



Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action

Dr. Anita Donaghy, Head of Species and Land Management
Oonagh Duggan, Head of Advocacy

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People have always had a strong connection with wild birds in Ireland. Species like the Curlew, Lapwing, and the extinct Bittern, are mentioned in our songs, poems, prose and folklore. Birds adorn important texts like the Book of Kells. Whether in the garden, along the coast or in the countryside, the presence and songs of birds has given people great joy and respite during the Covid-19 pandemic. Wild birds are also indicators of the health of our environment and many of our regularly occurring species are monitored to detect changes in populations and in the world around us.

In April 2021 BirdWatch Ireland and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Northern Ireland jointly published our fourth assessment since 1999 of the Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland list 2020-2026¹ (or commonly known as the BoCCI list).

This is a quantitative assessment based on the most up-to-date information available from a range of studies. Using a traffic light system, BoCCI indicates the conservation status of bird species on the island of Ireland by placing them onto three lists – Red, Amber or Green, indicating whether the species is of high, medium or low conservation concern.

The key message is that more birds than ever are now Red-listed in Ireland, which is the highest status of concern for their populations. A total of 54 Irish bird species (26%) are now on the Red List. An additional 79 species (37%) are now 'Amber-listed', and 78 are on the Green list (i.e. not currently at risk). **This means that 63% of Ireland's bird species are now in trouble; either in Ireland or other parts of their range and about a quarter of all our birds are suffering declines here in Ireland.** Not only are some declining species becoming more threatened but even recently common species are declining too.

The main groups of birds of concern are those of wetlands, farmland and our marine environment. Ireland is an important wintering area for migratory waterbirds that breed at Arctic latitudes and migrate southwards, using our estuaries, coastal bays, rivers and lakes as staging posts or wintering areas. We used to host well over one million waterbirds during winter, but this number has decreased by a shocking 40% since the mid 1990's.

¹ Gilbert, G, Stanbury, A., Lewis, L., (2021) Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 4: 2020–2026 *Irish Birds* 43: 1–22 Kilcoole available here <https://birdwatchireland.ie/birds-of-conservation-concern-in-ireland/>

Since Ireland has been farmed for millennia, many bird species have found a niche in Irish farmland, breeding, over wintering and stopping off there on migration. In 1999, 11 farmland birds of meadows, arable, pasture and upland habitats were on the Red list. Today one of these the Corn Bunting, an arable specialist, has become extinct and a further 8 new species has been added from across all farmed habitats, indicating a continued marked decline in the quantity and quality of these important areas for biodiversity in the last 20 years. Shockingly the Kestrel and Snipe were until recently widespread on farmland and are now Red Listed. The Kestrel has suffered a 28% decline in breeding population between 2006-2016 and the Snipe has declined by over 50% in the last 25 years. Ireland will possibly be the first European country to lose the iconic Curlew as a breeding species.

In relation to seabirds, three species were added to the most recent Red List including Kittiwake, Razorbill and the much-loved Puffin. Since the departure of the UK from the EU, Ireland is the most important member state for four of the red-listed seabirds.

Ireland is losing its diversity and abundance of bird species. We are at a tipping point and we are deeply concerned about what the next BoCCI will look like if concerted action is not taken now to safeguard our wild birds.

Causes and What Needs to be Done

Climate change is playing a part in the decline of some species but the loss of, and degradation of habitats, pollution, depredation of nests and chicks, and disturbance caused by human activities in Ireland are the most significant reasons for declines. Specifically, the stepped up and continued intensification of agriculture, afforestation on high nature value farmland, inadequate protection of hedgerows, peatlands and other habitats, overfishing and unmanaged recreation are all taking a toll. On top of this the failure to enforce environmental laws, inadequate environmental assessment of projects and plans, and poor mitigation measures, are on their own, and cumulatively, leading to this terrible outcome for wild birds and associated biodiversity. Sectoral policies and plans are undermining policies and legal obligations to protect nature. In addition, chronic underfunding of the National Parks and Wildlife Service means that they are not in a position to fulfil their important role to coordinate the national response to addressing loss of biodiversity. Even though under EU law all wild birds are protected, Ireland is failing to protect them and the habitats they need.

Protecting and restoring biodiversity must be at the heart of all government land use policies and decisions. Failure to halt losses and reverse trends will mean further breaches of international legal obligations and it will hamper our ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

We must meet our targets to cut emissions by 51% by 2030 and every sector must play its part. In addition, we must undertake landscape scale restoration of habitats to complement absolute emissions cuts. Nature-based solutions for climate action will help wild birds but preventing further catastrophic declines and extinctions will require a significant, coordinated, sustained effort of targeted and properly resourced measures. These include supporting high nature value farming and pulling back on the intensification of agriculture, providing generous agri-environment schemes in the CAP to support farmers to farm with nature and for nature, a new forestry model protects the biodiversity we have, resourced species recovery plans, reducing the impact of predation, enforcement of environmental legislation, urgent designation of new and effective marine protected areas, and the sensitive deployment of renewables both onshore and offshore.

BirdWatch Ireland is playing its part through the restoration of peatlands in Donegal and Sligo, working directly with farmers in Galway and Leitrim to save Curlew and a range of other survey, monitoring, conservation and awareness raising projects.

The tide of public opinion has turned as declines in environmental quality become more obvious. We must listen to the science and act to protect our valuable heritage and so that our countryside and coast doesn't go quiet for the lack of birds.

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