Birds of Kinvara Bay

Kinvara Bay - A special Place for Birds

Kinvara bay is designated as part of the Galway Bay Complex Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its habitats and wildlife. It is also part of the Inner Galway Bay Special Protection Area for Birds (SPA). These areas are part of a pan European network of sites and host an incredible diversity of habitats and species. The people of Kinvara are fortunate to have access to such an amazing site for wildlife right on their doorstep. Many of the birds that use the SPA are regularly recorded in numbers that are considered to be of national importance. The highest numbers are present between November and February, with fewest waterbirds in spring and early summer. The coastal habitats out from the village and castle are regularly used by a wide diversity of birds; in fact about 30 species of waterbirds are frequently recorded in the bay.

Photo Eastern end of the bay at low tide

Kinvara's Coastal Habitats

The patchwork of different coastal habitats enables a diversity of waterbirds to utilise Kinvara Bay. Areas of mud which are exposed during low tide are valuable feeding habitats for wading birds such as Dunlin, Redshank and Curlew. Turnstone, another wading bird, can be seen turning seaweed amongst the rocks in search of food. The shallow waters around the coastline are often utilised by Grey Herons and its close relative Little Egret. Similarly ducks such as Wigeon, Teal and Mallard are regularly seen feeding in the shallows during the winter when tidal conditions allow. Great Northern Divers, Great Crested Grebes and Little Grebes can be observed on open water diving for small fish. Mute Swans are also a very common presence in the bay and can be seen feeding using their long necks to grab at vegetation under the water. In high tide events these swans often congregate over the saltmarsh habitat at the eastern end of the bay. Birds of prey such as Peregrine Falcon, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk also use the coastal habitats where their presence often creates a large disturbance to roosting flocks of waders. During high tide flocks of waders, gulls and ducks can be observed roosting on the small islands and rocks offshore or along the eastern shore of Kinvara Bay where the surrounding habitats are more natural and less subject to disturbance.

Occasionally the site attracts rare birds, Surf Scoter, Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon and Forster's Tern have all turned up in Kinvara Bay in recent years.

Bird Identification - ducks

Wigeon

Wigeon (Rualacha) are very vocal and are sometimes known as the whistling duck due to their distinctive call. The males have grey bodies and a reddish brown head, with a characteristic golden forehead, females are more drab brown. This is the most the common duck in Kinvara Bay during the winter. Up to 200 have been recorded using the habitats in the vicinity of the castle.

Mallard

Mallard (Mallard) are one of our best known and largest dabbling ducks; these are the ducks that we all loved to feed as children. The males are very attractive with iridescent green plumage on the head, a white collar and yellow bill. Females are brown with a dark stripe across the eye. If you look closely a bright patch of blue can be seen on the wings of females. At least 100 of these ducks have been observed in Kinvara Bay.

Teal

Teal (Praslacha) are Ireland's smallest duck. Males have an orange brown head with a striking green eye patch which extends down to the neck. They have grey bodies with a distinctive yellow patch either side of the tail, which resembles a triangle when the bird is viewed in profile. Females are a mottled

brown with a small patch of green on the wing. There can be over one hundred individuals using Kinvara Bay during the winter.

Bird Identification – Wading Birds

Dunlin
Dunlin (Breacóg) are small waders with variable plumage but during winter when these birds are most regularly encountered they have grey-brown upper plumage and a white belly. Dunlin have a long slightly down-turned bill and black legs. Hundreds of Dunlin have been recorded roosting in Kinvara Bay

Lapwing
Lapwing (Pilibín) are very striking waders, appearing black and white at a distance, but closer views will reveal their green upperparts with glossy violet hues. They have short bills and distinctive crest feathers protruding from the back of the head. Lapwing have rounded wings and are known for their unsettled and erratic flight paths, especially when a bird of prey is about.

Redshank
Redshank (Cosdeargán) are named for their characteristic red legs. These birds are grey brown with long legs and a long black bill which is red at the base. Redshank are often flushed individually or in small groups from the shore, where they fly off with a loud piercing call, displaying a distinctive white flash across the rear edge of the inner wing.

Snipe
Snipe (Naoscach) are a medium sized, rather stout wader with a long, straight bill. Snipe can be difficult to see as they are highly camouflaged but are frequently encountered when they burst from close range when disturbed. Snipe frequent wet meadows or other coastal habitats. They have a very distinctive zigzag flight pattern.

Curlew
Curlew (Crotach) is Ireland's largest wader. It has long legs, a large streaky brown body and a very long downturned bill. Although large numbers of Curlew are present within Galway Bay, they are usually not seen in large flocks but are widely dispersed. Nevertheless these birds are nearly always present in Kinvara Bay during the winter, adding to the soundscape with their loud bubbling and 'curlew' calls.

Bird Identification – Egrets & Herons

Grey Heron

Grey Heron (Corr réisc) is one of the largest birds you will encounter in Kinvara Bay. These striking birds are up to 1m tall and have a large grey body, very long neck, long legs and orange on the bill. The adults have a distinctive black eye stripe that culminates in a black crown feather which protrudes out at the back of the head. These birds are often seen stalking fish or other prey around Kinvara Bay.

Little Egret

Little Egret (Éigrit bheag), which may also be encountered in Kinvara Bay is similar in shape to the Grey Heron but much smaller, and bearing entirely white plumage. A close relative of the Heron and much more recent addition to Ireland's avifauna, Little Egret colonised Ireland in 1997 when it began breeding here. Now it is a common sight in all coastal counties.

Bird Identification – Divers, Grebe and Cormorants

Great Northern Diver

Great Northern Diver (Lóma mór) is mainly a winter migrant that is common around the coast of Ireland. Their winter plumage is dark brown above with a pale neck and dark half collar. They have a thick neck and a dagger shaped bill with a pointed tip. Their heads are rather flat with a steep forehead. Watch out for them fishing and diving in deeper water offshore.

Cormorant

Cormorant (Broigheall) are a large glossy black bird with a thick neck and wedge shaped head. They have a large bill hooked at the tip. Cormorants can be seen floating on water and diving for fish, or holding their wings aloft to dry on undisturbed shorelines or roosting in Kinvara Bay.

Little Grebe

Little Grebe (Spágaire tonn) is the smallest of the grebes. It has a dark brown back and head plumage with a chestnut brown neck and small bill. Little grebes lack the impressive crests found on their larger cousin the Great Crested Grebe. Grebes are impressive divers. Look out for them fishing, intermittently diving and popping up from the waters offshore.

Great Crested Grebe

Great Crested Grebe (Foitheach mór) is a very attractive grebe with a long slim neck and bill, named for the impressive crest feathers that are very prominent in summer plumage. The head and the front of the neck are white in winter, with a black crown and eye stripe extending to the bill.

Status of Birds in Ireland

Ireland's bird populations are not doing well at present and now two thirds of regularly occurring species are listed on the Birds of Conservation Concern Red or Amber Lists. For example populations of Dunlin and Lapwing have exhibited large declines in the last 3 decades and now numbers are under half what they were during the 1990s. Threats to birdlife include habitat loss and fragmentation, disturbance, pollution, climate change, changes in agricultural practices and development pressures, both here in Ireland and globally. Many of the birds wintering in Kinvara travel large distances between their breeding grounds overseas and their wintering grounds in Kinvara. Birds are facing these threats in both their wintering and breeding habitats. Birds serve as indicator species and they provide important insights into the state of the ecosystems as a whole. The declining populations of many birds are a reflection of the state of the wider environment. If we are to change the current trajectory we must place value on the protection of birds and on the habitats that they depend on. Here in Kinvara we can start by learning about the amazing wildlife that is all around us.