

More Birding Co-Incidences, 1st Irish Records in Co. Galway.

In a previous note¹ I described the occurrences and events surrounding some of the 1st Irish records from the East Coast region of counties Louth, Meath, Dublin and Wicklow. In this note I have taken the advice of Horace Greeley to 'Go west, young man' and turn my attention to 1st Irish records from Co. Galway. That county's extensive indented coastline and offshore islands are an ornithological delight, providing the birder with good birds and the real prospect of a rarity. It's location on the west coast means that most vagrants found there originate in the New World. That said, the earliest addition to the Irish list from that county came from southern Europe rather than the west. A Great Spotted Cuckoo was on Omev Island in March 1842. While pursued by hawks it flew into a crevice in a stone wall to avoid capture. Unfortunately, its bolthole was noticed by passers-by and they captured it alive. It survived in captivity for four days during which time it was fed on potatoes and water. This handsome bird has occurred on a further eight occasions in Ireland, all but one of these during springtime as a result of overshooting its southern European breeding grounds.

There would be two further firsts before the end of the 19th century and both were New World waders. An Upland Sandpiper was shot on the River Suck near Ballinasloe in the autumn of 1885. Back then Upland Sandpiper was known as Bartram's Sandpiper after the American naturalist and author, William Bartram. As for appearance, think small Curlew without the long bill. Unusually for a wading bird it is not typically found along estuaries or shorelines, instead choosing to breed on the prairie grasslands of Canada and the USA, departing for the pampas of South America to winter. It is rare on this side of the Atlantic and the intervening years have produced only eleven further Irish records, most recently on the Mullet Peninsula, Co. Mayo in 2011. This probably has much to do with its preferred migration route through the Great Plains of North America, Mexico and Central America, a journey that manages to avoid the open sea and deep fast moving Atlantic depressions. Next was a Pectoral Sandpiper, a species that is now an annual visitor to Ireland. In October 1888 Edward Williams discovered and procured a male Pectoral Sandpiper in a Dublin market. It had arrived with a consignment of Snipe from Portumna where it had been shot. It takes its name from the noticeably sharp dividing line between its heavily spotted breast and pure white belly. Pectoral Sandpipers have the distinction of occurring naturally in both the Old and New Worlds with populations breeding on marshy boggy areas of Siberia as well as on the other side of the Bering Sea in Alaska and Canada. It is a long-distance migrant spending the winter as far south as Australasia and South America.

In June 1919 Alcock and Brown made the first non-stop transatlantic flight. It ended when they crash-landed their Vickers Vimy in a field near Cliften. Less than a year later a Sora made a similar voyage that ended when it crash-landed against Slyne Head's lighthouse lantern on 11th April 1920. Present to record another Irish first and collect the specimen for the National Museum was Professor C.J. Patten. The arrival date is unusual but not unique as

there are other spring records of this Nearctic rail in Europe. It breeds locally throughout much of North America in a wide range of marshy habitats and migrates south to Central and north South America using a variety of routes over land and sea. To date there has been one further Irish record from Wexford in 1998.

It would be almost fifty years before Galway would produce another national first and unlike its predecessors, it would survive the experience. On the first day of July 1969, on the beach at Ballyconneely Bay, a Gull-billed Tern. About the size of a Sandwich Tern but more robust and with a thick black gull-like bill. They have a rather fragmented distribution in the old and new worlds, wintering in the tropics. A further seventeen have reached our shores since 1969.

A report of a Rough-legged Buzzard in Claregalway had enticed Dublin birders Aidan G. Kelly, Tom Shevlin and Victor Caschera west on the 18th November 1995. They were rewarded with excellent views of the bird on the ground and in the air. From there they headed on to Nimmo's Pier in the hope of some northern gulls. On arrival, Tom and Victor remained in the car for a quick brew while Aidan headed off along the pier. On raising his binoculars he noticed a Cormorant with an orangey lower mandible and gape that immediately started alarm bells ringing in his head. As soon as he was able to view the bird through a telescope he realised it was a Double-crested Cormorant, a species he has previously seen in the USA. He ran back to alert Tom and Victor and together they managed to see the bird again before it flew out of the harbour and out of view. A crowd assembled once the news got out and an anxious three hour wait followed until the bird magically reappeared back at the exact same spot where Aidan first noticed it. Although it remained in the area until early the following year it was often very elusive, and erratic in its presence. To date, no further Irish records have occurred.

Inishbofin lies about five miles off the Connemara coast to the northwest of Cleggan Bay. In recent years, well known Belfast author and ornithologist, Anthony McGeehan has ensured that this island has featured prominently in the consciousness of Irish birders as he has found so many great birds there including two first Irish. On the 2nd November 2007 he found a Mourning Dove, a first for Ireland and the just the 6th for the Western Palearctic. It spent the next two weeks roaming the island and was last seen on the 15th November. It is tempting to speculate on the subsequent fate of vagrant birds. Do they realise they are lost and somehow make the necessary course adjustments to resume their journey? Well this bird seems to have settled down in these parts as photographs of a Mourning Dove in northeastern Germany and at Skagen in Denmark during the following May 2008 strongly suggest it was the same bird. Mourning Dove is a widespread and common bird in North and Central America where its sorrowful call provides its name. There has been one further Irish record at Garinish Point on the Beara Peninsula, Co. Cork in October 2009.

On the 24th September 2008 the report of a Little Egret at Barnaderg Bay near Letterfrack was brought to the attention of Aonghus O'Donail and Dermot Breen. On arrival they managed to locate it on the shore opposite the Avoca Gift Shop. They considered but soon discounted the possibility that it might be a Snowy Egret and they left the bird unable to completely resolve some of its features with that of Little Egret. On the 4th October Dermot was birding on Inishmore and that evening he settled down to browse David Sibley's 'North American Bird Guide' in order to get-up on North American wood warblers. He never got past page 63, because that's when he saw the Barnaderg bird of two weeks previous looking straight out at him and it was not a Little Egret, not even a Snowy Egret but a lovely juvenile Little Blue Heron! A rather frantic text message was sent to Aonghus that ensured he was back in Barnaderg Bay at first light the following morning when he was able to confirm that the bird was still present as well as its identification as a Little Blue Heron. A first record for Galway, Ireland, Europe and just the fourth for the Western Palearctic as there had been three previous in the Azores. It remained until the 22nd October attracting a steady stream of birders from Ireland and Britain. Little Blue Heron breeds colonially in sub-tropical swamps from the US Gulf south through Central America as far as Peru and Uruguay. It is largely of sedentary habits although birds in the northern part of its range do migrate south. Young Little Blue Herons, like the Barnaderg individual are white, only acquiring their distinctive blue plumage as they age. None have been recorded here since.

While undertaking an I-WeBS count off Rinville Point near Oranmore on the 30th January 2010 Michael Davis found and photographed a Pacific Diver. This species was long thought to be a race of Black-throated Diver and indeed looks very similar to that species, which makes Michael's identification all the more impressive. Efforts to relocate the bird were not immediately successful and it looked like it was going to go down as a one-day wonder until it turned up again six weeks later on the other side of Galway Bay at Finvarra Point in Co. Clare. It hung around that location on and off throughout March and May, went missing in April, until last seen on 23rd May. So far so good, but that was not the end of the story. More than a year previous to Michael Davis's great find two British birders, Paul Cook and Lawrence Pitcher, were on a visit to the west early in 2009. While on Tawin Island on the 12th January they noticed an interesting looking diver swimming well off-shore. Despite managing to grab some video footage of this individual its exact identification eluded them at the time and being cautious birders they were not prepared to jump to any conclusions. However as time went by they began to suspect more and more that they had found a Pacific Diver. Perhaps encouraged by the 2010 record they submitted their video footage and extensive field notes to the Irish Rare Birds Committee as a Pacific Diver, which was accepted as the first Irish record. In addition, the IRBC determined that it was the same bird that Michael Davis found a year later. Pacific Diver breeds on tundra lakes in northern Canada and eastern Siberia before moving to Pacific coasts for the winter. There is one subsequent record, a bird was present on Lough Fea, Co. Tyrone during January and February 2014.

October 2009 brought a fine spell of late summer weather to Inishbofin but very few birds of note. On the 14th October the absence of any noticeable autumn passage prompted Anthony McGeehan and Craig Nash to indulge in a spot of *Phylloscopus* identification near some willow bushes, where both Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler were present. This ambitious task was soon forgotten when Anthony happened upon 'the face of a waxwing (McGeehan & Nash 2009)' in the *Phylloscopus* bush. A waxwing on Inishbofin in October was unusual enough but Anthony had seen enough to suspect it was a first-winter Cedar Waxwing, a potential first for Ireland and fifth for the Western Palearctic. There followed a nervous wait while Anthony and Craig attempted to get better views of the bird to confirm the identity. In the end their patience paid off big-time when Anthony managed to see the bird's creamy-white undertail-coverts and that clinched it as a Cedar Waxwing once and for all! To the great dismay of the many that travelled the following day for a much sough-after tick the bird had not hung around and was never to be seen again. Cedar Waxwing is the Nearctic congener of our Bohemian Waxwing and is widespread over much of North America. Both are superficially similar but Cedar Waxwing is smaller, has white undertail-coverts, a brownish chest, a yellow belly and a plain grey upperwing.

Dublin birder Hugh Delaney has been visiting Inishmore each autumn since 2008 with mixed results. He gets around on a pushbike, scanning as he goes along for anything worth stopping for. In the early afternoon of the 5th October 2012 he was cycling along a road in an area west of Kilmurvey Beach when he caught sight of a bird sitting on top of a stone wall in a characteristic upright stance. Hugh immediately recognised it as an Eastern Kingbird, a bird he had seen previously in the USA. In birding terms this was winning the lottery, a first Irish and first Western Palearctic record for Galway. Hugh got the news out and despite the difficulty of getting out to Inishmore at a moments notice, three birders managed to get there before the bird was last seen around 6pm. About 70 arrived the following day only to be disappointed as it seems the Kingbird had departed the island overnight. Eastern Kingbird breeds across southern Canada and from the Rocky Mountains east to the Atlantic seaboard in the USA. A second Kingbird was found on Inishbofin by Anthony McGeehan in September 2013 so both Western Palearctic records of this species have been on Co. Galway islands and both were one-day birds.

That should be it then, but not quite as there is a pending record from February 2014 of a Slaty-backed Gull at Waterside, Galway City that was found by Tom Cuffe. Unlike most of the previous firsts this is an Eastern Palearctic gull found in northeast Siberia and Japan, with some moving south as far as Taiwan during winter. If it is accepted by the IRBC it will be published in the 2014 Irish Rare Bird Report, as it surely will be.

Joe Hobbs, December 2014.

¹ **Some East Coast Co-Incidences**, available online from the South Dublin Branch website at: <http://www.southdublinbirds.com/notes/notes.php>

Scientific names of species mentioned in this note:

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*

Pacific Diver *Gavia pacifica*

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*

Sora *Porzana Carolina*

Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda*

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*

Slaty-backed Gull *Larus schistisagus*

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*

Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius*

Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum*

Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*

References & useful reading:

Breen, D. 2008. The Little Blue Heron in County Galway a new European bird. *Birding World* 21(10): 436-440.

Cuffe, T. 2014. All the way from the Pacific. Slaty-backed Gull: Waterside, Co. Galway, 8 February 2014. *Birdwatch* 261: 8-9.

Delaney, H. 2012. The Eastern Kingbird in County Galway - a new Western Palearctic bird. *Birding World* 25(10): 430-432.

Kelly, A.G. 1996. Double-crested Cormorant in County Galway - a species new for Ireland. *Irish Birds* 5(4): 436-438.

McGeehan, A. & Nash, C. 2009. The Cedar Waxwing in County Galway. *Birding World* 22(10): 420-423.