

## 2014 WICKLOW COUNTY BIRD RACE

A sightings round-up by Niall T. Keogh

The Wicklow County Bird Race took place on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2014. Three teams met at Bray Promenade at 06:45 and then raced around the county from 07:00 trying to see as many species as possible before meeting at The Beehive Inn at 19:00. This was the first Wicklow County Bird Race to last 12 hours and also the first held in March. By the end of the day, a cumulative total of **102 species** of bird were recorded by all teams. With little in the way of scarce or rare species around the county, this year's total compared well to the 2013 day total of 104 species.

### 2014 Wicklow County Bird Race team scores as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> place (95 & ½ points): 'The Southside Swifts' – Brian Porter, Niall T. Keogh, Noel Keogh & Alan Lauder.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> place (89 & ½ points): 'The Peckers' – Dick Coombes, Gerry Lyons & Mick Boyle.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> place (77 points): 'Bussed a Gull' – Stephen McAvoy (a sterling solo effort using public transport only!)

The day was bright, mild & calm for the most part with increased cloud cover, some light to moderate winds and drizzle developing only in the late afternoon. Viewing conditions were excellent for finding birds on the sea but one of the great obstacles of the day was how desperately quiet it was on the seabird front. A handful of **Guillemots & Black Guillemots** were seen around Bray Head in the morning and just one each of Guillemot & **Razorbill** were seen flying South past Kilcoole later in the day! Small numbers of **Fulmars & Kittiwakes** were noted, mostly off Bray Head & at Wicklow Head and just the one **Gannet** was recorded, off Kilcoole. **Great Northern Divers** are generally considered to be a scarce bird in Wicklow but given how abundant they are this winter it was no great surprise to find 3 off Kilcoole and one at Broad Lough. Numbers of **Red-throated Divers** reached an amazing 120 birds off Kilcoole back in December 2013 but just 5 were seen between Greystones & Six Mile Point on the day. **Common Scoters** appeared to be on the move with a total of 35 birds in several flocks recorded moving along the coast between Bray & Six Mile Point.

Over the past few years, the Vartry Reservoir has become by far the best site in the county for **Great Crested Grebe** of which several full breeding plumaged birds were seen along with excellent views of two 'redhead' (female/immature) **Goosander** and a flock of 17 Whooper Swans. Another regular wintering flock of 30+ Whooper Swans was present in the coastal fields at Newcastle along with 200+ **Icelandic Greylag Geese**. No *Aythya* diving duck were found and just 2 **Coot** were present at Arklow Ponds (and absent from all other once regular sites checked on the day). The decline in the already small numbers of diving duck & Coot in Wicklow in recent times is worrying. **Water Rails** were heard squealing from reedbeds between Kilcoole and Blackditch East Coast Nature Reserve whilst **Little Egrets** seen away from well-known sites included 3 at Buckroneigh marsh and a single bird at the Vartry Reservoir.

The Spring sunshine and light winds made conditions excellent for Bird of Prey with teams logging 10+ **Buzzards**, 2 **Sparrowhawks**, 2 **Kestrels** & 3 **Peregrines** across the county. A single **Merlin** was seen at Kilcoole and a **Long-eared Owl** was heard calling at a traditional site in the South of the county. Furthermore, two **Red Kites** originating from the re-introduction project were seen South of Wicklow Town but the species is not currently counted on bird race tallies.

The marsh at 'Webb's field', Kilcoole held some excellent numbers of common waders: 250+ **Black-tailed Godwits**, c.100 **Golden Plover**, 100+ **Dunlin** & some displaying **Lapwing**. Among these were singles of **Greenshank** & **Grey Plover**, both excellent birds for the county. Two **Purple Sandpipers** were at Greystones and a pair of displaying **Woodcock** were seen at Black Hill in the evening. **Ringed Plovers** were plentiful on the day with birds seen at Greystones, Kilcoole & Broad Lough including several displaying males. A flock of 8 **Little Gulls** just North of Arklow harbour were probably leftovers from the excellent numbers seen along the Wicklow coast in recent weeks brought inshore by strong winds and rain. Migrating **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** are beginning to appear around the county with birds seen at Vartry Reservoir, Blackditch ECNR and Broad Lough.

The bright, calm and mild conditions for most of the day made it excellent for finding passerines. Many tillage fields have already been ploughed and re-seeded but those that were still left as stubble held small numbers of **Yellowhammers** and **Reed Buntings**. A couple of **Tree Sparrows** at Windgates and another at Newcastle were both surprise finds on the day of a species which is scarce in the county. A large flock of **Chaffinches** feeding on Beech mast at Powerscourt Demesne contained at least 2 **Brambling** (up to 7 were seen here recently). A good species to get on the race considering how rare they have been across Ireland as a whole this winter. Two flocks of **Crossbills** numbering 10+ birds were seen and heard at the Vartry Reservoir with small numbers of **Redwing** and **Fieldfare** were scattered across the fields in the surrounding area. **Stonechats** were plentiful along the coast, **Skylarks** were in full song at several sites and quite a few **Rock Pipits** were present at Greystones. Wintering **Blackcaps** were picked up in gardens at Newcastle & Delgany. Flyover **Siskins** were handy to get on the day with others seen on garden feeders but **Lesser Redpolls** were a bit trickier to nail down.

Just one **Dipper** was recorded, at Enniskerry but several **Grey Wagtails** were seen at Enniskerry, Vartry Reservoir, Kilmacanoge & Arklow. **Treecreepers** were recorded at Killruddery, Vartry Reservoir and ECNR and a single **Jay** was seen at Killruddery. **Ravens** were seen at Killruddery, Black Hill and Vartry Reservoir and quite a few **Stock Doves** were at Powerscourt, Kilcoole, ECNR and Broad Lough. A **Chiffchaff** was heard calling near the entrance to ECNR but not seen. Perhaps more likely to be an overwintering bird as opposed to a fresh Spring arrival?

Species which have often been seen on previous race days but absent in 2014 include Tufted Duck, Pochard, Hen Harrier, Mediterranean Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Kingfisher & Black Redstart.



The Southside Swifts (L-R: Noel Keogh, Brian Porter, Niall T. Keogh & Alan Lauder)



The Peckers (L-R: Gerry Lyons, Dick Coombes & Mick Boyle)



Bussed A Gull (Stephen McAvoy)