

Birds

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* Riabhóg Mhóna

The meadow pipit is probably the commonest bird of the Kerry mountains. It is a small bird, only 14 cm from beak to tail, and resembles a small thrush as it has a white breast with brown streaks. It has yellow brown legs and is olive brown above, which helps to camouflage it among the mountain vegetation. It is a very active bird, spending quite a lot of time on the ground, where it can be seen wagging its rather long tail (but don't confuse it with its cousin, the black and white pied wagtail!). The nest is a well concealed grassy cup, placed among the long grass, and if you stray near to one, you may find yourself being scolded loudly by the parents. Eggs are laid in one or two clutches, the first in early April, and are pale creamy-grey with fine brown speckles. The pipit is probably the most frequent victim of the cuckoo, which removes any eggs already present and then lays some of its own, to be fed and reared by the pipits! Not surprisingly then, pipits that spot cuckoos in the vicinity of their nests will often harass the cuckoos in an attempt to drive them away. In winter, our resident pipits are joined by others from more northerly climes, mainly from Iceland, who come to take advantage of our milder winters. Pipits are responsible for some of the beautiful birdsong that add to the atmosphere on a still summer's day on the hill. They sing their song of single notes which gradually rise in pitch as they themselves ascend into the air from the ground up to a height of perhaps 30 metres. Then the bird parachutes down to its original position, continuing to sing until just before landing.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis* Fuiseóg

The skylark is another streaky brown bird of the mountain and is distinguished from its cousin the pipit, by its larger size (up to 18 cm long) and by a small crest on its head. It is also a ground nesting species, but prefers shorter vegetation than the pipits in which to make its grassy nest. The nest is very well hidden and the parents are very careful not to give its location away – they never fly directly to it, but rather land somewhere nearby, and then meander their way to it by a circuitous route! The birds form breeding pairs in April, and these pairs may persist from year to year. The eggs are laid in two or three clutches of 3-5 eggs, beginning in early April. They are quite long eggs and a mottled brown-cream in colour, and incubated by the female alone for 11 days. Both parents feed and care for the hatchlings, and these usually leave the nest at 8-10 days. The song of the skylark is famous, and it is considered to be among the most beautiful birdsong in the world. Skylarks sing with great energy and individuals have been recorded singing for up to an hour without pause! However, typically a single burst of song lasts for around two minutes. The main singing period is early morning, hence the phrase 'up with the lark'. Singing is usually done in flight, the bird making a steep ascent, singing all the while. Heights of up to 100m are typically achieved, and singing continues while the bird hovers or circles before spiralling down slowly to its original spot. Unfortunately the numbers of skylarks in the countryside have declined dramatically over the past three decades. This is associated with the use of pesticides in agriculture, reducing the amount of insect food available to the birds, and to the loss of winter stubble, which is an important feeding habitat for these and other wild birds.

Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Clochrán alabhreac

This bird is named not for any association with wheat, but for the prominent white patch on its rump! This is a great aid to its identification, especially when in flight, but also note a distinct black eye-stripe and beak, particularly in the adult male. The head and shoulders are grey and the breast is buff,

with some reddening near the throat. The wheatear is a summer visitor from sub-saharan Africa, and is one of our earliest summer visitors to arrive. It is seen on the open hill from March to September and is particularly abundant along the west coast of Ireland and Britain. It nests in walls, rock crevices or burrows and requires an insect rich feeding habitat close to the nest site. The nest itself is loosely woven grass and lined with wool, feathers and hair, depending on what is available to the bird. Usually only one clutch of up to 5 eggs is laid, in late April or early May. The eggs are usually a very pale blue with little or no other marking.

Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* Caislín cloch

Heathland and dry open grassland are the preferred habitats of this attractive bird species. The male



has a black face and head, with a white collar and a reddish orange breast and is often noticed sitting very upright on a fence or post having drawn your attention with its distinctive call that sounds like two pebbles being knocked together. The main diet comprises insects and spiders but grubs and worms are also taken. The nest is built on the ground, concealed among clumps of grass and bushes in April or May. Between 3 and 7 eggs are laid and are incubated by the female for about two weeks before hatching. Because winter mortality is very high, up to four clutches may be raised in any given year to

ensure that at least some new birds survive to the following breeding season.

Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* Creabhar

As its name suggests, the woodcock is primarily a woodland bird. A close relative of the snipe and member of the waders, it has a long straight beak, which it uses as it wanders around on the forest floor, probing the soil for insects and worms. It is a medium sized bird, usually about 34cm in length, and is well camouflaged among the woodland vegetation and leaf litter by its stripy and speckled brown and black markings. The best time to see woodcock is during the breeding season from about March until June. At dusk and dawn, the male will engage in a behaviour called ‘roding’. This involves flying in circles, low over the trees with slow and interrupted wingbeats while uttering strange sneeze-like grunting sounds! A clutch of four eggs is laid in a shallow scrape on the ground lined with moss and leaves. The young hatch after about 20 days and leave the nest soon after, following the female around while gathering food.

Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* Naoscach

The snipe was once a common breeding bird across farmland and wild areas of Ireland, but is now a species in decline, suffering from land ‘improvement’ and habitat loss. It is a wader, with a very long bill, that is found on marshy grassland and bog. It is a ground nesting species, the nest being built between April and June in a clump of grass or other vegetation. The four eggs are incubated by the female alone. During the breeding season, male snipe engage in display behaviour to defend their female and territory. They fly up into the air and then descend quickly, with their tail feathers spread in such a way that the air rushing through them generates a strange ‘bleating’ noise – not unlike a flying saucer! This is called ‘drumming’.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Fanleóg

The swallow is a well known summer visitor to Ireland, flying from its winter home in western Africa. It is easily identifiable, even in flight, by its long forked tail, long wings and red face patch. It is found in most open habitats and is an agile flier, feeding on the wing and drinking water by swooping low over lakes and slow moving rivers. Flies of different types make up most of the diet but there are also records of other flying insects being taken, including wasps. Swallows mate soon after their arrival to the area and both partners invest much time making the nest. The nest is a shallow saucer of mud lined with grass and feathers and is usually located on a beam in a barn or outhouse, or on a ledge on a wall. Sometimes swallows will return to their nest from the previous year. Depending on how early the birds arrive and how much food is available, up to four clutches may be raised. Four to six white eggs with small black blotches are laid in each clutch and both parents and sometimes an un-mated



male ‘helper’ feed the chicks and fight off unwanted intruders quite aggressively. Swallows rarely land on the ground, except when gathering mud during nest building. They often congregate together in swarms for feeding and migrating flocks have been known to roost in reed beds and scrub in their thousands. They also gather on telegraph wires prior to their end of summer departure for their winter feeding grounds.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula* Spideog

The robin is probably one of our most popular native birds, especially as its inquisitive, cheeky nature means that it comes across as quite friendly and not at all shy! It is an unmistakable species with its bright red/orange breast and face, and its high pitched melodic song. Robins are primarily invertebrate and insect eaters – worms, larvae, flies and spiders compose the diet. Robins will nest almost anywhere that offers a hole or cavity for shelter; nests have been found in old hats, kettles and watering cans! The nest itself is quite bulky and made of grass, dead leaves and moss lined with softer hair and feathers. Eggs are laid in clutches of five or six, often as early as March. The robin is popular in modern culture and is particularly associated with Christmas. In Victorian times post-men wore red tunics and were known as ‘redbreasts’. As they delivered post and gifts on Christmas Day they were very popular, and so they were represented on Christmas cards by red-breasted robins! However, the link between this little bird and the spirit of Christmas goes back further than that. One legend to explain how the robin got its red breast tells that when robin went to visit the baby Jesus in his stable, the fire was dying. To enliven the fire and keep the baby warm, little robin is said to have fanned it with his wings, and the glowing embers scorched his breast!

Blackbird *Turdus merula* Londubh

The blackbird is one of our most common and well known birds and there are an estimated 1.8 million pairs present in Ireland. The male is shining black all over with a bright yellow beak and a yellow ring around the eye. The female is uniformly dark brown with a brown beak. This species is resident in Ireland all year round, and many continental blackbirds spend the winter in Ireland, enjoying the milder climate. The blackbird is found in a wide range of habitats and will nest in hedgerows, woodlands, gardens and scrub, usually about 2 metres above the ground. It feeds mainly on worms and insects and is often observed hopping around on the ground in search of food. The nest is usually quite big, and formed of neatly woven grass and twigs, with a smooth cup cemented inside of this, which in turn is lined with dry grass. The blue eggs with brown streaks are laid in two or three clutches beginning in early March, and with up to six eggs each time. The song of the blackbird is very complex and melodious, and is usually delivered from a prominent post.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*, Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Both of these spotted thrushes are quite common, but the smaller song thrush is usually the more abundant. Both are found in a variety of habitats, but usually require trees and so are common in parkland, woodlands and gardens. The thrushes have quite tuneful melodic song, like their relative the blackbird. The song thrush is distinctive in that the phrases are short, calmly sung and usually repeated 2-5 times in succession. The mistle thrush has less variation in tune than the blackbird, but does not repeat his phrases and sings quite quickly. Both thrush species eat a variety of food with more insects and worms taken in the spring and summer, and berries and fruits taken during the autumn and winter. Mistle thrushes are known to be quite possessive about their food sources and often defend their own holly or yew tree. Song thrushes have learnt that snail shells contain a meal and can lift the snail and drop it onto a hard surface to access the meal within.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

The redwing is our smallest member of the thrush family, and is about 21cm in length. It is quite a typical thrush/blackbird shape, with a streaky brown back and speckled breast and is known from other thrush species by a prominent yellow eyebrow and a red patch under its wing. In Ireland, redwings are winter visitors, arriving in the autumn to feed on the harvest crop of berries from the breeding grounds further north, in Scandinavia. Flocks of redwings and fieldfares (another member of the thrush family) can be observed noisily devouring the berries from holly and rowan trees, often appearing to vanish from the area once the crop has been exhausted. They tend to arrive in Ireland any time from September onwards and return to their northern summer homes in March and April.

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

The fieldfare is quite a large member of the thrush family, measuring 26cm in length. The fieldfare has a grey head and rump, with a chestnut mantle and wings, and is speckled brown with arrow shaped marks on its white breast. There is some yellow colouring in the beak. Like its close relative the redwing, the fieldfare migrates to Ireland and Britain from Scandinavia each autumn to feed on winter berries. It was once prized as a game bird, most often shot during its migration southwards and its meat was considered a great delicacy. This practice is almost completely absent from Europe today. When the supplies of berries and fruits have been used up, seeds, insects and other invertebrates may be taken, and flocks can sometimes be seen scratching around in winter cereal fields.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba* Ghlásóg Bhán

The pied wagtail is a common bird in towns and cities but is also widely found in more remote parts of the countryside. No other small bird (c. 18cm long) has such striking black and white (pied) plumage, and the constant wagging of its long tail and markedly dipping flight make it easy to identify. The pied wagtail is an insect feeder and likes bare open surfaces such as lawns, short turf and even roads and footpaths on which to chase its prey. It nests in a variety of places from a hollow among rocks or tree roots to a crevice in a wood pile or in a wall. The nest itself is built of twigs, moss, grasses and roots securely felted together. Two or three clutches of four to six grey eggs with black mottling are laid, the first usually in April. Like the meadow pipit however, the pied wagtail is a common victim of the cuckoo and often raises an adopted chick!

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Ghlásóg Liath

In spite of its name, the grey wagtail actually appears quite yellow, with a bright yellow breast. However its back is grey and this distinguishes it from its close relative the yellow wagtail which is even more yellow in appearance. The grey wagtail is a resident species, found near freshwater such as lakes, streams and rivers. Like the pied wagtail, it has a long wagging tail and also very dipping, bounding flight, but it is neither so abundant nor as easily seen as the pied. Nests of grass, leaves and moss are built in hollows in the river bank or nearby. Two clutches of eggs are normally laid, the first in April or May. Like the pied wagtail, the grey wagtails are insect feeders.

Tree Creeper *Certhia familiaris* Snag

The tree creeper is a secretive bird, and often its high pitched call of ‘tsee tree tsee’ is heard before it the bird is seen. This small bird (13cm from beak to tail) is well camouflaged to suit its behaviour. It spends most of its time creeping up the trunks of trees in search of its insect prey. It has developed particularly long, powerful claws which help it to hang on, and its beak is relatively long and somewhat down curved to help in its search among the crevices of tree bark. If you do manage to get a good view, you will see a brown and pale cream flecked back, white underparts and a white stripe above the eye. It carries out its food search while spiralling its way from the base towards the top of the tree, which is often oak, before flying back to the bottom to begin again. Tree creepers nest in a tree trunk crevice or in a hole in a wall, especially if it is secluded. The nest itself is supported by a platform of twigs where there is sufficient space, and is a rather haphazard construction of bark fibres and roots lined with softer material such as wool, feathers and grass. Two clutches of five or more eggs are laid in good years. The eggs are white with a scattering of reddish brown spots, concentrated at the less pointy end.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* Lasair choille

The goldfinch is the most colourful of our native birds and is easily known by its vivid red facial markings and striking gold wingbars. This small bird (12 cm long) is a finch, and has a characteristic robust beak which helps it to break into the various types of seed that comprise its diet. Its scientific name comes from the latin for thistle, ‘*carduus*’ and thistle, teasel, alder and birch seeds are favoured. The small compact nest is built by the female and is usually very well hidden, often high in the tree tops or if tall trees are not available, then deep within furze or thorny scrub. It is made up of lichens and leaves woven together. In May, the female incubates the 5-6 eggs without any help from her partner for the 12-14 days necessary. Once the chicks have hatched however, both parents are

involved in supplying the diet of aphids and partially digested seeds to the young. After fledging, young goldfinches flock together during the autumn and winter and this is the best time to see them, feeding anywhere that an abundance of seed is available.

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

The greenfinch is a green and yellow finch, approximately 14 cm long, with a characteristically heavy finch bill and a rather fierce, frowning facial expression. It is a bird of gardens, woodland edge, orchards and parks, where the diet of plant seeds and insects is easily found. Outside of the breeding season, greenfinches often flock with other finch species, roaming the countryside from one food source to the next. Nesting occurs in April, and the nest is built of twigs and roots, lined with feathers and hair in a sheltered branch or shrubby thicket. The hen incubated the 5-6 eggs for about two weeks, during which time she is fed in the nest by the male. Both parents work together to feed the young, mostly on crushed seeds but also including the occasional spider or caterpillar.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* *Rí rua*

The chaffinch is quite a common finch often seen in some numbers especially where food is abundant, in parks, garden bird tables and where seed has been scattered. The male is rather brightly coloured, with an orange-pink breast and chestnut back with white shoulders and grey head. The female is less brightly coloured with paler more buff tones although the white shoulder is still prominent. Breeding is concentrated in woody areas and the nest is usually located in the fork of a tree. The nest is a neat compact cup, made from spider web, mosses and lichens. Eggs are laid in 2 clutches, the first in April or May and the second in June or July. Four to six eggs are produced each time and incubated for 12-14 days by the hen alone. The hatchlings spend two weeks in the nest, being fed a diet of spiders and insects before fledging, and the adult birds are primarily seed eaters, like all our finches.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

The goldcrest is named for the yellow and orange stripe on its head which is seen as a raised crest during mating display. It measures only 9cm from bill to tail, weighs about 5 grams and is Ireland's smallest bird species. It has a dirty white underside and is dull green above, but it is difficult to see this detail as the bird is in almost constant movement. Coniferous woodland and scrub is the preferred habitat, but in winter frequent visits are made to gardens and parks. In addition, goldcrests may be more visible in winter because there are simply more of them about, as many continental birds visit during this season. Goldcrests nest high in coniferous trees. The nest is made from twigs, moss, lichens and spider web and is almost spherical with only a small opening near the top. This opening is made to be as small as possible because the nests are often raided by squirrels, jays and other predators. The small creamy eggs have tiny red-brown speckles, and 7-10 of these are laid in late April. They are incubated by the female alone, but once hatched, both parents feed the young on their diet of spiders, flies and small caterpillars. The young leave the nest after about two weeks, but spend further time with their parents, feeding and roosting high in the trees.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* *Droelín*

The wren is the second smallest bird in Ireland and weighs only 8-9 grams. It is also probably the most numerous bird present, although its secretive nature makes it far less often observed in the countryside than several other species. It is found in a variety of habitats from garden to woodland but

is rarely far from the cover provided by bushes and shrubs. In Spring, the male patrols and staunchly defends his territory, building up to 12 nests. Each one is located in well concealed spots among woodpiles, or in tree crevices and is made of any material to hand – grass, leaves hair and moss are common. Each domed nest is very neat in appearance and has a tiny hole in the side as an entrance. His mate chooses her preferred nest this one is then lined with hair and feathers. Two clutches of 5-8 white eggs with faint red brown spots are laid, the first usually appearing in April. Incubation is carried out by the female alone and takes about two weeks. After a further two weeks the young are ready to leave the nest, and often go with the male parent to one of the previously rejected nests while the female sits on a second clutch. The song of the wren is particularly loud, especially when the size of the bird is considered. It is one of few species that sings all year round, and its singing is mainly in defence of its territory. The wren is associated with an old Irish tradition of St. Stephen's Day, on which 'Wren Boys' dressed up in colourful costumes and travelled from house to house in the locality playing music and entertaining in return for food, drink and donations. Long ago the day began with a wren hunt, and the captured bird was paraded from house to house, but this practise had died out by early in the 20th century.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

The dunnock is a quiet and shy but very common songbird, found in most habitats, throughout the year, especially woods and scrub. It is about 14 cm long, and is brown with darker streaks above and grey on the breast and head. It is usually seen alone, and has jerky movements as it hops about on the ground in search of insects, spiders and small seeds. The nest is made from a variety of materials depending on what is available. Spruce twigs, nettle stalks and bean stalks have all been used and universally, a moss lining is added. A clutch of 4-5 blue-green eggs is laid and incubated for about 14 days, mostly by the female. In the winter, the local resident populations may be augmented by birds from harsher more northerly areas.

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Gaelbhan crainn

The tree sparrow is a small brown bird with a black beard and white underside, that is found down the east and west coasts of Ireland but is largely absent from the midlands. It is traditionally a bird of woodland edge and farmland, but numbers have dropped by up to 90% in recent decades because of intensive practices such as removal of hedgerows and the use of pesticides. As a seed eater that concentrates on the seeds of annual weeds such as chickweed, fertilisers and pesticides that reduce such weeds also reduce food available to sparrows and so their numbers fall. Nests are made in tree hollows as early as February and pairs often locate their nests close to other sparrows' nests. The clutch comprises 4-5 eggs which are incubated by both parents for 13-14 days. The hatchlings are fed on insects and larvae initially and the diet switches to seeds later in the year.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Gaelbhan binne

The house sparrow is quite similar to the tree sparrow but its beard is less well defined and it has a grey rather than a brown crown. As an adaptable and opportunistic species it has not suffered the same level of decline as its relative the tree sparrow. It feeds on buds, plant parts seeds and insects and also on household scraps that are often available as it is usually found close to human habitation. In March, the nest of paper, plant stalks and feathers is built anywhere that offers support and some shelter. The nest is quite untidy and is almost fully enclosed with access only through a small hole in

the side. Between three and eight eggs are laid, and both parents share the job of incubation. This takes about two weeks, after which the young spend 17-18 days in the nest under the care of the parents. Once the young have left the parents will breed again, and in good years up to four broods may be raised.

Coal tit *Parus ater* Meantán dubh

This is the smallest of the four tit species found in Ireland, typically being only about 11cm long. It is named for the dark colour of its head and beard. It reaches greatest numbers in stands of coniferous trees but is also present in lower numbers in broadleaved woodlands. It is similar to the other tit species in that it feeds on woodland invertebrates (especially caterpillars) in the spring and summer and on nuts and seeds in the autumn and winter. It is specially adapted for smaller food items than the other tits however, and its thinner bill helps it to prise food from among conifer needles. It may also store items among conifer branches for retrieval later on in the season. At the end of April, the nest of moss is built in a tree hole, crevice or nest box if it is available. A clutch of 7-11 white eggs with brown mottling is laid and the eggs are incubated by the hen alone for about two weeks. The young leave the nest after 15 or 16 days but continue to visit the nest where they are fed on insects by the parents for a further two weeks. Once this brood is reared, a pair may have another if the weather and food supply are good. Once nesting is over, coal tits usually flock with other coal and other tits roaming local countryside (and gardens) in search of food.

Blue tit *Parus caeruleus* Meantán gorm

The blue tit is slightly larger than the coal tit and is readily identified by its blue cap and its bright yellow underside. It is quite an acrobatic flier and is often observed in impressive moves at the garden bird table. Blue tits are primarily broadleaved woodland birds and highest densities are found in oakwoods. Nesting occurs in hollow trees, or holes in walls and often return to the same nest in consecutive years. The clutch of 10-16 eggs are laid in late April or early May and hatching is usually timed to coincide with the unfurling of the oak canopy and consequently the highest abundance of caterpillars, the preferred food type. By eating early caterpillars that have fed on young tannin free oak leaves, chicks grow faster and are healthier than later broods.

Great tit *Parus major* Meantán Mór

As its name suggests, this is our largest tit species and is usually about 14cm in length. It has a black cap and a striking black stripe down the middle of its otherwise bright yellow underside. The great tit is a bird of broadleaved woodland, and takes the largest food and spends much time on the ground. These birds make a very deep cupped nest, usually located in a hole in a wall, bank or tree. The number of eggs in the two annual clutches varies between 6 and 15, depending on the amount of food available and eggs are laid by the hen, one per day. The hen alone incubates the eggs for up to two weeks. Both parents are kept busy feeding the brood and parent great tits have been counted making up to 800 round trips to gather food in a single day! In winter, the great tit with its larger size and sturdy beak can tackle more difficult nuts and seeds than the other tit species. The sound of the great tit tapping open hard seed cases can be heard in the woods and may be responsible for legends of fairy cobblers or leprechauns in south west Ireland!

Wood pigeon *Columba palumbus*

The woodpigeon is a large plump grey bird with a white mark on the neck and a pink blush on the upper breast. It is chiefly a farmland and woodland bird where it may be present in such numbers that it is considered a pest. It eats mainly berries, leaves root crops and some slugs and worms. In oakwoods it will gorge on the autumn crops of acorns. Breeding occurs between March and September and a flimsy nest over overlain twigs is made in the branch of a tall tree, usually a conifer. Two oval glossy white eggs are laid and these are incubated over 18 days by both parents in turn. The young are fed with 'pigeon milk' which is regurgitated by both adult parents. Woodpigeons are common prey for peregrine falcons, and are especially vulnerable when feeding on open farmland.

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Although it is present throughout the year, the Jay is most commonly encountered during Autumn and early winter, and even then it is more often heard than seen. It is easily known, as no other Irish bird is coloured similarly, with brownish-pink plumage, black and white tail feathers, a white rump and a startling blue patch on the forewing, only seen during flight. Its cry is very raucous and is usually heard from high in the treetops. The flight is undulating with quick wing beats. The diet consists of both plant matter and animal, and the jay is fond of other birds' eggs. The jay is a talented impersonator and is known to imitate the calls of other birds.

Crow *Corvus corone* *Préachán*

The crow is widespread throughout all of Europe and there are two subspecies which are geographically separated. In Eastern Europe and all but the north eastern tip of Ireland, you will find the 'hooded' crow, easily known by its colouration: the body is a dirty grey colour and the head, bib wings and tail are black. Its close relative, the carrion crow is completely black and is found throughout the rest of Western Europe (including north east Ireland), except for north western Scotland where the hooded crow is seen. The crow is a relatively large bird, measuring 47cm from beak tip to tail. It is a rather unpopular species as it feeds on carrion and steals other birds' eggs, but it is generally an opportunistic feeder and also eats berries, insects and any other available forage. Crows tend to be solitary in their habit; if you see a flock of 'crows', they are probably rooks. Look out for the thicker, more down curved beak, and of course the colouration in the case of the hooded crow. Nests are built in March, high in the tree tops and composed of dry twigs and mosses.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus* *Rúcach*

The rook is a member of the crow family and probably the one seen in most abundance in the countryside. Although often persecuted like the other crows, this species is actually a friend to the farmer, preying on insect pests such as leather jackets. Rooks can be distinguished from crows by their untidy leg feathers, straight sharp beak and the fact that they are usually spotted in great flocks. They also roost in large rookeries every evening, and large numbers can be seen around dusk, gathering from all directions to settle down in a large communal roost for the night. Rooks breed very early in the season, so their nests can be easily spotted in the bare branches. Often many pairs will build their nests close together and much squabbling can be heard as birds steal building material from their neighbours' partially completed constructions! Often birds simply renovate old nests rather than begin from scratch, and these nests can become rather large and clumsy from several years' additions. The eggs are laid in clutches of 3 – 5 any time from the end of March, and are quite variable in

colouring and pattern. The female incubates the eggs alone, for 18 days, during which time the male brings her most of her food. Once the eggs are hatched, the male feeds the whole family for the first few days.

Magpie *Pica pica* Snag breach

The magpie is a large bird up to 46 cm in length and is strikingly clothed in black and white, often with an iridescent blue-green tinge especially on its long tail feathers. It is quite a common bird in a variety of habitats including towns and villages and has increased in abundance and distribution as the practice of trapping and killing magpies has decreased. Magpies build their nests in trees or tall shrubs in early April. The nests are quite distinctive, being composed mostly of twigs, often thorny which are also used to make a kind of domed roof over the structure. The hen lays 3-10 eggs which she incubates for 17-18 days. The young are fed by both parents for up to 4 weeks before fledging and sometimes return for feeding for some time after they have left the nest. The diet of the magpie is very varied. They will eat field mice and voles as well as eggs and nestlings of other bird species and insects, berries and fruits. They are known to be fond of glittery items such as jewels and are said to hoard such items in their nests.

Chough *Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax* Cág cosdearg

The chough is a rare type of crow, easily identified by its fully black plumage with bright red bill and legs. In Europe they have suffered the loss of more than 50% of their population during the last 25 years and the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry has the greatest concentration in north west Europe. It is mainly found on coastal cliffs but also sometimes on inland crags and rocky crevices. It requires shortly grazed grass areas to feed and feeding is carried out entirely on the ground. The diet is dominated by invertebrates, fruit, seeds and scraps and rarely, other birds' eggs are taken. Untidy nests of dry twigs roots and plant stems are made in late March and the first of several clutches of 3-6 eggs is laid. Hatchlings stay in the nest for up to 40 days before fledging and immature birds are known from their parents by their orange beaks. The chough is the county bird of Cornwall, southwest England, to which it recently reintroduced itself, just as conservationists began a reintroduction program of their own!

Raven *Corvus corax* Fiach dubh

Of the seven members of the crow family present in Ireland, the raven is the largest and is actually as big as a buzzard, with a wing span up to 1.3 metres! Ravens pair for life, and are found in mountainous areas, especially where there are cliffs and crags. Ravens are talented acrobats and can be seen soaring very high into the sky and then tumbling and rolling in descent. Ravens are one of the earliest birds to nest and breed in Ireland, laying 4-5 eggs in February or March.

Ravens are omnivores, eating both plant and animal matter, depending on what is available. The young are often fed on carrion from animals that suffered winter mortality and small mammals and rabbits are also important prey. The nest is made of woven twigs on the outside, with a softer, inner layer, and is usually found on a cliff ledge or, occasionally, in a tree. Each pair nests in its own isolated area, away from other ravens and feeds over a large territory. Other birds, such as peregrine falcons, often use raven's nests later in the year.

Many myths are associated with the raven. Celtic goddesses supposedly often took raven form and these birds were thought to carry information between this world and the spirit world. The ravens at

the Tower of London are surrounded by old superstition. It is said that if the ravens were to leave the Tower, then the crown will fall and the British Empire with it. To prevent this catastrophe the ravens' wings are clipped. In Somerset, locals used to tip their hats to Ravens, in order not to offend them. Ravens are considered royal birds and legend has it that King Arthur turned into one. Alexander the Great was supposedly guided across the desert by two ravens sent from heaven. In Wales, it is believed that if a raven perches on a house, great prosperity will come to the family within.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Fabhcún gorm

Peregrine falcons are large birds of prey with grey plumage and a white throat and a wingspan of c. 95-115cm. They are skilful and powerful fliers which enables them to hunt and catch their prey of smaller birds. They take a wide range of species and more than 100 different types ranging from goldcrests to herons have been recorded among their prey in the British Isles. Nests are built in open areas, such as rocky crags or cliffs, which command a good view of the surrounding countryside, and cathedral spires and other tall city buildings are occasionally used. Only one clutch of 3-4 buff, tan or orange brown eggs is produced, usually in April or May. The chicks remain in the nest for 35-40 days and on leaving, usually stay close to the parents for some time. The increase in intensive farming and the use of pesticides in the 1960s caused a serious decline in peregrine numbers. As pesticides concentrated in the fatty tissues of their prey, these then caused thinning of the falcon's eggshells, so that incubating parents damaged their young eggs. As reproduction failed in successive years, populations crashed. Despite the move away from such harmful practices, peregrine numbers have still to make good recovery, especially along the more exposed western fringe of Ireland and Scotland, where many suitable nesting sites remain empty. Less than 20 pairs are thought to nest in Co. Kerry.

Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

The dipper is the world's only truly aquatic songbird, inhabiting fast-flowing streams and rivers. Looking like a rather large, fat wren with a chestnut tinge and a clean white bib, it is usually seen bobbing (on its legs) on rocks among the rapids. It frequently dives, swims and paddles in the water while hunting for its insect larvae prey. The nest is built during April or May, and is never far from water, be it in a crack under a foot bridge, a hole between rocks, or even behind a waterfall. The size of the nest depends on the size of the cavity – the bird simply fills the available space with moss and other vegetation. It is interesting that the bird often collects the vegetation from below water, and dips any moss used into the water before adding it to the nest! The female lays and incubates 4-6 eggs which fledge after about 6 weeks. The dipper's most impressive trick is its ability to walk on the bottom of a river or stream, apparently defying buoyancy. In fact, this is achieved by arching its back and constantly moving its wings to keep its body down below the water.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Mallard

The mallard is a common and widely distributed freshwater duck and can be seen on the lakes in the



Inchaquin valley. The duck (female) and drake (male) are similar in shape but the male is larger than the female and also brightly coloured. He has a bottle green head and neck a bright yellow beak, a white collar above a chestnut breast and a purple-blue stripe on the wing. In contrast, the female is mottled brown all over, but does display the same purple-blue wing stripe when in flight. Mallards are surface feeding ducks *i.e.* they dabble, head-dip and upend in order to get their food – they do not dive. They eat a variety of foods, doing

most of their foraging after dusk and may fly off the lake to feed in marshes moors and ditches. Seeds, plants, insects and crustaceans all contribute to the diet. And of course they gladly accept any leftover sandwiches that are offered too! In the springtime the male duck selects a nesting site some distance from the water. This may be among long vegetation on the lakeshore, or be further afield among grassland, heather or even scrubby woodland. The female then builds the nest of reeds, grasses and dead materials. The inside of the nest is lined with a thick layer of downy feathers. A single clutch of 8-14 plain eggs may vary in colour from white to olive green and are laid between March and May. These are incubated for 22 days by the female alone and when she leaves the nest, she carefully covers the eggs in downy feathers. After hatching, the ducklings will remain out of the water until their feathers are fully dry and waterproof. They are preyed upon by rats, hooded crows and mink.

Teal *Anas crecca*

The teal weighs only about 300g and is the smallest duck found in the British Isles. It is a winter visitor to lakes, rivers and estuaries of Cork and Kerry. The male has a dark-grey body, split longitudinally by a black and white line. The head is striking, with metallic green around the eye and down the short neck, bordered by gold and otherwise rich chestnut. During the summer the diet is mostly aquatic and dominated by animal food such as insects and invertebrates. During its winter visit, more plant matter is taken including a variety of seeds when available.

Wigeon *Anas penelope*

The wigeon is a pretty duck, with pale grey back, a rich buff breast and neck and a chestnut head with a wide central stripe of peach. It breeds in northern areas such as the Baltic coast, Scandinavia and north eastern Scotland, and visits Ireland during the winter months. They prefer stretches of slow moving or stagnant waters where there is thick vegetation at the banks to provide shelter and cover. The diet is mainly vegetarian, including grass and aquatic plants, but insects and molluscs are also taken.

Grey heron *Ardea cinerea* Corr reise

This large, widely distributed bird is a common sight frequenting rivers, lake edges and marshy areas. Herons nest colonially in treetops, but in some habitats will nest as single pairs and in lower bushes or even on the ground. Nests are made by the female with twigs and reeds gathered by the male. Clutches of 4-5 pale blue eggs are laid in between February and April, and both parents take turns to incubate the eggs for a period of approximately 28 days. The heron is a skilled and patient fisherman, standing motionless, but alert at the edge of a pond or stream as it waits for an unwary frog or fish to come within spearing distance. Eels are often caught in the marshy ground, and it is comic to watch the dismayed bird trying to deal with the slippery object squirming round its neck.

Cormorant *Plalacrocorax carbo* Broigheall

The cormorant is chiefly a coast bird in the British Isles, but is also found at inland lakes and rivers, particularly during winter months. It nests colonially on rocky islands and outcrops and are sometimes found in heronries! It is a large bird, about 90cm long, with a long thick neck and dirty yellow bill. Cormorants feed mostly on fish, diving into the water from above and chasing their prey underwater. They are powerful swimmers and achieve good speeds by propulsion from their powerful, back-set feet. The fish are ingested whole, and the bones and other indigestible parts are later regurgitated. After swimming, the birds 'hang their wings out' to dry, and are often observed in this stance on a rock near the water's edge. However, it is not thought that this stance actually does help the wings to dry – in fact the reason for it is unknown, and the subject of much debate among ornithologists.

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

The lapwing was formerly widespread throughout Britain and Ireland, but has seen a dramatic decline because of changes in agricultural practices. It is primarily a winter visitor to the southern counties of Ireland, where it can be seen wading in damp grassland and on agricultural fields searching for insects, mollusks, seeds and other food. Lapwings are easily identified by their wispy crest and glossy green back and shoulders. The cry sounds like 'pee-wit' and indeed this is another name for the bird.