



Northern Water-thrush, Greenish Warbler and Yellow-breasted Bunting on Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork - 11th September 1983

by John Coveney

Introduction

Unusually for a Sunday in September 1983, I was at home during the late morning of the 11th September when I got a phone call from Dennis O'Sullivan. Modern birders, who are used to instant tweets of 'megas', may struggle with the idea of being out of touch if you were out birding! However, this was a year before the first commercially available **mobile phone** * – and only a few years after rarity news travelled off Cape Clear by postcard – honestly!

* **Note: External links are indicated in this font colour.**

Pic. 1. Central Bog, Cape Clear Island.

As it appears in 2015.

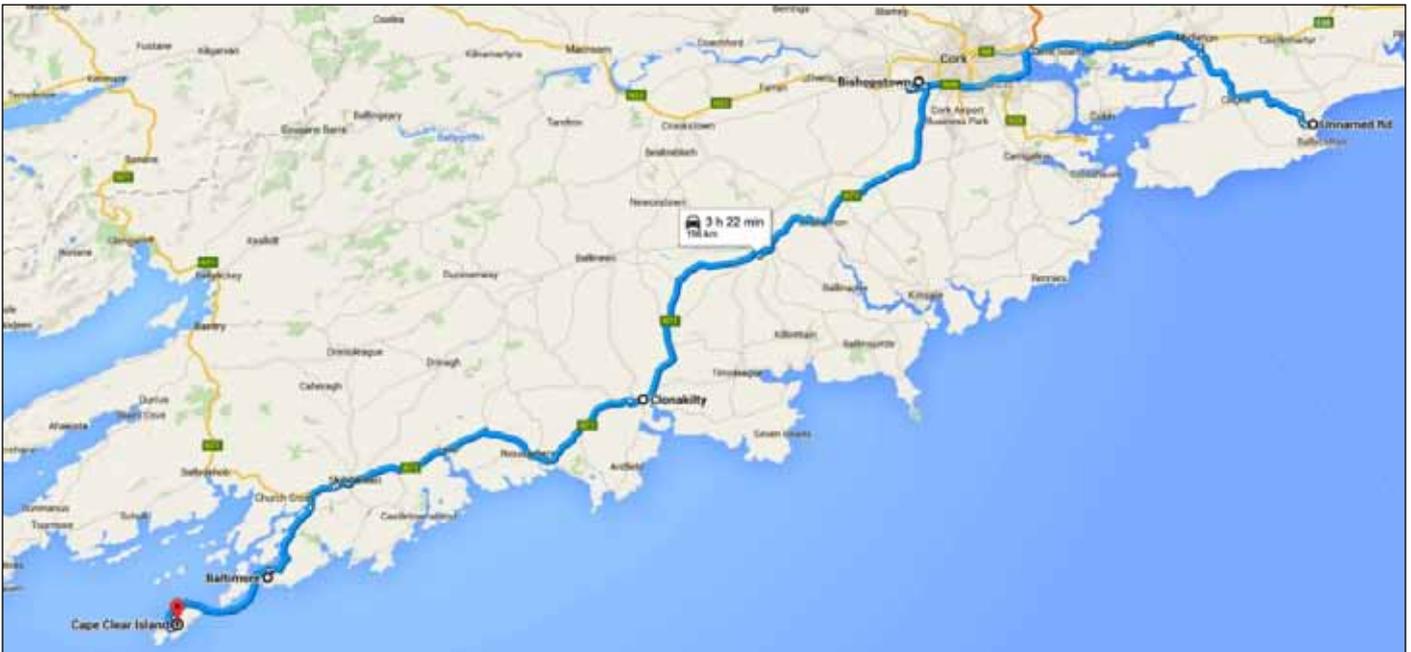
Photo: Dick Coombes.

News from Cape

Anyway, during his regular Sunday morning birding trip to Shanagarry Marsh and (the then) Ballycotton Lake, Dennis met a birder on the beach who had come off **Cape Clear** – on his way home to Britain. Astonishingly he had seen a Northern Waterthrush as well as a Greenish Warbler there the previous day.

At the time, there were still some birders who thought twitching should be discouraged, so it was purely due to this chance meeting that the news got out! Dennis knew he couldn't get from **Ballycotton to Baltimore** for the 2:15pm ferry to Cape that day – then the old Naomh Ciarán as shown in **this video** from 1980. It would be another two years before the idea of chartering boats to and from Cape began with a twitch for the **Scarlet Tanager and the Philadelphia Vireo**.

However, he thought I might just make it from Bishopstown and he dashed home to make the call. It's probably best not to dwell on the health and safety aspects of that crazy motorbike ride to Baltimore via Bandon, Clonakilty, Rosscarberry, Leap, and Skibbereen - and after all that I was gutted to arrive five minutes late for the ferry . . . or I would have been, had the ferry not been ten minutes late leaving!



Straight to Central Bog

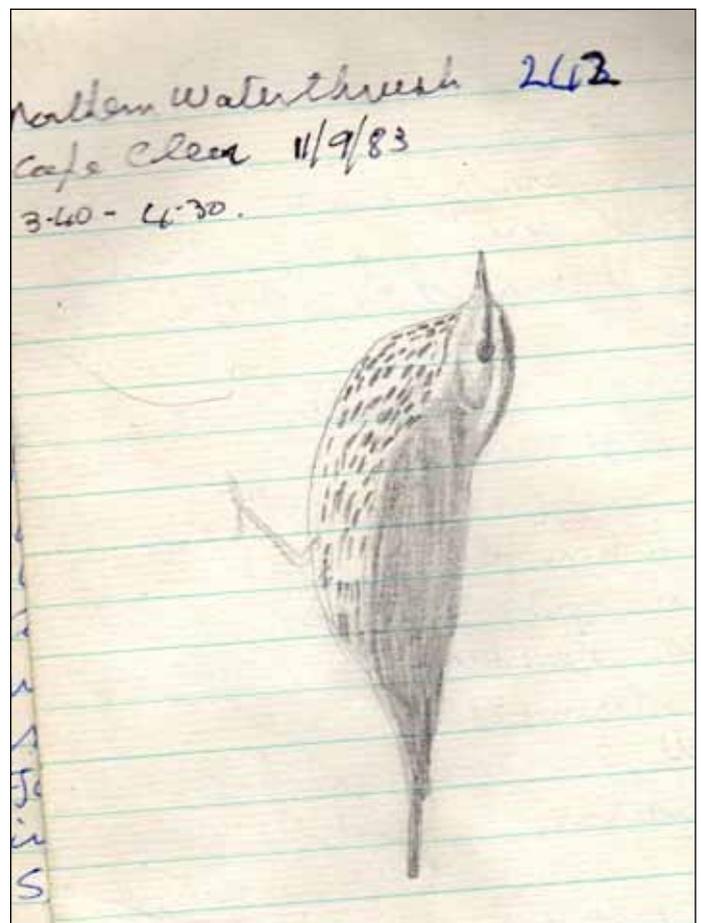
On arrival in the North Harbour on Cape, we - there was a couple of other birders on the boat but I can't remember who - went straight past Cotter's Garden and the Greenish Warbler. This was a lifer for me but the first Irish record of a Northern Waterthrush from America was a far bigger prize so we puffed up Cumber Hill and headed straight out to Ballyieragh's Central Bog without a second thought! Sadly, this bog has since been largely drained.

We arrived about 3:40pm and quickly found the bird feeding actively in a muddy area around the stream leaving the bog. We looked down on it from a small ridge for an about an hour or so and I got this rough sketch (right).

Greenish Warbler and a Strange Bunting

Then we decided to head back to Cotter's Garden to get the Greenish Warbler and we found it about 6:15pm and watched it for about half an hour - until an English birder called Julian Torino rushed breathlessly into the garden saying he had seen a strange bunting up near Mary O'Donoghue's farm at Lough Errul.

I'd never met Julian before - or since - and I didn't quite know what to make of this but as the warbler was well ticked, I and the others thought we might as well go see - in the hope we would get something out of the day :-). On arrival, about 7:35pm, we immediately realized it was certainly a strange bunting and we took detailed notes and sketches until it got dark around 8:10pm (see Pic. 5, next page).



Pic. 2 (top). Map of Cork.

Route, in blue, taken from Ballycotton & Bishopscourt to the Cape Clear Ferry at Baltimore. From: Google Maps.

Pic. 3 (above). Waterthrush Sketch.

Rough sketch that I made of the Northern Waterthrush at Central Bog, Ballyieragh South, Cape Clear, Co. Cork.



Pic. 6 (top). Northern Waterthrush, Cape Clear, 29th August 2008.

Not the 1983 individual, but the only other Irish record that also popped up in Central Bog on Cape Clear.
Photo: Tom Shevlin.

Pic. 7 (above). Yellow-breasted Bunting, Miyun Reservoir, Beijing, China, September 2015.

Not an immature but rather a female bird near Beijing that has yet to get a Cape stamp in her passport!
Photo: Marie Louise Ng.



Pic. 8 (above). Walking Routes on Cape Clear.

Boreens from the North Harbour and Cotter's Garden to the Northern Waterthrush site in Ballieragh South and the Yellow-breasted Bunting site (at Unnamed Rd flag) near Lough Errul.

From: Google Maps.

Pic. 9 (left). Locations in Ballyieragh, Cape Clear.

From: Bing Maps.



Northern Waterthrush

Northern Waterthrush is a New World species that breeds in wooded areas with slow-moving water over much of northern North America. It is highly migratory spending the winter from Mexico south to northern South America and the West Indies.

There are just two Irish records. After a gap of almost 25 years another was found in Central Bog, Cape Clear for a few days in late August 2008 (Pic. 6).

The first Western Palearctic (WP) record was captured on Ile d'Ouessant, Finistere, France on 17th September 1955 and since then there have been about 20 WP records. The 1983 bird is the 6th WP record and the 2008 bird is the 11th.

Grateful Thanks

Many thanks to Dick Coombes, Tom Shevlin (www.wildlifesnaps.com) and Marie Louise Ng (www.birdingbeijing.com) for allowing me use their great pictures and to Joe Hobbs for compiling the status information for the three species.

John Coveney, November 2015
www.johncoveney.ie

Yellow-breasted Bunting

Historically, Yellow-breasted Bunting was one of the most abundant species throughout eastern Europe and Asia. Tragically, its numbers have crashed by up to 95% since 1980 and the western limit of its breeding range, that used to be as close as Finland, has moved about 5,000km to the east! BirdLife International has recently upgraded its status from vulnerable to endangered. One of the main reasons for this decline seems to be illegal trapping for food consumption, especially in China.

There are five Irish records:

1. Tory Island, Donegal. 18th September 1959.
2. Near West Bog, Cape Clear Island, Cork. 11th - 20th September 1983.
3. Trawkieran, Cape Clear Island, Cork. 18th September 1985.
4. Tory Island, Donegal. 21st September 1998.
5. Dursey Island, Co. Cork. 9th October 2010.

Considering its current plight, one wonders if there will ever be a 6th?