

## Some East Coast Co-Incidences

When viewed from a particular point of view birding consists of a sequence of co-incidences, *i.e.* both an observer and a bird are in the same place at the same time and the bird watcher happens to observe the 'birdee', so to speak. Within the geographical boundaries of the East Coast region that comprises counties Louth, Meath, Dublin and Wicklow we should expect the majority of these co-incidences to involve expected and familiar species. Every now and again however, the co-incidence of bird and person occurs for the first time and a new species is added to the Irish List.

Nowadays, the majority of new species in Ireland are found in the south and west of the country; however the East Coast region has added its fair share historically. Prior to the publication of the Irish Bird Report in 1953, the details of species new to Ireland were described in a number of publications including *The Birds of Ireland* by P.G. Kennedy, R.F. Ruttledge and C.F. Scroope and *Birds of Ireland* by R.J. Ussher and R. Warren. The former, published in 1900 includes records as far back as 1800 and the latter, published in 1954, adding records to 1953.

The earliest recorded addition to the Irish List found within the East Coast is Stone Curlew. This occurred near Clontarf in January 1829 when one was shot. Stone Curlew is classified as a wading bird although it is more usually seen on grassland or in fields than on estuaries or the seashore. In that case, perhaps the location near Clontarf was parkland rather than the foreshore of Dublin Bay? We will never know for sure but wherever it was, a strange looking bird like a Stone Curlew must have stood out, probably contributing towards its demise.

By the end of the 19th century the region contributed a further nineteen species to the Irish List. Very often it turned out to be bad news for the bird as the majority did not survive the experience, ending up as an exhibit in some trophy cabinet!

One notable record was the occurrence of a Lesser Kestrel. The bird, an adult male, was first noticed in Glenamuck, County Dublin around the 8th November 1890. Even today this area between the M50 and the Golden Ball is a patchwork of fields. The bird was reported to '*follow the plough like a Gull, walking along the furrows; then it would rise and quarter the ground until it saw a worm, on which it would immediately drop*' (Ussher & Warren 1900). At that time of year, Lesser Kestrels should be somewhere south of the Sahara but this individual settled instead for south County Dublin, where it remained in the general area until the following February when, sad to say, it met the same end as the Stone Curlew and was shot on the 17th February near Shankill, a few miles from Glenamuck. The specimen is held at the Natural History Museum on Merrion Street beside Leinster House. It remains the sole record of this species in Ireland to date.

Lighthouses have played a significant role in adding new species to the Irish list. One of the most prominent lights on the east coast is located on Rockabill off Skerries in north County Dublin. Construction of the light was completed by 1860 and when it began operating it was reported by George Halpin, an Inspector of the Ballast Board (a predecessor to the

Commissioners of Irish Lights), that '(the light's) ..*brilliance surpassed any other catoptric light on the east coast*' ([www.cil.ie](http://www.cil.ie)).

Nowadays Rockabill is best known as an important breeding site for the Roseate Tern, but way back in the autumn of 1908 it also added two species to the Irish List and as so often the case with lighthouse records both were found dead.

The first was a Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, a *Locustella* warbler from Central Asia that winters from India east to Indonesia. A male was found on the 28th September, predating the first British record on Fair Isle by over forty years. It is just possible more of these arrive on our shores in autumn than recorded as their behaviour is so secretive and skulking. Since then, there has been just one further record on Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork in 1990. The Pallas in question is the German zoologist Peter Simon Pallas, one of the greatest 18th century naturalists. His name is celebrated in about a dozen species of bird as well as mammals, fish, insects and he has even given his name to a volcano.

Just four days later, on the 2nd October, a female Little Bunting died striking the light. This species breeds from Norway eastwards to the Pacific Ocean in high latitudes while spending the winter months in south-east Asia. It has become a regular autumn vagrant to north-west Europe with individuals having occurred as far west as Iceland including just over 40 Irish records.

Probably the best-known birding location within the East Coast region is the North Bull Island, close to Raheny and just a few miles north of Dublin's city centre. It is the most recent part of Dublin to form as a result of a build up of silt just off-shore following the construction of the North Bull Wall in the 1820s. By 1900 the island's geography had more or less become the one we are familiar with today.

During 1953 and 1954 the Bull contributed two new species to the Irish list. In 1953 a party of four Little Ringed Plovers were observed, followed in 1954 by a pair of American Wigeon. During the intervening years both these species have become regular and more recently have been recorded almost annually. In 2008 Little Ringed Plover was added to the list of Ireland's breeding species when a pair was found with three young in Co. Tipperary and there are reports of possible earlier breeding in Co. Cork during 2006 and 2007 (Hillis 2007, 2008 & 2010).

More remarkable were two species of tern found in the same two years on the Bull, *i.e.* a Bridled Tern in 1953 and a Royal Tern the following year. As both were picked up as tideline corpses the records are assigned to Category D of the Irish list. Species added to this category, which can happen for various reasons, are not included in the national list total. Bridled Tern is a widespread tropical species breeding in both the old and new worlds. There are two races, *melanoptera* from the Caribbean and West Africa and *anaethetus* found throughout the rest of its range in the Indian Ocean, Far East and Australia. On the 29th November 1953 Lt.-Col. C.F. Scroope found a freshly dead individual on the Bull Island. The

Scottish ornithologist, Kenneth Williamson, identified it as an adult of the race *melanoptera* in winter plumage. The specimen is held at the National History Museum and we are still awaiting a live one.

Royal Tern is also comprised of two races, the nominate *maxima* of the Americas and *albididorsalis* from West Africa. On the 24th March 1954, Redmond G. Wheeler found the remains of one on the Bull Island. Unlike the Bridled Tern of the previous year this bird was '*partly covered by sand at the high tide line. The bird had been dead for a considerable while; most of the body feathers had gone, but the head, wings, legs and feet were intact. The wings were somewhat oiled*' (Kennedy 1955). Once again Kenneth Williamson was called on to help with the identification and later it was sent for further examination to Mr. G.M. Spooner, of the Marine Biological Laboratory in Plymouth, Devon. Following Mr. Spooner's critical analysis the editors of the monthly magazine *British Birds* concluded that '*there is a sufficiently strong case to dismiss any suggestion that the bird drifted here as a corpse, and that, therefore, there is every reason to treat it as a genuine vagrant to the British Isles*' (ibid). Not only was it a first for Ireland but also the first European record of the species. It would be another fifty-five years before a living Royal Tern would visit Ireland when one put in a brief appearance during the afternoon and early evening of the 7th June 2009 in and around the estuary at Clonakilty and Ring in Co. Cork.

County Louth did not produce a first record for Ireland until a pair of Bearded Tits were observed near Dunleer in 1966. Just eight years later it would do so again with a real quality bird.

Jim Dowdall and Jim Fitzharris travelled to Clogher Head on the 20th May 1974 in the hope of seeing a Serin, which had been found there the previous day by Colm Moore. The first Irish record of Serin had been taken by bird catchers south of Dublin as far back as 1893. Over eighty years later the Clogher Head bird was only the fourth Irish record and a much sought after tick for the two young birders who had to overcome the difficulty of a Dublin bus strike to reach their destination. After spending some time searching in vain for the Serin, they decided to try their luck with a seawatch, which also proved to be a fruitless exercise. So while thinking about calling it a day Jim Dowdall was flabbergasted when his casual gaze just happened upon an adult male Rock Thrush sitting on the hill above Clogher Head's Port Oriel harbour. In that moment all their earlier disappointments vanished. The following day, Colm Moore and Major Robert Rutledge also managed to see the bird. Rock Thrush takes its name from its preferred breeding habitat on mountain slopes from Spain and Morocco east through southern Europe and the Middle East as far as the Himalayas. It spends the winter mainly in Africa. There has been one subsequent Irish record in Co. Clare during September 1995.

Just over eight years later Jim Fitzharris did not have to travel as far for another first Irish record when he found a Forster's Tern at Sandymount Strand on the south side of Dublin Bay on the 21st November 1982. The bird was in first-winter plumage and it remained in the vicinity of Dublin Bay until the following February. This species was not recorded in the

Western Palearctic until 1959 or in Britain until 1980. It seems to be making up for lost time as there have been about 35 records in Ireland since, although it is difficult to be precise about the exact number as many records would appear to involve the same individual returning to the same location over a number of winters and more recently, summers. This tern breeds in North America on the prairies as well as on the east coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. It spends the winter south of its breeding range as far as Central America. The name remembers Johann Reinhold Forster who was an 18th century clergyman in the city state of Danzig on the Baltic Sea, now known as the Polish city of Gdańsk. Forster subsequently accompanied Captain James Cook as naturalist on one of his voyages to southern seas and would later write the formal description of a tern collected in Hudson Bay that now bears his name.

In the late summer and early autumn Sandymount Strand is a good area to search for Black Terns. These are birds of the nominate race *niger* returning south for the winter. When Belgian birder Peter Adriaens arrived there during the afternoon of the 3rd September 1999 it was not so unusual to find a group of 'seven Black Terns flying far out over the sea (later on, at least 18 Black Terns were present)' (Adriaens 1999). While searching through the group in the hope of finding a White-winged Black Tern he noticed a juvenile tern that "showed obviously dark grey flanks" (ibid). By a happy co-incidence he had seen similar birds the previous week; but not in Ireland and not even in Europe but almost three thousand miles away in Jamaica Bay, New York. It didn't take him long to realise he was watching the first Black Tern of the North American race *surinamensis* for Ireland and just the fourth record for the Western Palearctic. Fortunately it remained for a further four days allowing birders to catch up with this fascinating bird. American Black Tern has a wide distribution throughout much of North America and is a long distance migrant to Central and South America. Since the bird at Sandymount there have been a further four recorded in Ireland.

In total, since 1900, the East Coast region has added about fifteen full species as well as some well-marked races, such as the American Black Tern, to the Irish list. As of May 2014 the most recent addition was Great Knot, a first cousin of our Red Knot. Great Knot breeds in the tundra regions of north-east Siberia, migrating south to spend the winter mainly in SE Asia, Australia, Arabia, Pakistan, north India and Bangladesh. This one was well off course when it paid a visit to the estuary of the Broadmeadow at Swords, Co. Dublin on the 25th July 2004. Fortunately Joe Doolan was on hand to record the co-incidence, as it didn't hang around very long.

The appearance of any bird, especially a first record is never a scheduled event; indeed it often seems to happen when it is least expected. If I were to hazard a guess about the many people who have found first Irish records I would say that very few, if any, considered the prospect when heading out on the day in question and that, in my opinion, is the great joy of birding co-incidences.

**Joe Hobbs, May 2014.**

**Scientific names of species mentioned in this note:**

American Wigeon *Anas americana*  
Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicephalus*  
Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*  
Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*  
Red Knot *Calidris canutus*  
Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*  
Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*  
American Black Tern *Chlidonias niger surinamensis*  
White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*  
Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*  
Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*  
Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*  
Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*  
Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*  
Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella certhiola*  
Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*  
Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*  
Serin *Serinus serinus*  
Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*

**References**

- Adriaens, P.** 1999. The American Black Tern in Co. Dublin. *Birding World* 12(9): 378-379.
- Kennedy, P.G.** 1955. Royal Tern in Dublin, a new British Bird. *British Birds* 48(3):116-117.
- Hillis, J.P.** 2007. Rare breeding birds in Ireland, 2005-2006. *Irish Birds* 8(2): 249-262.
- Hillis, J.P.** 2008. Rare Irish Breeding Birds, 2007 The Seventh Annual Report of the Irish Rare Breeding Birds Panel (IRBBP). *Irish Birds* 8(3): 365-372.
- Hillis, J.P.** 2010. Rare Irish Breeding Birds, 2008 The Annual Report of the Irish Rare Breeding Birds Panel (IRBBP). *Irish Birds* 8(4): 571-582.
- Ussher, R.J. & Warren, R.** 1900. *The Birds of Ireland*. Gurney and Jackson, London.