other organisations and the Government, and will continue to do so throughout 2012, with the ambition to make sure that the CAP spending delivers as much as possible for birds, biodiversity, and the active farmers that deliver most for sustainable management of farmed landscapes.

In July 2011 the European Commission published its package for the review of the EU **Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)**. As well as providing the framework for determining fishing quotas and providing financial assistance to reduce damaging fisheries activities, the proposal was meant to ensure there is an end to practices that are resulting in declining fish stocks, environmental damage and loss of livelihoods in coastal areas. BirdWatch Ireland has been active as part of the Ocean 2012 coalition of fishing interests, NGOs and recreational groups, amongst others, to ensure the new CFP delivers for the marine environment. For more on our work through the Ocean 2012 coalition see [www.ocean2012.com](http://www.ocean2012.com).

#### **Meeting future energy needs and ensuring biodiversity is protected**

BirdWatch Ireland contributed to a BirdLife International Report '*Meeting Europe's Renewable Energy Targets In Harmony with Nature*' which was published in November. We then progressed advocacy and project development work to develop bird sensitivity mapping for Ireland, one of the key good practice exercises carried out in other member states which supports positive consideration of birds in planning for renewable energy development.

#### **Working with the new government, agencies, NGOs and the private sector**

BirdWatch Ireland has been actively engaging with sectors both through the Species Action Planning Project as well as through addressing sector-specific issues. Developing working relationships with Mountaineering Ireland, Bord na Móna, the IFA, Eirgrid, Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland and our newly elected TDs and Senators were key aspects of our work in 2011. We continued to be active in the Irish Environment Network, and in Working and Educating for Biodiversity (WEB), and have developed a joint work programme with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Northern

# Policy

Ireland. Members of staff have continued to represent the Environmental Pillar at the National Economic and Social Committee and the European Economic and Social Committee, as well as on the National Ramsar Committee and Biodiversity Forum.

## **Casework and submissions**

BirdWatch Ireland continues to rely heavily on its members, branches and the general public to be the 'eyes and ears' on the ground to protect our most important sites and species. With increased use of our 'Damage Alert Form' and reports of increased incidences of poisoned birds of prey, illegal harvesting of shellfish and erosion of upland areas for example, this will become an even more important aspect of our work in 2012. Planning related casework included submissions to aquaculture licences, wind energy and port developments. National submissions included those on the Framework for Sustainable Development in Ireland, pre-budget submission, fur farming and the Forest Service Protocol for Hen Harrier in Forest Management.



*Hen Harrier (Declan Roche)*

BirdWatch Ireland has actively engaged in the Forest Service's development of procedures for the appropriate assessment of forest management activities in relation to protected populations of Hen Harriers. The procedure addresses legal requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives. These require that consideration is given to the potential impacts of plans and projects in Natura 2000 sites (SPAs and SACs), either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, on the conservation interests of the site.

We have been pressing for the full consideration of nesting and foraging habitat requirements, availability of prey species, and the effects of habitat loss and disturbance. We have also called for management plans for the Hen Harrier SPAs that address the cyclical nature of short rotation forestry and ensure that sufficient suitable breeding and foraging habitat is available for Hen Harriers across the life cycle of forest rotation.

## **Addressing Ireland's environmental credibility**

Ireland's environmental credibility has been highlighted over the course of the last year with a new political desire to 'clear the slate' of environmental infringements before the Irish Presidency of the EU in 2013. BirdWatch Ireland remains active in addressing the profound failings found against Ireland in the European Court of Justice ruling against Ireland in 2007. In 2011, new legislation transposing the EU Birds and Habitats Directives came into play which we welcome, although it remains to be seen how effective it will be. Additionally, guidelines and legislation relating to the loss of wetlands were produced, but again the effectiveness of this development remains to be tested. While the designation of Special Protection Areas for wild birds has progressed significantly over 2011, the lack of proactive management of sites remains a significant concern coming into 2012.

## **Our role as a BirdLife International Partner – Policy work**

BirdWatch Ireland has been active on the Task Forces for Agriculture and for the Birds and Habitats Directives. The Task Forces have developed BirdLife positions on Management Plans for SPAs, Marine IBAs, developing Conservation Objectives, the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020, as well as aspects of CAP reform and High Nature Value Farming. The BirdLife partnership provides a very valuable expertise base and policy development forum for the partnership of bird conservation NGOs.

# Media

## Media and Communication

*Promoting our work to the widest base possible*

Media and communication coverage of BirdWatch Ireland continues to grow in both traditional and new media outlets.

### Websites and online communications

Our main website, [www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie) attracted an increase in traffic over 2010:

Website hits: 217,445 visits by 145,313 unique visitors (an increase from 205,885 visits by 134,501 by unique visitors in 2010).

We are also actively involved in four more websites:

[www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net)

[www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net)

[www.springalive.net](http://www.springalive.net), and

[www.irbc.ie](http://www.irbc.ie)

and our branches maintain a further 13 sites.

Facebook page statistics:

From weekly Facebook

insight reports we measure

not merely the number of fans who 'like' our page

(4,241 at the end of 2011, up

from 2,086 at the start of 2011) but also our weekly 'reach', number of posts, and quantity of post views and shares which are much better indicators of success.



*Niall Hatch appearing on TV3's The Morning Show.*

Monthly E-zine: the total subscriber list reached 13,838 by the end of 2011, up from 10,000 in 2010.

### Traditional Media Coverage in 2011

The organisation now receives media enquiries and coverage on a daily basis across television and radio networks as well as national and regional newspapers and on an increasing number of news websites and blogs.

# Surveys

## Science, Surveys and Monitoring

### *Monitoring and tracking changes in our bird populations*

#### **The Bird Atlas 2007-2011**

The Bird Atlas 2007-2011 is a joint project to map all of Ireland and Britain's birds during both the winter and the breeding season. It is a working partnership between BirdWatch Ireland, the British Trust for Ornithology and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. It will allow us to assess changes in bird distributions since previous breeding atlases in 1968-72 and 1988-91, and since the last winter atlas of the early 1980s. By the end of 2011 over 2,450 volunteers had registered to take part in the project in the Republic of Ireland.

The fieldwork period concluded in 2011 with the completion of the final breeding season of fieldwork. By the end of the year an impressive 1.2 million bird records were submitted in the Republic of Ireland. The number of Timed Tetrad Visits completed across Britain and Ireland equates to over 810,000 kilometers walked, the same as hiking around the equator 20 times.

The Atlas coordinator continued to deliver a series of talks around the country during 2011, providing a 'sneak preview' of the Atlas maps and also encouraging volunteers to get involved in other BirdWatch Ireland bird surveys. Towards the end of the year the validation process got underway, helped out by a number of volunteers across the country. The process of loading datasets to the Atlas database also started, with many tens of thousands of records from surveys such as CBS, I-WeBS and GBS all contributing valuable records to the Atlas.

#### **Countryside Bird Survey (CBS)**

The CBS is carried out between April and June every year and has been running since 1998. It aims to monitor population changes in breeding countryside birds in the Republic of Ireland. It is a joint project of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and BirdWatch Ireland. In 2011, almost 200 observers took part, covering 295 squares, with coverage best in the eastern regions. Analyses of trends for the period 1998 to 2010 were undertaken. Out of 53 species for which trends were analysed, 17 increased and 13 declined, with 23 species remaining stable. The cold winter of 2009/10 had an impact on several residents, and most showed a downturn in trends between 2009 and 2010. The impact of the cold winter was most notable for Stonechat and Meadow Pipit.



*Stonechat (Ray Egan)*

#### **Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS)**

In partnership with the National Parks & Wildlife Service, the Irish Wetland Bird Survey continued to be the primary tool for monitoring wintering waterbirds in Ireland, fulfilling its objectives to estimate waterbird population sizes, determine trends, and to identify important sites for waterbirds in Ireland. The scheme entered its 18th winter season in 2011. Since the scheme began in the Republic of Ireland in 1994 regular counts of wetland sites across the country have been carried out and over 80 wetlands have been designated as Special Protection Areas under the EU Birds Directive based on data collated about wintering waterbirds.

There are currently over 320 participants in the survey, including skilled volunteer observers and staff of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. A paper presenting the results of the 2009/10 winter season

# Surveys

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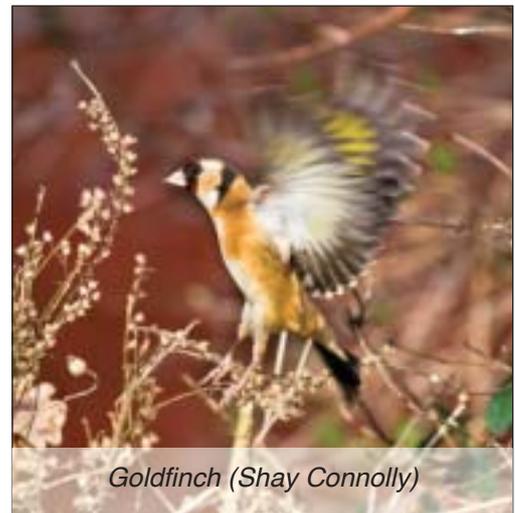
was prepared and appears in the most recent *Irish Birds* (Vol 9 Number 2), reporting that 253 sites were covered, with 48 internationally important sites identified. The I-WeBS newsletter was circulated as usual to counters and the content of a species report covering the seasons from 2002/03 to 2008/09 was finalised and is now being prepared for publication.

In addition to regular I-WeBS counts, a one-day aerial survey was trialled with the intention of trying to achieve this every year so that annual data from a sample of the full suite of sites covered during the full survey - which takes place once every 5 years - could be obtained. On 24th March 2011, the west coast islands from Galway to Donegal, as well as some key mainland sites, were surveyed from the air by NPWS and the I-WeBS Office, with a total of 5,820 Barnacle Geese recorded.

The I-WeBS Office organised and ran an I-WeBS workshop on November 26th 2011 in Oranmore in Galway, with 48 people taking part. It was a full day event, comprising an indoor set of talks given by the I-WeBS Office, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency reporting on WeBS, and Ralph Sheppard, site co-ordinator of Lough Swilly, and a group exercise involving all participants before an outing to Rahasane Turlough.

## **The Garden Bird Survey**

The 2010/11 survey began with snowfalls, as early as the end of November. The month of December was one of the coldest on record but the weather improved thereafter. Much of the bird activity peaked in late December, coinciding with the hardest weather: thus Redwings and Fieldfares moved into gardens to avail of berries but some species such as the diminutive Wren, declined in numbers through the winter period. In contrast, Goldfinches and Blackcaps continue to show up as positive movers in this survey: Goldfinches entered the top ten list, now occurring in 85% of gardens surveyed, quite a dramatic shift as they were outside the top twenty in early years of this survey.



*Goldfinch (Shay Connolly)*

The survey demonstrates that everyone can contribute to science and our knowledge of birds in gardens and in the wider countryside.

## **BirdTrack**

BirdTrack, a partnership between the BTO, the RSPB, BirdWatch Ireland and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, looks at migration movements and distributions of birds throughout Britain and Ireland. BirdTrack provides facilities for observers to store and manage their own personal records as well as using these to support species conservation at local, regional, national and international scales.

During 2011 a total of 126 observers submitted 29,035 bird records to BirdTrack in the Republic of Ireland. With the conclusion of Bird Atlas fieldwork in 2011 it is planned to capitalise on the observer momentum established through the Atlas and grow the number of observers taking part in BirdTrack into the future.

## **Barn Owls**

A Barn Owl research and monitoring programme was initiated in late 2005. The extensive body of work conducted to date provides a template for the other single species raptor work as well as wider raptor monitoring within the Raptor Conservation Project, which has expanded significantly in recent years.

# Surveys

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Due to a large network of volunteers, comprehensive monitoring of the Barn Owl population has expanded each year since its initiation, increasing our knowledge of the population and facilitating meaningful data on the status and conservation requirements of the species.

Intensive survey work revealed a total of 137 active sites throughout the country, with the highest densities located in the south-west. Of all sites monitored in 2010, over 85% remained active into 2011, which is the highest annual occupancy rate recorded by the project to date. A breeding success rate of over 90% in pairs monitored in 2011 also gave cause for optimism, being much higher than in previous years. Brood sizes and fledging success were also positive in the context of comparable data. A brood of five chicks had never been recorded through the project prior to 2011, yet three broods of five were documented in 2011! Chicks were ringed at 53 nests, which brings the total number of Barn Owls ringed over the life of the project to over 420. These efforts have also provided significant insights into survival and dispersal, with 34 recoveries and re-traps to date. In 2011 the number of Barn Owl nest boxes installed across the country and registered through the project exceeded 230, which demonstrates the phenomenal efforts and good will of volunteers, landowners and the general public towards Barn Owls.

Ground-breaking research into the impacts of rodenticides on Irish Barn Owls was also conducted in 2011, thanks to support from the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and the Marine. Toxicology analysis was carried out on 69 Barn Owl carcasses, which revealed substantial secondary exposure to these toxins. Although worrying, the findings represent the first comprehensive assessment of rodenticide poisoning in a predatory species in Ireland and as such provides the long required basis from which to proceed to address this issue.

## **Kestrels**

Although the Kestrel is one of our most abundant and widespread raptors, previous research in Ireland has been sparse, and our knowledge of their ecology and status is therefore limited. This was the second year of the Kestrel research and monitoring efforts under the Raptor Conservation Project which aims to rectify this situation. This work saw a continuation and expansion of the aspects initiated in 2010, which included population monitoring, survey work, assessments of nesting ecology, site selection and diet.

The monitoring efforts were primarily focused in western counties, where, with significant input from NPWS staff as well as a network of volunteers, over 70 Kestrel territories were located in 2011. Monitoring efforts and nest visits were increased on 2010 and in total 85 chicks were ringed from 23 broods, with breeding success assessed at a further 28 sites. As in 2010, a good breeding success rate was recorded among pairs monitored, with a similar fledging success (3.8) for successful pairs as documented in 2010. One of the most interesting findings of the work of the ringing work relates to a bird which was previously ringed through the project in Kerry in 2010 and which subsequently turned up over 700km away in France in early 2011, providing previously unknown information on the dispersal patterns of our birds.

The monitoring efforts also provided excellent insights on the nesting ecology and requirements of Kestrels, confirming the versatility of the species. Nests were recorded in a impressive diversity of sites, from a range of man-made structures to rocky outcrops, sea cliffs, quarries, hollow cavities and old corvid nests in trees. The early stages of a Kestrel nest box scheme also took root in 2011, three specific areas were defined for this work, which include Connemara, areas of Kerry and Cork and also West Offaly. A number of boxes were installed in the latter stages of 2011 and this work will continue in future years to benefit the population and facilitate monitoring. Although Kestrels have taken up

# Surveys

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residence in numerous Barn Owl boxes, the first successful Kestrel nest box registered through the project was recorded in 2011. This box which fledged five young was installed by the West Kerry Branch in a barn in Dingle; amazingly there is also an active Barn Owl nest box in the same barn, meaning at one stage during the summer there were 13 raptors sharing the same small building!

Collaboration with WIT also saw advances in Kestrel pellet analysis methods through DNA techniques. Over 200 pellets were analysed using DNA and conventional pellet analysis, which re-enforced the importance of introduced small mammals in the Kestrel diet, and one of the primary objectives of the project going forward will be to effectively determine the effects of these species on Kestrel ecology and future status.

## **Merlin**

Results from site monitoring indicate that Merlin breeding success in 2011 was significantly lower than that previously recorded for stable or increasing Merlin populations. Productivity values of 0.7-1.3 fledglings per breeding attempt for both 2010 and 2011 are in the range of those recorded for declining populations. However, this low breeding success and productivity could be a short-term effect of adverse winter conditions, resulting in reduced availability of important passerine prey species.

Research on the use of tape lures and decoys to detect breeding Merlin highlighted the discreet nature of Irish populations. In total 14 trials were carried out at sites where breeding attempts were confirmed, with only 28.6% of trials eliciting a response from resident Merlin. These responses were generally inconspicuous, consisting of short exploratory flights with no vocalisations recorded. Publications on this aspect, as well as the pilot survey and dietary work were featured in the 2011 edition of *Irish Birds*. During the latter stages of 2011, survey work was also conducted to identify suitable sites for nest baskets for Merlin, with future plans to implement such a scheme in Connemara. The next steps towards determining the status and conservation requirements of Merlin will be an expansion of monitoring and research specifically in Connemara, which is likely to be one of the strongholds for the species.



*Merlin (John Fox)*

## **Impact of Cormorant predation on selected fisheries**

This study was funded by Inland Fisheries Ireland, the objective of which was to investigate the real and perceived impacts of Cormorant predation on salmonids at defined study sites on four geographically isolated river systems, the Owenea, County Donegal, the Slaney, County Wexford, the Ballynahinch, Co. Galway and the Suir, in Counties Kilkenny and Waterford. A comprehensive Cormorant survey was undertaken at each site throughout 2011. A minimum of two counts per month were carried out, with the frequency of visits increased to two per week during April and May 2011, to coincide with the period of the Atlantic Salmon seaward migration. Diet composition was also assessed by the collection and analysis of pellets and regurgitates from five Cormorant roosts and nesting colonies in proximity to the study areas between 27th January and 1st June, 2011.

On average, Cormorant numbers were low across the study areas and did not increase during the smolt run. The Suir survey area held, on average, one Cormorant per 14.4 hectares and the Slaney supported one bird per 15.3 hectares. The densities for the Ballynahinch and Owenea survey areas were substantially lower at one bird per 242 and 832 hectares respectively. Analysis of 255 diet samples from five coastal and inland roost and nest sites revealed Ballan Wrasse to be the most

# Surveys

important species in the diet in terms of frequency (38.6%), followed by Perch (9.3%) and Roach (7.4%). Salmonids and Eel represented 6.8% and 1.5% of the diet respectively. Across all sites, 61% of the identifiable prey items were marine species, with the remaining 39% being freshwater species.

The survey data, in conjunction with the dietary analysis for the Owenea and Ballynahinch survey sites, indicate that the impact of Cormorants on local salmonid populations is limited. The data is less comprehensive for the Suir and Slaney and survey areas due to difficulties in locating accessible roosts or colonies to collect diet samples. This work also provided a detailed future work plan to build on the valuable information generated in 2011.

## Birds on Cutaway Peatlands

In continuing partnership with Bord na Móna, two areas of work on the cutaway peatlands were developed. As part of a baseline ecological assessment of all Bord na Móna sites, bird surveys were undertaken on bogs at Cavemount, Ballybeg, Mount Dillon, Derrycashel, Lough Bannow and Littleton. Littleton Bog in Co. Tipperary proved particularly interesting, with breeding confirmed for Lapwing and probable for Common Sandpiper and, best of all, Curlew. A sign of the impact of the two cold winters was that only a single pair of Stonechat (feeding young) were recorded on any of the bogs surveyed (also at Littleton). With baseline bird surveys now completed for ten sites, it is hoped that the bird data can be compared to detailed habitat data already collected by Bord na Móna ecologists to improve our understanding of the interactions between bird populations and habitat on the cutways.



*Snipe chick (Paul Troake)*

Following management of 20 hectares of land at Drinagh bog in Co. Offaly in the autumn of 2010, which involved scrub clearance, drainage ditch re-profiling and drain blocking, an intensive survey of the bird population of the area (using territory mapping) was undertaken during the summer to look at the impacts of the work and serve as a baseline against which the impacts of future work could be assessed. Although scrub habitats held the highest density of territories, particularly Willow Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Lesser Redpoll and Reed Bunting, it is the open habitats that are the most important for a range of species of conservation concern, including species on the BoCCI Red List. The speed of habitat occupancy by breeding waders (from one pair of Lapwing and one pair of Snipe in 2010 to four pairs of Lapwing, four pairs of Snipe, two pairs of Redshank and one pair of Ringed Plover in 2011, along with ten Skylark territories) indicates that the type of habitat management undertaken here can have substantial short-term benefits. Furthermore, the value of re-wetting or flooding at least part of the area is also important not just for breeding waders, but also for wintering waders and wildfowl.

## Machair Waders

In 2011, with funding from NPWS, BirdWatch Ireland carried out research and monitoring of key machair sites which support important populations of breeding waders. Machair is a rare type of species rich grassland found in just a few parts of the world, including Scotland and Ireland, where it occurs along the north and west coasts. Many of the sites support breeding Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe, Oystercatcher and Dunlin. Surveys in Ireland have shown severe declines since the 1980s and the aim of this year's study was to collect population data and monitor the factors affecting breeding success, such as habitat degradation, disturbance and predator pressure. Ten sites, four in Donegal and six in

# Surveys

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Mayo were included. Results indicated further widespread declines since previous survey work in 2009. Lapwing nest survival and productivity were generally low and intensification of farming, grazing activities and human originated disturbance were regarded as the main threats. The threat from predation tended to be site specific; where it was a problem, it was caused mainly by mammals, usually foxes.

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that breeding wader numbers at machair sites are critically low and continuing to decline. Urgent action is required, which should include management agreements with landowners to ensure the habitat is in optimal condition, control of the impact of predators, including consideration of, for example, predator proof fences, such as on Inishee Island in the Shannon Callows and at our reserve at Annagh Marsh. Better publicity is also important, as some sites are popular with walkers and surfers and greater awareness of the sensitivities during the breeding season would help to reduce disturbance. A set of site-specific recommendations have been included as part of the report to NPWS and we would hope for progress on some of these actions in 2012.

## **Wintering waterbirds within Irish coastal SPAs: Baseline low tide survey programme**

The low tide waterbird survey programme continued for a third and final winter with monthly surveys of seven coastal SPAs. This project, funded by the National Parks & Wildlife Service, is designed to gather specific information on how waterbirds use key sites across a range of tidal stages but with specific focus at low-tide.

Counter teams surveyed seven sites between October 2011 and February 2012, all of which are prime sites for wintering waterbirds and are designated as Special Protection Areas (SPA) under the European Birds

Directive. Sites were largely east-coast based, and included the larger North Bull Island & South Dublin Bay & River Tolka Estuary (SPAs 4006 & 4024) site along with Baldoyle Bay (SPA 4016), Malahide Estuary (SPA 4025), Rogerstown Estuary (SPA 4015), the Boyne Estuary (SPA 4080) and the River Nanny Estuary & Shore (SPA 4158). Ballyteige Burrow (SPA 4020) in Co. Wexford was also surveyed.



Patterns of waterbird distribution gleaned from this winter's surveys, together with additional data from the Marine Institute on sediment composition and invertebrate distribution and abundance, will facilitate the identification of the most important areas used by waterbirds within these sites and provide information on activities which might be causing disturbance. Low tide counts provide valuable information on the potential effects on waterbirds of a variety of human activities which can affect the extent or quality of intertidal habitats, such as intertidal aquaculture, tidal power barrages, marinas, recreational activities and many more. The information compiled from the low tide survey programme, combined with existing data on waterbird population sizes and trends (from I-WeBS) is essential so that we can identify pressures and define conservation priorities for key wetland sites in Ireland

## **Impacts & benefits of flood risk management and arterial drainage maintenance on birds**

Arterial drainage maintenance is required to improve river channels for navigation, to control stream-bank erosion and as a mechanism for reducing the chances of flood events. It is expected that there will be increased frequency and severity of flood events in the future due to increased rainfall caused by climate change and increased development. The Office of Public Works (OPW) is the Statutory Body responsible for maintaining channels and for managing floods. In doing so they are required to

# Surveys

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account for the impacts and associated costs at a variety of levels, including the environment, to ensure compliance with European Birds and Habitats Directives. In 2011, OPW provided funding for BirdWatch Ireland to undertake two assessments, to examine the impacts and potential benefits on birds of (1) arterial drainage maintenance activities and (2) flood risk management methods.

As part of the first study, we accompanied staff from OPW and Inland Fisheries Ireland on a selection of their walkover surveys along river channels. Guidance was provided on the habitat requirements of waterways birds. We concluded that measures that are already in place as part of the Environmental River Enhancement Programme, which is primarily focussed on enhancing fish populations, will also benefit waterways birds. We identified a number of other measures that would minimise impacts, such as retention of some overhanging branches for Kingfisher and retention of some patches of emergent vegetation, where possible, for a variety of breeding bird species such as Mute Swan and Sedge Warbler.

OPW have identified a number of areas throughout Ireland that are at risk from future flood events. They will be proposing and implementing a series management measures to reduce the chances of significant flood risk in these areas. This second OPW project was a desk-based study which provided an overall review of bird requirements in Ireland and how they might be affected by flood management. We examined each of the flood risk management methods and their likely impact on bird species in Ireland, especially those which are of conservation concern in Ireland. The breeding season is the most critical period for birds, as this is the period when they are generally confined to the vicinity of their nesting areas, and there is considerable energy expenditure involved in nesting and rearing chicks. Ground-nesting birds, especially those with scarce distributions in Ireland such as Corncrake and breeding waders are of greatest concern regarding flooding. Some of the management measures have the potential to improve or even create wetland habitats, which would be of benefit to some species, especially wintering waterbirds.

## **Seabird Monitoring & Tracking – Future of the Atlantic Marine Environment (FAME)**

In the 2011 season we continued our programme of detailed seabird productivity monitoring on Lambay, Co. Dublin, and the tracking of breeding adults using GPS tags to determine their feeding areas whilst incubating and rearing young. This work focussed on four species: Shag, Kittiwake, Guillemot and Razorbill. In conjunction with RSPB and the University of Exeter a small number of Gannets were also tagged. The 'foraging tracks' of tagged birds will enable us to start mapping Marine Important Bird Areas for our nesting seabirds. The breeding success of study species on Lambay was 'good' and in line with previous year's results for this island (2007, 2009, 2010).

On the West coast, seabird colony monitoring was undertaken at two large colonies, the Cliffs of Moher (Clare) and Horn Head (Donegal), and a range of smaller sites in Donegal Bay. Both named colonies support large populations of four species, Fulmar, Kittiwake, Guillemot and Razorbill and while all seem to be increasing or stable (Fulmar) at the Cliffs of Moher (compared to the Seabird 2000 counts in 1999), these same species have decreased at Horn Head, with Razorbills showing least change. Puffins also appear to be increasing at the Cliffs of Moher.



This project is part funded by Atlantic Area INTERREG Programme.

# Species

## Species & Habitat Conservation

### *Monitoring and tracking changes in our bird populations*

#### **Corncrakes**

BirdWatch Ireland was again successful in attracting Heritage Council funding to continue important work for Corncrakes. In Donegal we have been focusing on Tory Island, off the north Donegal coast, an important stronghold, with an annual population of around ten calling males. This year, we continued a programme of fencing to exclude sheep from meadows under management agreement between landowners and BirdWatch Ireland. We also enhanced areas of early cover created in 2010 by additional transplants of nettles. This will help to provide vital early cover for Corncrakes when they first arrive on the island in late April and May.

Similarly, on our reserve at Termoncarragh we have been continuing to create additional areas of early cover and enhancing the meadows to ensure they provide optimal habitat. We have also brought one additional previously rush-infested field under suitable management for Corncrakes. The larger meadows held at least two male Corncrakes throughout the summer; one each in the northern and southern meadows; whilst no male Corncrake was recorded calling from the early cover corridor created in 2010, it was seen to be used by Corncrakes in 2011 and given that early cover patches usually take a couple of years to become well established, next year should see more prolific growth of nettles and hopefully this area too will be occupied by a calling male.

With funding from LEADER, we also carried out a feasibility study of opportunities for habitat restoration for Corncrakes on Arranmore.

Research into land ownership was carried out in the Corncrake area of the island and discussions

with several landowners were initiated. It is hoped that further funding can be secured to follow up this work in 2012 and establish agreements with landowners to restore habitat for Corncrakes on the island.



*Corncrake (Colum Clarke)*

#### **Breeding Curlew and the Halting Environmental Loss Project (HELP)**

2011 saw the establishment of the Halting Environmental Loss Project (HELP). This is a cross-border project with RSPB Northern Ireland and South West Scotland, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) INTERREG IVA programme. The overall aim of the four-year programme is to deliver targeted biodiversity action for priority species and habitats. In the Republic of Ireland the project targets the border counties and the focus of the work is exclusively on breeding Curlew, now a globally threatened species. BirdWatch Ireland will be carrying out baseline surveys and selecting areas to trial habitat management to restore the habitat suitability for Curlew. We hope eventually that Government will develop prescriptions for agri-environment schemes to allow farmers to be grant-aided to manage their land to protect breeding Curlew.

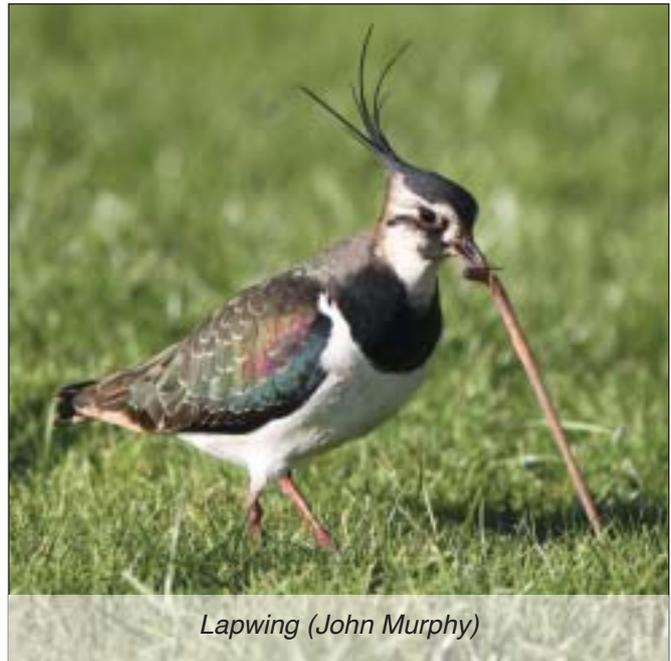
# Species

In 2011, surveys were carried out in Donegal and also in Mayo as part of a masters degree study with NUI Cork. Severe declines were recorded in both counties since the 1988-91 Breeding Atlas. Just four pairs were located in Donegal and three in Mayo. Nationally, the 2007-2011 Bird Atlas has recorded a 60% decline over the last 25 years. Further survey work will be carried out in the other border counties in 2012 and 2013, but it is anticipated that similar declines will be recorded. At the sites in Donegal where breeding pairs were located, management agreements with the landowners were established to ensure grazing regimes and agricultural operations are timed to protect nesting birds. Other works to improve the habitat were also carried out, including tree and scrub removal and a programme of predator control was also undertaken. Similar work will be carried out at selected sites where Curlew are recorded breeding in 2012.

## **Shannon Callows Breeding Wader Project**

The Shannon Callows Breeding Wader Project, funded by National Parks and Wildlife Service began in 2005 with the aim of maintaining and restoring populations of breeding waders – Lapwing, Redshank, Curlew and Snipe – in the Shannon Callows SPA. The project consists of a voluntary grant scheme for farmers and selected habitat management at key sites. In addition, depredation by predators is controlled on a key breeding site Inishee Island through the use of a predator-proof fence.

In 2011, total wader populations declined on sites under management for the first time since 2008. A decline of 37% was recorded on 2010 figures, despite excellent breeding success in 2010. It is most likely this was the result of the harsh winter in 2010 and 2011. However, hatching and fledging success continued to rise in 2011, with 78% of pairs successfully hatching and 52% successfully fledging chicks.



*Lapwing (John Murphy)*

A total of 202ha of land was under management in 2011 and compliance with the Breeding Wader Grant Scheme was excellent. Farmers received regular advisory visits and partook in a very successful training workshop. A number of farmers carried out small-scale habitat creation works, such as reprofiling drains to create suitable chick feeding areas and creating wader scrapes, which points to the high level of farmer “buy in” to wader conservation in the Callows and to the benefit of regular training and advisory visits.

On Inishee, 11 volunteers gave 56.5 work days to carrying out maintenance works on the 3.7km long fox- and mink-proof fence. The work was very challenging, water levels fluctuated and the project had to be suspended on more than one occasion. However, their hard work and commitment paid off, no mammalian predators breached the fence in 2011 and of the 31 wader pairs, 77% successfully fledged chicks, including a pair of Curlew.

## **Kilcoole Little Tern Project**

Wardening of the Little Tern colony at Kilcoole/Newcastle began on 3rd May 2011 and ended on 12th August 2011. Night wardening (thus 24 hour colony-coverage) was initiated on 12th May. A total of 130 nesting attempts were made by 99 breeding pairs of Little Tern in 2011, the third highest total of

# Species

pairs recorded since the project began in 1985. 120 nesting attempts occurred north of The Breaches (K-colony) whilst an additional 10 nesting attempts occurred south of The Breaches (N-colony).

The first eggs were found on 12th May, but were thought to have been laid on 9th May. A total of 274 eggs were laid, with a mean clutch size of 2.10 eggs per nest with known clutch sizes (271 eggs from 129 nests). The largest loss of eggs related to 36 eggs/16 nests (13.1%) which were depredated by a Rook between 23rd and 27th May. Other losses included 28 eggs/22 nests which failed to hatch (infertile/addled), 18 eggs/10 nests which were abandoned, 15 eggs/6 nests which were washed away by high tides & storms, 5 eggs/3 nests which were presumably depredated by corvids (possibly Hooded Crows) whilst the fate of 1 egg/1 nest is unknown. A further two eggs were laid randomly ('dumped') and were not part of an active nest or being incubated. A total of 169 chicks was known to have hatched out of 88 nests from 3rd June. The modal incubation period was 21.83 days.

Of the 169 chicks hatched, a total of 14 young were known to have died as follows; 7 chicks were lost to a high tide & storm on 17th June, 4 died from apparent natural mortality at or near the nest scrape, 2 died from unknown causes & the remains of one fledgling were found in circumstances suggesting depredation by a bird of prey. Thus, 155 chicks were presumed to have fledged (the fourth highest total recorded since the project began in 1985), which equates to productivity this year of 1.57 fledglings per breeding pair. This is likely to be a slight overestimate, and productivity based on chick re-trap data is much lower at 1.13 fledglings per breeding pair. A total of 4 adult Little Terns was also depredated; 3 by Peregrines & 1 by an adult Great Black-backed Gull.

We would like to acknowledge the National Parks and Wildlife Service for its ongoing financial support and long-term commitment to the project and to the veritable army of volunteers who assisted this year.

## Rockabill Tern Project 2011

- There was continuous wardening on Rockabill Island between 10th May and 5th August.
- The first Roseate Tern egg was seen on 15th May, two days earlier than in 2010. The first Common Tern egg was seen on 19th May the same date as 2010.
- In total, 1,125 Roseate, 2,191 Common and 171 Arctic Tern nests were found up to and including the cut off date (34 days after first eggs were seen).
- Mean clutch sizes for Roseate, Common and Arctic Terns were 1.72, 2.31, and 1.56 respectively.
- The productivity of Roseate and Common Terns was 1.21 and 1.03 respectively. As in 2010, no estimate could be made for Arctic Tern productivity but it is likely to have been very poor.
- A minimum of 86 (82 in 2010) Black Guillemot nests were laid with a mean clutch of 1.83. Productivity of Black Guillemots was estimated to be 1.23 fledged chicks per nest with eggs. In total, 101 chicks (also 101 in 2010) and two adults were ringed.
- A total of 172 (163 in 2010) AONs (Apparently Occupied Nests) was recorded. The mean clutch was 1.85. The productivity of Kittiwakes was low for 2011 and estimated to be 0.67 fledged chicks per egg laying pair (1.15 in 2010). 112 Kittiwake pulli were ringed
- Totals of 1,169 Roseate, 1,802 Common and 2 Arctic Tern chicks were ringed. 5 Adult Common Tern were ringed but no adult Roseate Terns were ringed in 2011.



*Roseate Tern (Lars Soerink)*

# Species

- Disturbances amounted to a total of 4 hours and 5 minutes over the entire season, most of which was caused by avian activity. Gull predation of Arctic Tern nests was largely responsible for the poor breeding performance on The Bill this year.
- An estimated 61% of adult Roseate Terns had both BTO and Roseate special rings, 3% had special rings only, 9% bore BTO rings only and 27% were unringed. The percentage of Roseate Terns bearing both rings was noticeably lower than in 2010 (73%).
- The rings of 781 individual Roseate Terns were read. 96.7% of these birds were ringed on Rockabill. Four-year-old birds comprised the largest cohort. The oldest birds were nineteen years old and were ringed as chicks on Rockabill in 1992.
- Clupeids were once again the most common prey item (80.72%) presented to Roseate Tern chicks, followed by gadoids (7.91%) and sandeels (2%).
- Gadoids were the most common prey item (51%) presented to Common Tern chicks, followed by clupeids (47%) and sandeel (2%).
- Roseate Tern chick provisioning rates peaked in the early morning (05.00-08.00).
- Tern foraging activity occurred in all directional sectors around Rockabill, with 45.1% occurring in the N, NW and W sectors and another 40.8% being observed in the S, SE and E sectors.

We would like to acknowledge the National Parks and Wildlife Service for their ongoing financial support and long-term commitment to the project.

## **American Mink on Puffin Island, Co. Kerry, 2011**

In early summer 2007, Lars Soerink, a Dutch wildlife photographer, reported a sighting of an American Mink on our Puffin Island Reserve. Puffin Island is unusual because it supports large numbers of the three key species and it is close to the mainland (a channel of approximately 250m). Swift tidal currents sweep through Puffin Sound but at low tide conditions can be calm enough for a predominantly terrestrial mammal such as a mink to swim over to the island. There is a large and growing literature of catastrophic losses of colonial breeding birds to depredation by non-native American Mink. Puffin Island supports three key species of seabird: Manx Shearwater,



*Control of alien mink population was carried out on our Puffin Island reserve, County Kerry, in 2011 (Lars Soerink).*

European Storm-petrel and Puffin. The numbers breeding on this island and neighbouring Skellig Michael and the Blaskets far exceed any other cluster of islands in Ireland and are internationally important. Between April and August BirdWatch Ireland mounted three expeditions to the island and undertook an extensive search for signs and trapping effort to remove this unwelcome non-native predator. Mink scat (droppings) were widespread in April and some dead birds/remains were found (Manx Shearwater, European Storm-petrel and Common Gull) though abundant rabbits were probably the main prey item taken in winter/spring before the reappearance of seabirds. A single adult male mink was trapped and removed and thereafter 'sign' diminished (weathered away) and no further animals were caught. The island could easily be re-colonised by mink from the mainland and we must remain vigilant for a reoccurrence.

We are grateful to the Heritage Council for supporting this project through a Heritage Management Grant.

# People

## People

*Working with staff and volunteers to maximise our membership*

### Membership Development

In 2011, continued efforts were made to maximise our membership and support was lead by our development team and involved all staff. Two membership seminars were held, and one run jointly with RSPB Northern Ireland proved particularly successful with many staff and key volunteers receiving training on membership development, customer service and the like.



*A BirdWatch Ireland outing (Dick Coombes)*

### Membership targets and priorities

For the third year in a row the record for the number of new members signed up was broken: 1,515, up from 1,274 in 2010, itself a record at that time. We have focussed on family memberships in particular and have a new junior magazine to help encourage family members. We continue also to offer group memberships and welcome groups of all ages. We are hopeful that increased visibility, with, for example, over 100 school classes visited in 2011, will in turn encourage more families to join when they become more aware of our work and what we offer members.

### Events and 'Face to Face' programme

In conjunction with the Development Officer and staff from Administration and Conservation departments, Branch and key volunteers, we participated in over 40 outdoor recruitment events in 2011. We also had a successful program of staff talks to local garden groups and active retirement groups.

### Working with staff, volunteers and branches

Initial branch set up workshops were carried out by development teams as required and existing branches were also mentored to inform new volunteers and revitalise structures. Conservation and development staff continue to contribute to the branch's events programmes with talks on their respective projects.

The number of active branches at the end of 2011 was 29, an increasing resource for our membership that covers the whole of the country.

### Volunteers

In 2011, BirdWatch Ireland's work was again enhanced by the efforts and expertise of its volunteers: the effort is from transition year through to third level students, from the Board of Directors to local branch members, from new recruits to volunteers who are life-long supporters. In 2011 the work of volunteers was equivalent to at least 20 full time staff, in line with 2010.

2011	Number of Volunteers	Total Hours
Surveys, Habitat Management	4,000	40,000
Development & Publications	80	1,100
Administration & Shop	10	460
Reserves	6	340
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,096</b>	<b>41,900</b>

# People

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## **Cape Clear Bird Observatory**

The Observatory has been in operation for over 50 years now and is genuinely unique in its contribution and standing in the birdwatching community in Ireland. The operation of a series of natural history courses for beginners and improvers is a vital part of the observatory's work. The observatory continues to serve the needs of active birdwatchers and students of migration, especially in the autumn months. However the combination of roles is vital to ensure we can both maintain the building and employ a warden from April to November.



*South Harbour, Cape Clear (Dick Coombes)*

# Reserves

## Reserves

### *Special places to watch nature*

#### **Nature Reserves**

During 2011 we continued the enhancement of the visitor facilities at our East Coast Nature Reserve with, in particular, the installation of a final stretch of raised boardwalk. This completes a circular walk with a woodland loop which takes the visitor through the rich and varied habitats found on the reserve. Along the walk there is now access to three public hides where the visitor can take time and absorb the atmosphere of these important wetlands. Whether that is the plethora of wintering waterfowl, the 'streams' of migrating Swallows & martins, the variety of breeding birds or even the diversity of other wildlife, such as butterflies, dragonflies and otters. Similarly, at our Rogerstown Estuary reserve the continued 'natural' development of saltmarsh habitat is an important aspect. From our two public hides overlooking the area the visitor can watch the continuing success in attracting successfully breeding Lapwings during the summer and the spectacle of over 14,000 waterbirds during the winter months. Not all of our reserves have hides. but the majority are accessible to all and several held events through our Branch network. These provide an excellent opportunity to discover our reserves and during 2011 a variety of events was held at our East Coast Nature Reserve, Wexford Slobs, Cuskinny Marsh, Shenick Island, Shannon Callows, Kilcoole and Termoncarragh reserves at various times throughout the year.



*Common Blue (Ronan McLaughlin)*

Many of our reserves hold important breeding populations, such as those off the Kerry coast, with Puffin Island and Little Skellig both renowned for their seabirds. The numbers of seabirds appear stable with a 'favourable' 2011 breeding season recorded, whilst the recent colonisation of Common Gull on Puffin Island continues and Black Guillemots was confirmed as a breeding species. Most importantly though was the removal of a single mink which had been present on Puffin Island since first being recorded in 2007.

Other reserves where predation on breeding birds is having a detrimental effect is at our Annagh Marsh reserve. Following another poor year for the breeding waders at this site (which are suffering high losses of eggs and chicks to foxes) an 'anti-fox' perimeter fence was constructed which now safeguards nearly 30 ha of important breeding wader habitat from mammalian predators into the future. Close by, at our Termoncarragh Meadows reserve, no such problems have been found and these plant-rich meadows are continuing to attract successfully breeding Corncrakes and continue to offer the visitor a rare chance to see these elusive birds. It's not all about birds though. Our reserves are also important for the wider biodiversity, such as at our Sheskinmore reserve where the wet fens hosts the nationally important snail *Vertigo geyeri*, whilst the plant communities at our Termoncarragh Meadows and Annagh Marsh reserves are important for, amongst several 'specialists', the rare Great Yellow Bumblebee. Our management at these sites is sympathetic to their requirements.

Even our 'common' birds and wildlife provide inspiration and this was gloriously captured in photographs at our Cuskinny Marsh reserve throughout the changing seasons in 2011. These were shown in an exhibition in November entitled 'A Year in Cuskinny Marsh' and twelve of the photographs were then used to produce a 2012 calendar; a great inspiration to visit one of our reserves.

We continue to maintain a network of bird reserves around the country and much of our work at these is only possible through volunteer help, membership support and public funding support. In 2011 we received specific funding support from County Wicklow Partnership under the Rural Development Programme (Leader), the Heritage Council, Dublin Zoo and Fiontar Chomhraic Teo., Co Mhaigh Eo.

# Accounts

## Annual accounts

### Financial statements

#### Financial Statements

The details that follow are a summary of accounts for BirdWatch Ireland. A full set of accounts for the year ended 31st December 2011 is available from BirdWatch Ireland on request.

2011 was a particularly challenging year for BirdWatch Ireland, as indeed was the case for most charities in the wake of the economic recession. We experienced a substantial drop in income, down €162,011 on 2010, largely due to a drop in funded conservation projects and, to a lesser extent, in donations. Expenditure being in line with the previous year, these circumstances led to a net deficit of €136,744. The view of the Board is that, in addition to the effects of recession, this loss reflects ongoing investment in key strategic areas of development (membership), management and capacity, as well as obligations to fulfill existing conservation commitments. During 2011, Board instigated a review of operations with a view to recalibrating the organisation to be as effective as possible within the foreseeable operating climate. Appropriate action was taken to substantially reduce administration expenses, and to streamline certain operations while having as little impact as possible on conservation and development priorities. This is reflected in the operating budget for 2012.

Further losses are recognised in the accounts with Board approving the transfer of shares and investments to pay off the bulk of the remaining mortgage on the headquarters building, thus showing a within-year loss of non-cash resources of €246,584.

Incoming resources	2011 €	2010 €
Subscriptions	250,936	250,115
Donations & bequests	29,241	55,176
Grants	15,298	13,539
Development & events	706	12,221
Advertising income	7,457	11,052
Shop sales	119,156	101,264
Conservation projects	1,395,209	1,542,499
Investment income	6,214	362
<b>Total incoming resources</b>	<b>1,824,217</b>	<b>1,986,228</b>
<b>Resources expended</b>		
Shop – cost of sales	(71,470)	(63,439)
Conservation project costs	(1,322,026)	(1,482,818)
Administration expenses	(567,465)	(443,512)
<b>Total resources expended</b>	<b>(1,960,961)</b>	<b>(1,989,769)</b>
Net outgoing resources	(136,744)	(3,541)
Other recognised gains & losses	(246,584)	29,223
Total funds brought forward	2,410,932	2,385,250
<b>Total funds carried forward</b>	<b>2,027,604</b>	<b>2,410,932</b>
<b>Represented by:</b>		
Fixed assets	2,985,285	3,203,350
Net current assets	295,591	502,046
Other creditors	(1,253,272)	(1,294,464)
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,027,604</b>	<b>2,410,932</b>

