

## Some East Coast Coincidences

When viewed from a particular point of view birding consists of a sequence of coincidences, 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 coincidences to involve expected and familiar species. Every now and again however, the coincidence 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 for 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 Irish Bird Reports in 1954, details of species new to Ireland were included in a number of publications, notably, *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 latter, published in 1900 includes records as far back as 1800 and the former, published in 1954, added 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, Dublin around 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 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 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 for hosting the largest Roseate Tern colony in Europe, but way back in the autumn of 1908 it 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 *Helopsaltes* warbler from Central Asia that winters from India east to Indonesia. A male was found on 28th September, predating the first British record at Fair Isle by over forty years. Since then, there has been just one further record at Cape Clear Island, 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, spending the winter months in south-east Asia. It has become a regular vagrant to northwest Europe in autumn with individuals occurring as far west as Iceland including 52 Irish records.

Probably the best-known birding location within the East Coast region is the North Bull Island (or just 'the Bull'), 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 Great South Wall and Bull Wall Bridge in the early 1800s. 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 Tipperary and there are a number of subsequent breeding records in Tipperary, Kilkenny and Wicklow.

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 tide line corpses they were assigned to Category D of the Irish list. Species added to this category, which can happen for various reasons, are not counted 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 region and West Africa and *anaethetus* found throughout the rest of its range in the Indian Ocean, Far East and Australia. On 29th November 1953 Lt.-Col. C.F. Scroope found a freshly dead individual on the Bull. It was sent to the English ornithologist, Kenneth Williamson, who 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 *maximus* of the Americas and *albididorsalis* from West Africa. On 24th March 1954, Redmond G. Wheeler found the remains of one on the Bull. 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 it was later sent for further examination to G.M. Spooner, of the Marine Biological Laboratory in Plymouth, Devon. Following 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 55 years before a live Royal Tern would visit Ireland when one put in a brief appearance during the afternoon and early evening of 7th June 2009 in and around the estuary at Clonakilty and Ring, Cork. In August 2016 another visited locations in Mayo, Kerry and Clare.

Louth did not produce a first Irish until a pair of Bearded Reedlings were observed near Dunleer in 1966. This charming species has become a recent colonist establishing a small breeding population in the southeast. It would be a further eight years before Louth hosted another first and would do so with a real quality bird.

Jim Dowdall and Jim Fitzharris travelled to Clogher Head on 20th May 1974 in the hope of seeing a Serin, which had been found there the previous day by Colm Moore. The first Irish Serin had been taken by bird catchers south of Dublin as far back as 1893. Over 80 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 utterly 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 along 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 other Irish record at Kilbaha, 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 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 39 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 in 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 honours Johann Reinhold Forster who was an 18th century clergyman in the city state of Danzig on the Baltic Sea (now 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.

Ten first Irish have been found in Wicklow, including Montagu's Harrier, Red-footed Falcon, Shore Lark and Ortolan Bunting. The most recent was an early Christmas present for Oscar Merne when a Marsh Tit visited his back garden on Cuala Road, Bray on 17th December 1990 (Merne 1993a, 1993b) and to date is still the only Irish record.

In late summer and early autumn Sandymount Strand is a good area to search for Black Terns. These are birds of the nominate race *niger* on passage to their wintering grounds. When Belgian birder Peter Adriaens arrived there during the afternoon of 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 coincidence he had seen similar birds the previous week; but not in Ireland and not even in Europe but almost 3,000 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 hung around for 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 three Irish records.

Great Knot breeds in tundra regions of northeast Siberia, migrating south to spend the winter in southeast Asia, Australia, Arabia, Pakistan, northern India and Bangladesh. One had wandered way off course on 25th July 2004 when it paid a brief visit to the Malahide Estuary at Swords. Fortunately Joe Doolan was on hand to record the coincidence, as it didn't hang around very long.

There are three subspecies of the *Sylvia* warbler Lesser Whitethroat and all are on the Irish List. The nominate race is predominantly a scarce spring and autumn passage migrant and there is a single record of the Siberian form *blythi* trapped at Great Saltee Island, Wexford on 15th November 1954. Shortly after Christmas 2010 a Lesser Whitethroat was noticed coming to bird feeders in gardens on The Priory and Westcourt Roads in Drogheda. Early in 2011 it was trapped and the biometrics indicated it could be one of the Asian forms. A feather from this bird was sent to Professor Peter de Knijff at Leiden University in the Netherlands for DNA sequencing. The results revealed it to be a somewhat atypical *halimodendri*, known as Central Asian Lesser Whitethroat, a first for Ireland. It remained in the area until the end of March and to date is the most recent addition to the Irish List from the East Coast region.

In total, since 1900, the East Coast region has added nineteen species and subspecies to the Irish list. 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 is the great joy of birding coincidences.

**Joe Hobbs, September 2018.**

## Scientific names of species mentioned in this note:

American Wigeon *Mareca americana*  
Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*  
Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*  
Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*  
Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*  
Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*  
Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*  
Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*  
Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*  
White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*  
(American) Black Tern *Chlidonias niger niger / surinamensis*  
Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*  
Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*  
Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*  
Bearded Reedling (Tit) *Panurus biarmicus*  
Shore Lark *Eremophila alpestris*  
Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler *Helopsaltes certhiola*  
Lesser Whitethroats *Sylvia curruca curruca / blythi / halimodendri*  
Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*  
Serin *Serinus serinus*  
Oortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*  
Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*

## References

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