



**Ireland's Wild Birds**  
**How are they faring and what can be done to help them?**



Curlew (An Crotach) by Mike Brown

**BirdWatch Ireland Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Culture and Heritage**  
**July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019**

## Introduction

We thank the members of the Committee for inviting us here today to talk about how Ireland's wild birds are faring. The primary objective of BirdWatch Ireland is the conservation of wild birds and their habitats. We strive to achieve this through scientific research, survey and monitoring, including with citizen scientists and active conservation projects, as well as through advocacy, awareness-raising and education.

Our organisation is the largest independent nature conservation charity in Ireland with 15,000 members, a network of 25 branches nationwide, and over 1,500 volunteer surveyors who contribute thousands of hours of survey time to collecting information on our wild bird populations. Our staff include internationally recognised experts on waterbirds, seabirds, farmland birds and many others. We are the Irish representative of BirdLife International, the world's largest conservation partnership, and we collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders, including government departments, state agencies, businesses, farmer representative bodies and many other organisations, to achieve our goals. We also champion birds and biodiversity conservation in national, local and international media, at public events and through our work with teachers and schools.

In this submission, we will outline how Ireland's wild bird are faring, the pressures and threats they are facing, what we are doing to help and what else needs to be done. The Dáil declared a biodiversity and climate emergency on May 9<sup>th</sup> 2019 and also called for biodiversity loss to be addressed by the Citizens' Assembly. This indicates that as a nation we recognise that our native wildlife is in trouble and urgent action is needed to protect and safeguard our environment into the future.

## How are Ireland's birds faring?

This year is BirdWatch Ireland's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In the last 50 years Ireland has seen dramatic changes to its landscape and to its biodiversity in general. Of the species that have been assessed here, one in every five is threatened with extinction. Dramatic changes are also evident in bird populations, most sadly for the worse.

Birds are key indicators of the health of our environment and they face many challenges, including habitat loss, disturbance and the impacts of climate change, to name just three. Some bird species are more adaptable than others, but for many the rate of loss of their habitats is happening so fast that they cannot cope with the change, and their populations have been decimated. There are some good news stories, but the trends for some key species groups are very worrying.

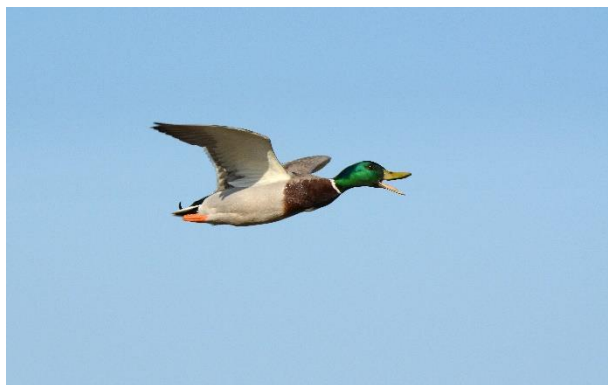
## The status of waterbirds that migrate to Ireland for the winter

With our mild climate and vast abundance of wetlands, Ireland attracts thousands of migrant waterbirds every winter. For the past 25 years we have monitored their populations through the **Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS)** funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht) and coordinated by BirdWatch Ireland, with help from our volunteer network. Each year roughly 11,000 volunteer hours are contributed to the survey by irreplaceable, skilled individuals who care about, and want to protect their local birds and wetlands. Our most recent I-WeBs survey analyses shows that Ireland has lost around half a million waterbirds, almost 40%, in less than 20 years.

In detail, over half of the 15 wader species that regularly winter here have declined, e.g., our wintering Lapwing are down by 67% in less than 20 years. Mallard – a duck so familiar to everyone that it is often overlooked – has declined by over 40% in the last 20 years. Other species that frequent our larger

lakes are faring even worse, with declines of 30-80% for Tufted Duck, Goldeneye and Pochard. The Greenland White-fronted Goose is another example – traditionally associated with the bogs, they have declined by 30% in less than 20 years with many sites lost entirely. Habitat loss, climate change and cumulative impacts represent the biggest pressures and threats on our wintering waterbirds and urgent action is needed to protect areas important for them and to maintain this diversity of species.

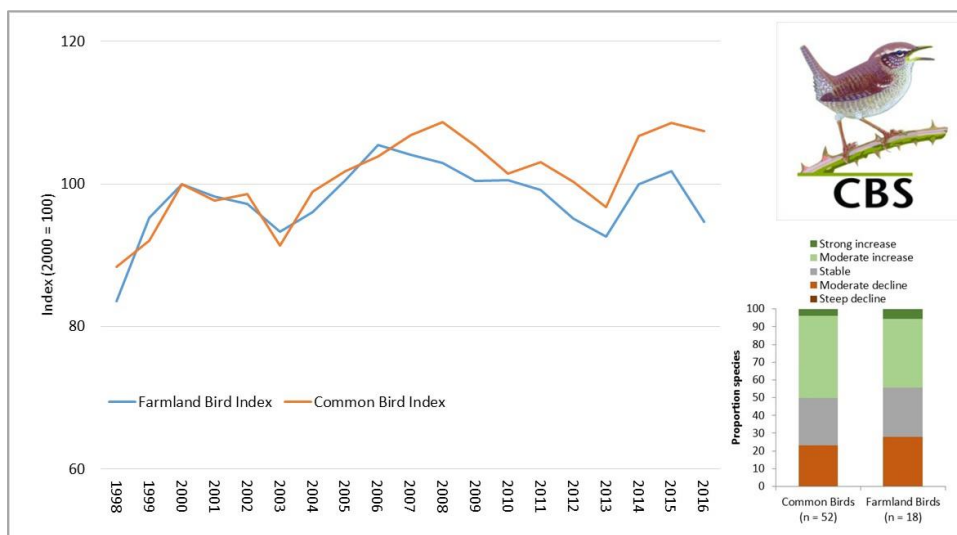
*A widespread and well-known species, but our resident **Mallard** duck has declined by over 40% in the last 20 years.*



### Countryside and Farmland Birds

Farmland in Ireland has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. The **Countryside Bird Survey (CBS)**, a BirdWatch Ireland-led citizen science-based survey, funded by National Parks and Wildlife Service (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht), has been running since the late 1990s and monitors the most common breeding birds in the Irish landscape.

Results tell us that although many common species, such as Goldfinch and Blackcap, are stable or even increasing, about a quarter of familiar farmland birds, such as Stock Dove, Swift, Greenfinch, Stonechat and Kestrel are exhibiting serious declines.





**Stock Dove (Colm Gorm) (left) and Kestrel (Pocaire Gaoithe).** Both are farmland birds in decline.

More detailed knowledge of longer-term trends in **all** bird populations comes from another volunteer-based survey, **the Bird Atlas** which has been completed every 20-25 years with the most recent being the 2007-11 Bird Atlas. The Atlases record the presence of all species occurring in Ireland and the UK and allow us to monitor change over the longer term and are particularly important to highlight declines indicative of dramatic changes in the Irish landscape.

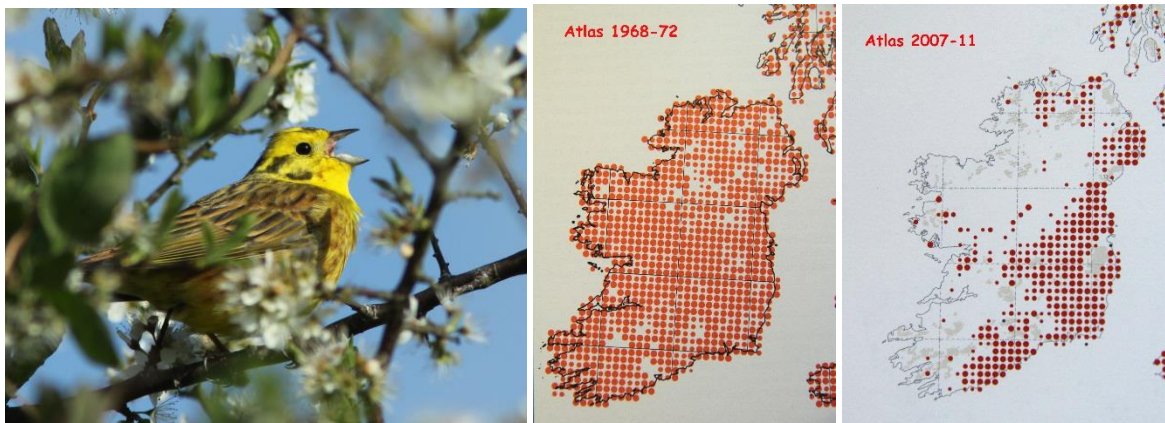
For example, the fact that our once biodiversity-rich farmland landscape has become less and less hospitable for wildlife, as agricultural methods and technologies have intensified, is clearly reflected in the almost complete extermination of farmland birds such as the Corncrake. Once widespread, they are now confined to the most marginal areas of the west and north-west as late cut hay meadows were converted to multiple cut silage. Similarly, severe declines have been recorded in most of our breeding waders. There are twelve different species of wader nesting in Ireland and of these 11 are in serious decline, with the most recent Bird Atlas showing declines of at least 50% since the 1970s. These species, which include Curlew, Lapwing and Snipe, were once widespread and familiar to many farmers, as they nest in damp pastures, traditional hay meadows and bogs. Curlew is one of the most severely impacted and, like Corncrake, is now on the verge of extinction in Ireland, with only about

150 pairs remaining of the 5,000 pairs nesting here in the 1960s and 70s. Once, not long ago, the famed Cry of the Curlew was literally the sound of wild Ireland, but most of its former strongholds have now fallen silent.



The main reason for the declines of many farmland birds is habitat loss - the widespread drainage of wetlands and damp pastures and the more intensive management of agricultural grasslands through reseeding and increased fertiliser use. Other factors include industrial scale extraction of peat bogs and afforestation of habitats. Remaining populations of many farmland species, particularly

ground nesting birds, are now much more isolated, and several studies have shown high levels of nest and chick predation of Curlew and Lapwing nests as breeding populations become more fragmented and less able to withstand the onslaught of mink, rats, foxes and other predators, both native and alien.



**Yellowhammer (Buíog).** Bird Atlas distribution maps show major range contraction in 40 years.

Another significant change in our farmed landscape has been the loss of mixed and arable farming, and consequently the birds associated with these habitats such as the Yellowhammer and Skylark, have suffered as a result, as they rely on spilt grain in stubble fields for winter foraging. The Corn Bunting, once common in arable land sadly became extinct in Ireland in 1991.

While agri-environment schemes such as GLAS, where farmers are incentivised to work the land in an environmentally friendly way, have gone some way towards maintaining or in some cases improving bird habitat on farmland, such schemes do not go far enough.

Hedge-cutting and the burning of scrub and upland habitats are detrimental to our native wildlife and impact our carbon stores. The changes to the Wildlife Act contained in the Heritage Act have sadly weakened the protections afforded to breeding birds of uplands and hedgerows. Water quality in lakes and rivers affected by nutrient run-off and other inputs can reduce the number of invertebrates, which in turn can have a knock-on effect on birds living in these aquatic habitats such as Dipper, Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail. Indeed, the change in our climate with more extreme weather events also impacts birds with some very negatively impacted by the cold winters of 2010 and 2011.



**Grey Wagtail (Glasóg Liath)** (left) and **Stonechat (Caislín Cloch)** – both species affected by severe winter weather.

## Raptors

Raptors (or birds of prey) are apex predators and sentinels for the health of our environment. As raptors sit at the top of the food chain they can be affected by a range of changes and pressures in the environment and for this reason we can learn a lot about the health of ecosystems through studying bird of prey populations. In recent decades raptor populations in Ireland have changed dramatically, there have been many positive conservation success stories, such as the return through re-introduction of species such as Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle and Red Kite. The Buzzard is once again a familiar sight across much of the country having naturally recolonised after it was lost due to persecution. The Peregrine Falcon has also slowly started to recover after decade-long declines.

However, many of the issues which have caused the declines and extinctions of birds of prey are unfortunately still present in the Irish countryside. The illegal killing of birds of prey remains prevalent and affects a wide range of species through shooting and indiscriminate poisoning. Increasing awareness and appreciation of the importance of birds of prey and their role in the environment is essential in tackling this issue. However, greater emphasis on investigation and enforcement of the legislation is required, including better resourcing of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and greater collaboration with An Garda Síochána.

Raptors can also be exposed to other poisons which are legally used, such as rodenticides which are targeted at controlling rats and mice. Secondary poisoning occurs when a raptor consumes a rodent which has ingested the poison. We know that a wide range of raptors are exposed to rodenticides,



Hen Harrier (Cromán na gCearc) by Neil O'Reilly.

and for some species such as Barn Owl and Red Kite, the majority of the

population are exposed to these toxins. BirdWatch Ireland has been an active partner in the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use working with food companies, farmers, agricultural advisors and many more stakeholders to encourage responsible use of rodenticides.

Although, there have been some successes to celebrate with the return of once absent birds of prey and the recovery of others, unfortunately many of our raptors are in trouble and some have suffered extensive declines in recent decades. The Barn Owl is a Red-listed Bird of Conservation Concern in Ireland and its populations have declined dramatically, largely due to land use changes and the intensification of agriculture, which has caused the reduction in the extent and quality of habitats available to it. In addition, it is one of the birds most susceptible to rodenticide exposure. Hen Harrier

populations have also declined for similar reasons, much of their upland nesting habitat has been lost to the planting of non-native conifer plantations. The Merlin, our smallest bird of prey in Ireland is also affected by the changes to our uplands including the degradation and loss of heather moorland, overgrazing, and extensive afforestation.

The most significant pressures and threats to raptors include illegal persecution (illegal poisoning and shooting, which affects species such as Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Red Kite, Buzzard, Peregrine etc.); Secondary poisoning of rodenticides (many species are exposed to rodenticides through consuming animals which have consumed the bait, we know that Barn Owl, Long-eared Owl, Kestrel, Red Kite, Buzzard, Peregrine are all affected by rodenticides); Land use change and the loss of habitat (reduction in the extent and quality of habitat available to birds of prey has affected their populations and reduced prey availability); Afforestation (extensive planting of non-native conifer forests which has caused the loss of habitat).

### Urban Birds

There are many species of birds that coexist with humans and that can meet their own ecological requirements from within our urban and built spaces. We often refer to this suite of birds as “urban birds”. Whilst many are not strictly urban in nature, some such as the Swift exist predominantly in our built landscape.

These species live amongst us in our cities, towns and villages. Many such as the Blackbird, House Sparrow and Pied Wagtail have adapted to exploit the natural and semi-natural spaces that still exist in our towns and cities by feeding and nesting in green spaces such as gardens, parks and river corridors. These species bring a lot of enjoyment and health and wellbeing benefits to citizens.

However, many of these species have come under significant pressure, with species such as the Swift



undergoing a shocking 50% decline in the last 20 years. Although reasons for these declines vary by species, they do reflect a similar pattern of decline seen in many of our bird species found in the wider countryside, such as Swallow and Kestrel.

We believe that the decline in Swift populations is due to a number of factors; one is the loss of their nest sites in the fabric of our older buildings, where access to the roof space and gaps in masonry has housed their nests for generations. Old buildings being demolished, renovated and retrofitted displace nesting Swifts by removing this vital access they once had. Once a Swift loses its nest site, it can mean many lost breeding seasons before the monogamous pair find new suitable nest sites and breed again. Other impacts include climate change, and in particular the decline in insects which the Swift solely relies on for food.

A familiar winter visitor to Dublin from Arctic Canada is the Brent Goose. Ireland hosts a high percentage of the global population of this species. They are threatened

by the squeeze for space which is far greater in our capital than anywhere else in the country due to the rate of development. Brent Geese need permanent short grassland swards (such as playing pitches) to graze in the lean months of the winter, sites which are disappearing in our capital. Any pressures or threats to this species could have an effect at population level, and so they are of high conservation concern.

## Seabirds

Seabirds are dependent, for some part of the year, on the marine environment; most eat fish and shellfish. Twenty-four species of seabird breed here, with Ireland supporting internationally or even globally important numbers of six species: Manx Shearwater, European Storm-petrel, Gannet, Shag, Razorbill and Roseate Tern.

Puffins and Kittiwake are globally threatened and have declining populations in Ireland, whilst Black-headed Gull and Herring Gull are on the Irish Red list due to dramatic decline in breeding numbers in recent decades.

Climate change is probably the most serious threat to seabirds; as the oceans warm, a change in prey fish distributions occurs and seabirds have to travel further from their nesting colonies to find food. Other serious threats include sea level rise, resulting in loss of beach nesting habitat and increasing



Kittiwake (Saidhbhéar)-a globally threatened seabird which breeds in Ireland.

summer storms, which impacts species like Little Tern; oil pollution and increasing abundance of ingested plastics in seabird diets affects Fulmars, and Kittiwake; Gannets suffer fatal entanglement in discarded fishing gear, plastic debris and other marine contaminants. Non-sustainable fisheries practices result in depleted fish stocks and bycatch.

BirdWatch Ireland staff have been involved in active conservation of the Roseate Terns on Rockabill island off Skerries. This has been a profoundly successful project and shows what can be achieved with the input of resources. In the last 30 years numbers of Roseate Terns has increased from **152** breeding pairs of to **1,597** breeding pairs.



## Roseate Tern Population Increase on Rockabill Island An Irish Conservation Success Story



Roseate Terns (Geabhróg rósach) standing guard on their nest boxes on Rockabill Island (photo by Maeve Maher-McWilliams)

The project to protect and conserve Roseate Terns on Rockabill began in 1989, when there were just **152** pairs of these beautiful migrant seabirds present, and alongside **108** pairs of Common Terns. Conservation actions since that time, including the removal of vegetation, provision of nestboxes, and protection from predation and disturbance, have enabled the populations of both species to increase significantly, to **1,597** pairs of Roseate Terns and **2,085** pairs of Common Terns by 2017. Rockabill has been the largest Roseate Tern colony in Europe since the mid-1990's and numbers have been largely increasing year-on-year (24 of 29 seasons). Ringing of chicks at the colony with specially designed metal rings has also shown that Rockabill acts as a source population for breeding birds at the other colonies in north-west Europe (i.e. Lady's Island Lake in Wexford, Ireland, and Coquet Island in Northumberland, England).

Recent analysis of data gathered over the course of the project has shown that Roseate Terns breeding in nestboxes have a higher hatch rate and productivity than those in natural nest sites. Thus, the combined management of vegetation and provision of nestboxes for Roseate Terns on Rockabill has allowed the species to breed at higher densities and achieve higher reproductive output than would otherwise have been possible without these conservation activities.

The conservation activities targeted at increasing numbers of breeding Roseate Terns has also benefitted the local Common Tern population by providing more open habitat and protection from predation and disturbance during the breeding season. Funding for this work comes from the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Roseate Tern LIFE project.

### What is being done to address declines of bird populations?

BirdWatch Ireland uses all tools available to further conservation efforts, especially research and monitoring, habitat and species management and restoration, maintaining our reserves, responding to planning applications, providing advice, advocacy with ministers, elected representatives, government officials, media and public engagement work, campaigns and appeals. The examples we

provide here represent a snapshot of a significant amount of work that we are undertaking for wild birds.

Our advocacy work seeks to influence decision-makers to improve policies which impact on bird populations and advise on conservation work that needs to be undertaken.

We are progressing large-scale conservation work through collaboration with partners on two significant projects to improve key peatland and wet grassland habitats for breeding waders. One is through a Cooperation Across Borders for Biodiversity project supported by the EU INTERREG VA programme and focused on the border counties. The other is a European Innovation Partnership project working with farmers on the conservation of breeding Curlew around Lough Corrib and Leitrim funded through the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

In terms of seabirds, BirdWatch Ireland undertakes long-term management, protection and monitoring of several important seabird sites in Ireland. We also work with government, industry and fisheries scientists at Irish and EU level to ensure that fisheries and marine spatial planning embrace sustainable fisheries management and marine conservation.

Our ongoing research work supported by Dublin Port on how waterbirds use Dublin Bay has been very beneficial as an aid to decision-making around proposed developments in the bay as well as advancing knowledge of waterbird ecology.

We have developed bird sensitivity mapping tools to aid in the decision-making process around siting of renewable energy infrastructure, including onshore wind and offshore marine renewables. Both tools were developed with the support of a variety of stakeholders including the National Toll Roads Foundation, ESB Networks and Eirgrid.

Surveys of urban-nesting Swifts supported by local authorities and others have been undertaken in many towns in Ireland in conjunction with our branches and members of local communities.

We are working with Transport Infrastructure Ireland to understand the factors behind Barn Owl mortality on roads and to develop mitigation to reduce impacts of road networks on Barn Owl populations.

There are other actions happening all around the country supported by government and concerned members of communities, which is heartening. Indeed it is clear that Irish people care deeply about their natural heritage as witnessed by the green wave which has taken hold in recent times. However, we will need to take further significant action if we are to protect birdlife and nature on our island.

### **What else needs to happen to help birds in Ireland?**

Ireland is in the midst of a biodiversity crisis, which was acknowledged by the Dáil and widely reported by both national and international media. Biodiversity conservation is the responsibility of all of government departments and sectors as all human activity has an impact on it, positive or negative. All stakeholders have a part to play to turn around the fate of our birds and other biodiversity.

The most important action which could be taken by government is to ensure that sectoral policies are coherent with the policies and legal obligations to protect and conserve biodiversity, including our wild birds and their habitats. Taking action to biodiversity-proof sectoral plans is the most cost-effective action which could be taken. Significantly, funding for biodiversity was subject to devastating and disproportional cuts during the recession and have not recovered sufficiently. Now is the time to bolster this funding to ensure that we can continue to avail of the ecosystem services that nature provides. Full implementation of the National Biodiversity Action Plan is a must before it expires in

2021. In addition, we must act to stem the worst impacts of climate breakdown. The report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action provides a pathway to emissions reductions by 2030 and makes strong proposals for climate action that has biodiversity co-benefits. Unfortunately, the all-of-government Climate Action Plan 2019 falls down in this regard.

Agriculture is the dominant activity on the land mass of Ireland. Past and current intensification is causing serious impacts to key species. Government is attempting to address some of the declines in farmland birds through agri-environment schemes such as GLAS, and whilst GLAS is a useful broad-brush tool, it is not nearly specialised enough to deal with the complex array of problems facing farmland birds. There is also almost a complete absence of specialised advice to farmers from qualified ecologists who could guide them through the process of creating the right conditions for wildlife to thrive. Agri-Environment contracts are too short to compete with, for example, long term returns offered by forestry. Cooperative and landscape scale schemes need to be introduced and there should be further funding and roll out of the very promising EIP programme, which is testing solutions from the ground up for species (e.g. Hen Harrier and Curlew).

Farmers with High Nature Value land and land which has been designated as Special Protection Area and/or Special Area of Conservation need to have proper reward and recognition of the ecosystem services they are providing.

The policy direction of Food Wise 2025 does not bode well for biodiversity or climate in Ireland in general. Diversification of agriculture is needed if we are to ensure viable farm livelihoods, rural communities and thriving biodiversity within the context of a changing climate. Significant efforts, funding, and enforcement of laws are required to address biodiversity loss and climate change in the next Common Agriculture Policy.

Ireland's climate ambition relies heavily on forestry, but forestry policy to date represents a significant pressure and threat to birds. The current policy of planting mostly non-native Sitka spruce on High Nature Value Farmland in the west and north west is removing biodiversity in these areas. Afforestation planning contains no safeguards to protect ground-nesting birds and this must change. The Government must publish and implement a strong Threat Response Plan for the Hen Harrier to allow this species to thrive and to support upland farming communities.

In relation to our vast marine area, Ireland needs to fully implement the Common Fisheries Policy and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, ensuring that fisheries are sustainable, and adopt an ecosystem-based approach. We must ensure that 10% of our marine area is designated as Marine Protected Areas by 2020 and 30% by 2030. Ireland's MPA network should include sea areas used by foraging seabirds (hotspots) and migratory bottlenecks. Better marine spatial planning and rigorous environmental assessments of offshore renewable energy developments are also required and we can help in that regard with our offshore marine renewables sensitivity mapping for birds.

We cannot protect what we don't measure. Funding is needed for additional bird survey coverage to fill gaps in our knowledge of bird species distributions and abundances. This will require professional co-ordination and survey with support from citizen scientists. In particular, we suggest the implementation of a series of surveys which have the potential to considerably improve species coverage, reducing the proportion of inadequately monitored species, such as breeding wetland and waterbirds; woodland birds; breeding waders; farmland birds; scarce species not covered by other national surveys and special surveys of species not covered by any of the above (includes Red Grouse, Whinchat and Golden Plover).

There are several policies that could be adopted by government to benefit our urban bird species including making it mandatory that all new public buildings (e.g. schools, libraries and hospitals) have Swift nest cavities (Swift bricks) installed to provide safe and permanent nest sites for Swifts. This would go a long way towards halting the rapid local extinctions we are seeing across the country.

### **Conclusion**

Indeed, there is a long list of actions that need to be undertaken to protect wild bird populations including, strengthening our national laws and their implementation, working with communities to increase awareness of the importance of Ireland for birds, and ensuring that biodiversity on the island of Ireland- a single biogeographic unit, is protected as part of Brexit negotiations.

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