

# Notes for Beginner Bird Watchers

Joe Hobbs



Sea-watching from the Bridges of Ross, Co. Clare.  
Picture by: Victor Caschera.

## Introduction

In this note the author is addressing the pastime of observing birds for recreational pleasure, and not as a profession or for ornithology. How much or how little time the individual has available is not relevant except that a casual observer might be called a 'bird watcher' while those that take the pastime more seriously are known as 'birders' who engage in 'birding'. Both of these terms are used interchangeably in this note.

The term 'twitch' means to undertake a journey with the purpose of observing a specific bird at a specific location. A person who makes the journey is sometimes known as a 'twitcher', however in the author's view this term describes an activity and not an individual.

Many bird watchers maintain a list of species seen within a specific boundary, e.g. garden, county, Ireland etc or within a specific time period, e.g. day, year. Whatever significance the individual places of such lists is personal and subjective. Regular bird watchers in Ireland can expect to see between 250 and 300 species over a lifetime or even more if they are determined and are prepared to put in the required effort. A national list of species recorded in Ireland is maintained by the Irish Rare Birds Committee ([www.irbc.ie/topbar/categories.php](http://www.irbc.ie/topbar/categories.php)). The most recent total (31st December 2011) is 467 and there are pending records from 2012 and 2013. A 'Bird Race' is an event that involves teams (usually of 3 or 4), attempting to see as many different species of bird within a boundary in a set time, e.g. the Dublin Bird Race which takes place on the first Saturday of the year between 8:15am and 6pm.

## Warning - Learning Curve Ahead

When first starting out it is not unusual for a beginner to discover there are many more reasons to pack in bird watching than there are to persevere. This is particularly true when struggling to come to terms with a bewildering array of cryptic and confusing plumages and indecipherable calls and songs displayed and made by birds that refuse to stay put long enough just to focus your binoculars, while nothing even remotely similar can be found in any of the field guides! Frankly it can be downright frustrating and discouraging, especially when there is no sign of any light at the end of the identification tunnel. At these times just remember that even the most experienced bird watchers had a first day in the field and felt the same way.

## Why Watch Birds?

Notwithstanding the previous 'learning curve' warning there are many reasons to take up bird watching, e.g. it gets you out and active in the fresh air; for the pleasure gained from watching wildlife in beautiful surroundings; the challenge of overcoming the difficulties of identification can be hugely rewarding and fulfilling; it satisfies a natural curiosity that many have about nature and the creatures that inhabit it; there is every chance of making new friends and travelling to places that you never would have otherwise both in Ireland and elsewhere; it can be the perfect antidote for the pressures of modern life etc.

In short, bird watching can be enjoyed by anyone regardless of age and can provide a lifetime of genuine pleasure with the occasional perfect moment thrown in for good measure.

## Where to Watch Birds in Ireland?

Although some sites have gained a reputation as prime locations for bird watching, e.g. the Bull Island, Wexford Slobs, Tacumshin Lake, Ballycotton, Cape Clear Island etc there are very few places in Ireland that are permanently devoid of birds, so the answer is just about anywhere. The habitat and time of year will determine the variety and number of birds found at any location. It is very useful to acquire a good understanding of how these factors influence what might be seen. That said, most bird watcher's interest was nurtured closer to home by observing birds in their garden and on a local patch.

It is fairly easy to attract birds in to your garden by providing food, water, shelter and nestboxes. You will need binoculars and a field guide if you hope to identify what you see, but more of both later. Place food and water away from areas when predators can hide. Some shrubs and bushes, e.g. Pyracantha and Cotoneaster will sprout fruit in the autumn, much loved by thrushes and occasionally Waxwings, and they can also provide cover for birds and a place to nest.

All birds need clean water both to drink and to preen and even a shallow bowl can be used. In cold winters unfrozen water can be hard to find and providing it during freezing conditions will both benefit and attract birds.

Garden watching is a great introduction to learning different species and study their behaviour from the comfort of your home.

In addition, garden watching can make a contribution to conservation by taking part in [BirdWatch Ireland's Garden Bird Survey](#), which records peak counts of various garden species between December and February.

A 'local patch' is an area that you watch on a regular basis. Usually it will be close to your home or place of work. It could be a local park, river, shoreline, harbour or just about any suitable open space. For many this is a place where you become familiar with watching and learning about birds at your own pace and on your own terms.

Regardless of where you watch birds, always keep in mind that the occurrence of a bird is never a scheduled event and there will be times when you see very little; that comes with the territory and you have to be able to live with it and learn to be patient.

It's not always this easy to see a Dotterel!  
Picture by: Mark Stewart.



## Binoculars?

It's just not possible to be a bird watcher without a pair of binoculars or bins as many call them. Later on you might consider investing in a telescope or a digital camera or even both but neither are considered in any detail here.

Nowadays, the selection of bins to choose from is huge. There are many makes and models available at a wide range of prices. One thing to keep in mind is that you don't have to spend a small fortune to get a good pair.

It is essential that you test any potential purchase outdoors before buying. They should have clear and sharp optics, feel comfortable in the hand and be easy to use. The BirdWatch Ireland shop in Kilcoole, [also available online](#), is an excellent place to start your search.

The magnification and diameter of the objective lens, i.e. the front lens, are significant details to be aware of when deciding on a suitable pair. These are indicated by 2 numbers, e.g. 7 x 42. The first number is the magnification and in this example it is 7 times. The second number indicates the diameter of the bin's objective lens and in this example it is 42mm. The wider the objective lens, the more light is captured and the brighter the image.

Bins used for bird watching are typically between 7 and 10 magnification. Larger magnification bins can be difficult to keep sufficiently steady, especially in windy conditions, to give a clear sharp image. For magnifications in excess of 10, a telescope is the preferred option.

In recent years Roof Prism bins have become the favoured design choice (B). These are streamlined in appearance with straight barrels and the eyepieces and objective lenses are in line. Roof prism bins are usually durable and waterproof. Most expensive design however! A more traditional and perhaps familiar design is Porro Prism (A). These models will provide good clear optics, but are not as durable or stylish as roof prisms and often are not waterproofed.

Finally there is Reverse Porro Prism (C). This design allows for a lightweight and compact size that can fit it to a pocket.

The bin's weight should be checked, after all there is every chance you will have them hanging on your neck all day. The strap should be comfortable also, although if not, it should be easy to find one that is.

With proper care bins will continue to give clear images for years. Always handle them carefully and avoid any bumping or jarring which can cause the lens to become misaligned or compromise waterproofing. In wet weather or by the sea when salty spray is likely, keep the rain guards in place to reduce the amount of moisture on the lens.

Be especially careful when cleaning the lens as they can be easily scratched resulting in a blurred image. Brush loose dust and dirt from the lens with a lens brush or similar. Always use a lint free cloth or similar to clean the lens and never use a hankie or other type of abrasive cloth. Gently wipe the lens surface in a circular motion to clean and never use force.

Store your bins sensibly out of sunlight preferably with the lens caps on and in their original case.



**Types of binoculars.  
Picture by: Dick Coombes.**

## Taxonomy and Species?

Taxonomy is the classification of living things. The system that is employed today was the brain-child of the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné in the 18th century. It is a hierarchical arrangement with 'species' as the base unit. All birds are categorised in the class Aves.

There is much debate amongst experts regarding the exact definition of a species so for the purpose of this note; **different types of birds that can interbreed with each other are different species.**

There are roughly 10,000 species of birds and each is assigned a unique binomial name, i.e. it has two parts. This is often called its Latin name, but that's not very accurate as sometimes it is Greek or a mix of Greek and Latin or Latinised or a native language or onomatopoeic or just simply made up; so the author prefers to use the term 'Scientific Name'. The first part of the scientific name is the genus and is capitalised and the second is the specific name, which is the name of the actual species. A Genus (plural: genera) is a grouping of closely related species that share a common ancestor. A group of closely related genera is a Family and a group of closely related families is an Order. There are about 29 orders in the class Aves. For example the taxonomy of the Yellow Wagtail is:

Species: *flava*

Genus: *Motacilla*

Family: Motacillidae

Order: Passeriformes

Class: Aves

Useful as it is to be aware of scientific names and what they can tell us, birders seldom use them in conversation. Instead they use the vernacular name; the common name that the bird is known by in the language being spoken. In recent years, there have been fairly successful attempts at standardising vernacular names in the English language, although some continue to defy that; Little Grebe / Dabchick, Lapwing / Green Plover, Dunnock / Hedge Sparrow etc. In addition, if you check a North American field guide you will notice that Divers are called Loons, Guillemots are called Murres, Tits are called Chickadees, what we call Buzzards they call Hawks, Old World Warblers and New World Warblers are not even in the same family of birds and the American Robin is a thrush not a chat! So its not always straightforward when it comes to vernacular names.

## Subspecies?

Some species, especially those that have extensive ranges, can exhibit variations across populations. These variations are called subspecies and represent the rank below species level. To signify a subspecies a third part is added to the scientific name. Sometimes, the differences can be so obvious that subspecies acquire their own vernacular name. Any species that has subspecies is known as polytypic and if it has none it is monotypic.

To continue using the example of Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, which has many subspecies worldwide, the following forms have been recorded in Ireland:

Vernacular Name - Scientific Name

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava flavissima*

Blue-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava flava*.

Grey-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava thunbergi*

Ashy-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava cinereocapilla*

Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg*

## Seasons of Birds?

### Resident / Partial Migrant

Birds that are present all year round are said to be resident. They breed in Ireland and do not migrate.

Many species that we regard as resident are in fact, partial migrants. These are species whose worldwide population is comprised of both resident and migratory populations. Thrushes and Starlings that are resident in Ireland are joined by migrating birds from further east during the winter months. Many others such as Curlews, Lapwings, Robins, finches, wagtails etc are partial migrants.

### Bird Migration

Migration is the seasonal movement of birds that takes place each spring and autumn between the breeding and wintering grounds. It seems that the main motivation driving bird migration is the availability of food elsewhere. In spring birds migrate northwards to find sufficient food in order to breed successfully and raise their young before returning where they came from. In the autumn migrating birds move south to avoid harsh weather and limited food opportunities that could mean the end for them.

Some of the most spectacular sights in nature are the result of migrating birds.

## Summer Visitor

Birds that migrate north to Ireland to breed are our summer visitors. Some arrive as early as March, e.g. Wheatears, Sand Martins, Sandwich Terns whereas Swifts and Spotted Flycatchers are usually among the last to arrive as late as May. As soon as they arrive they begin the arduous task of finding a mate and raising a brood; for birders it's definitely the time to enjoy the family lives of birds. By the beginning of August some have already begun to depart southwards and by the end of October that's it for another year.

## Winter Visitor

These are birds that arrive in Ireland seeking refuge for the winter having spent the summer breeding further to the north or east. Ireland's relatively mild Atlantic winters means that wetlands and estuaries seldom freeze, which is especially important for wildfowl and wading birds that rely on running water for food. The arrival of Greenland White-fronted Geese each autumn to the Wexford Sloblands from their breeding grounds in v-formation is a sight not to be missed.

## Passage Migrant

Passage migrants are birds that pass through Ireland on their spring and autumn migration. Some of the species that occur on passage in Ireland will also breed and winter here whereas some, such as Curlew Sandpiper and Whimbrel are only seen here on passage.

## Irruptions

At times large numbers of birds that are not normally expected arrive on our shores; this unexpected occurrence is known as an irruption. It can be caused by a number of factors, such as a good breeding season followed by a complete food famine or when a local population grows too large for the available food sources.

Waxwings can exhibit irruptive behaviour arriving in big numbers during the winter. During 2008 and 2009 an irruption of well over 200 Cattle Egrets arrived in Ireland, a species that had only ever been recorded 10 times previously. On two occasions during the 19th century large numbers of the central Asian Pallas's Sandgrouse irrupted west with birds reported from many Irish counties in 1863 and 1888.

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Swallow - the epitome of summer visitors.  
Picture by: Colum Clarke.



## Vagrant

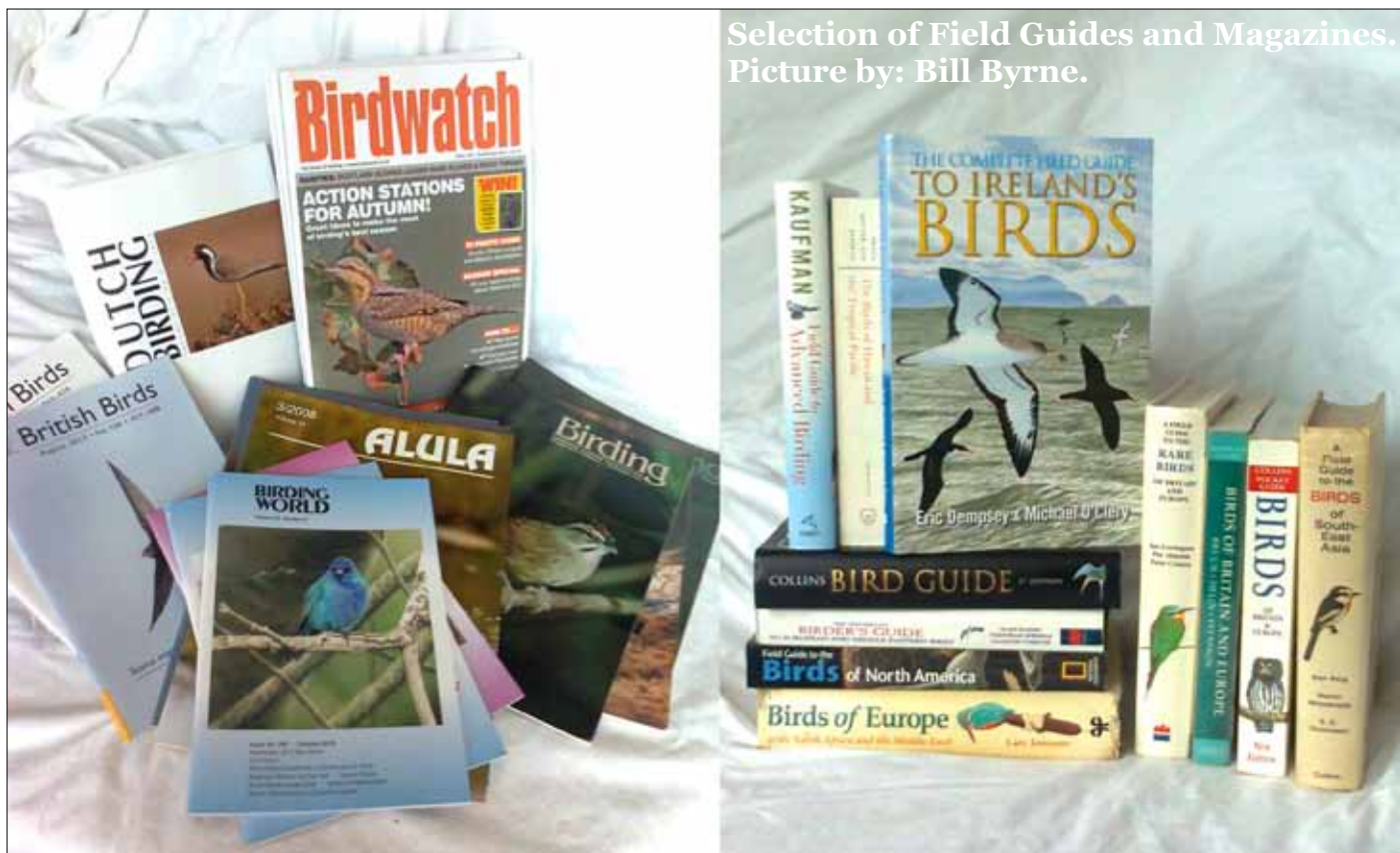
A vagrant is a bird that is well outside its normal range for the time of year. Some are short-distance vagrants and some are long-distance vagrants.

All of the causes of vagrancy are far from being fully understood, however they would seem to include; the adverse effects of inclement weather systems, such as fast moving North Atlantic depressions occurring during autumn migration, overshooting the breeding grounds by spring migrants returning from Africa, reverse migration of birds originating in the Far East, the first stages of some future colonisation, e.g. Collared Dove, a species that first arrived in Ireland in the late 1950s and is now a common resident and some may just have a wonky migration gene that has failed them as well as many other as yet unknown reasons.

It is interesting to speculate on what becomes of these 'lost' individuals. It's quite likely that some are well aware of where they are and re-orientate themselves before successfully continuing their journey, especially spring overshoots. North American vagrants may unknowingly swap the New for the Old World and continue quite happily migrating between Europe and Africa rather than North and South America, e.g., it is speculated that some multiple winter records of the New World Forster's Tern in Ireland relates to the same individual that has set up 'home' on the 'wrong' side of the Atlantic. The same may apply to some North American wildfowl such as American Wigeon and Ring-necked Duck.

About half the species on the Irish List are vagrants.

Selection of Field Guides and Magazines.  
Picture by: Bill Byrne.



## Field Guides?

Another essential item all birdwatchers need is a field guide or more often, a selection of field guides as there are a great many to choose from covering just about everywhere on the planet. Its purpose is to help the individual identify a bird to a species by referring to illustrations or photographs and/or written descriptions. They come in all shapes and sizes but if it is to be carried in the field make sure you choose one that is small enough and light enough to carry comfortably.

While the author is not recommending any particular field guide or books, the following seem to have become popular choices with Irish birders and are therefore worth mentioning:

*'The Complete Field Guide to Ireland's Birds'* by Eric Dempsey and Michael O'Clery. Published by Gill & Macmillan in 2010.

A comprehensive Irish guide, which beautifully illustrates and describes almost 370 species from the very common to the rarely seen in Ireland.

*'Collins Bird Guide'* by Lars Svensson, Peter J. Grant, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström. Published by HarperCollins in 2009 (2nd edition).

A critically acclaimed field guide that covers the Western Palearctic region of Europe, North Africa and Middle East.

*'Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East'* by Lars Jonsson. Published by Christopher Helm in 2005.

Another critically acclaimed field guide that covers the Western Palearctic region.

## Other Books?

There is a myriad of bird books available on such diverse subjects as bird identification, behaviour, family monographs, breeding and wintering atlases, rare birds, conservation, bird photography, checklists etc.

To view a comprehensive selection of what's available it is probably necessary to browse the web, such as [BirdWatch Ireland's online shop](#) or similar.

Another possible addition to your book-shelf that is worth considering are the 'Where to Watch / Finding Birds' type guides that describe the best locations within a region to watch birds, along with descriptions of the likely birds and habitat that are found, the best time to visit and directions to the site. There are two guides available covering Irish sites as follows:

*'Finding Birds in Ireland, The Complete Guide'* by Eric Dempsey and Michael O'Clery. Published by Gill & Macmillan in 2007.

*'Where to Watch Birds: Ireland'* by Paul Milne and Clive Hutchinson. Published by Christopher Helm in 2009 (4th edition).

## Irish Birds / Birding Magazines?

*Irish Birds* is an annual journal that has been published by BirdWatch Ireland since 1977. It includes scientific papers on various aspects of Irish ornithology as well as the 'Irish Rare Bird Report', the 'Rare Irish Breeding Birds Report' and the 'Irish Ringing Report'.

To discover bird magazines in English you will need to look further afield. '*British Birds*', '*Birding World*' and '*Birdwatch*' are monthly British publications; the first two are available by subscription only while *Birdwatch* can be got on subscription or off the shelf. The Netherlands has the bimonthly '*Dutch Birding*', available by subscription only. Articles are in Dutch and English, Dutch articles have English summaries. Google these titles to learn more details.

## Other Equipment?

It's stating the obvious but worth repeating that suitable clothing for the terrain, good rain gear, walking shoes or boots and a pair of wellies are all important for your comfort.

Carry a notebook from the git-go and take notes on your sightings, their numbers and any other relevant information, e.g. date and times, weather, who else was present, location etc. Bird watching is a great way to work up an appetite, often when a good distance from any shops or take-aways. So a flask and some grub for these occasions does not go amiss.



**Thumbs up for birding!**  
**Picture by: Neal Warnock.**

## What about Conservation?

You've got your bins, you picked out a field guide, now join **BirdWatch Ireland** and support their conservation work for the benefit of wild birds in Ireland. They undertake nationwide projects, surveys, research work, reserve management etc to monitor the well being of wild birds in Ireland and ultimately better understand their conservation needs. They are a Non-governmental Organisation that rely on membership subscriptions to continue the good work.

BirdWatch Ireland's East Coast Reserve near Newcastle, Co. Wicklow is a must see for all birders. It is approximately 250 acres in area with a mixture of coastal marsh, flooded fields, reed beds, farmland and woodland. The southern border of the reserve is covered in wet woodland of mainly Birch as well as some Alder, Willow and Ash. The land was acquired late in 2002 and habitat management on the reserve began in 2004. It is beautifully laid out with walkways and three well appointed bird hides.

BirdWatch Ireland's nation-wide system of branches organises indoor and outdoor events for its members that are listed in their magazine *Wings*, which is posted to members four times a year.

The South Dublin Branch of BirdWatch Ireland was formed in 1984 and is active each year from

September to June and sometimes in July. You can check out the list of upcoming indoor and outdoor events organised by the South Dublin branch on the website at [www.southdublinbirds.com](http://www.southdublinbirds.com). All are welcome to come along, both members and non-members.

## Finally?

Hopefully you have found these notes to be useful and helpful. They are far from comprehensive and intended as an introduction only, to get you started.

What ever level of interest you have in bird watching or birding, the main thing is to enjoy it as best as you can, keeping in mind at all times that it is not a contact sport.

Finally, be advised, there is no such thing as a Seagull!