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### **Fauna:**

**Barn Owls** (*Tyto alba*) most often seen at dusk silently flying low over its hunting grounds or illuminated in the car head lights is unfortunately getting more uncommon, especially in the North West. This species is one of 25 Red listed birds of Conservation concern in Ireland.

The reasons behind their decline are not fully understood, but are likely to be related to changes in agriculture practice (loss of small scale tillage farming, change from hay to silage, removal of hedgerows etc), loss of traditional nest sites (destruction, dilapidation, demolition and renovations of old buildings) and the increased use of toxic rodenticides.

In order to try understand the reasons behind their decline, John Lusby of Birdwatch Ireland and UCC is undertaking a research project, part funded by NPWS. Its main aim is to determine the Barn Owls foraging and habitat requirements. To date nine birds have had radio transmitters fitted and their movements have been recorded. The birds regularly forage up to 5km from the nest site. Important foraging habitat types noted are cereal crops, rough grassland and grassy margins of woodland edges and hedgerows.

The research hopes to determine the effects of rodenticides on the Barn Owl. 51 carcasses have been collected to date in Ireland and analysis of their liver tissue will reveal their toxin levels to the main rodenticides used. (Of note warfarin based poisons would help reduce the chance of secondary poisoning. So ask your local supplier to stock it and we could all be doing something to help.)

In 2009 to try and understand the dramatic decline in Barn Owls in the Northwest, Mayo will be focused on. Only three sites are known and pellets will be gathered to assess diet etc and research into habitat use and home range will also be looked at. John is asking for assistance from the public by reporting any sightings, carcasses, known nesting or roost sites to him at [jlusby@birdwatchireland.ie](mailto:jlusby@birdwatchireland.ie), telephone 057 9151676 or alternatively you can contact Nicola Carroll at the office in Lagduff.

### **Did you know?**

Certain butterflies, such as the Small Tortoiseshell and the Peacock, over winter in Ireland as adults. They make attempts to get inside to a warm area (usually our houses, but I have seen a peacock butterfly in amongst the dense, dry, warm base of a mature Pampas grass plant in the garden) at the end of the summer months. The hotpress or in between the pleats of the curtains seem to be the preferred places.

So if you come across a butterfly in the house in the winter and you think its dead, don't throw it out the window into the freezing cold, its patiently waiting for the first warm days of Spring to come, hence being one of the earliest butterflies we see.



Comhshaol, Oidhreacht agus Rialtas Áitiúil  
Environment, Heritage and Local Government

## **Ballycroy National Park**

**National Parks &  
Wildlife Service (NPWS)**  
Lagduff Office: 098 49996

## **Newsletter February 2009 - Issue 5**

### **Visitor Centre Update:**

Construction on the Visitor Centre building has been completed. Melmount Developments Ltd. have started work on the outside paths which will consist of approximately 2km of boardwalk and graveled pathway around the hill behind the Visitor Centre. A pond for education purposes will also be constructed. The new road exiting onto the N59 just south of Ballycroy village is temporary and will be removed once the paths have been completed.

Cod Steak Ltd. are working on the fabrication of the interpretive displays. This work should be completed and installed by the end of March.



Ballycroy National Parks (BCNP) Visitor Centre.

### **What's happening in the Owenduff/Nephin designated area & BCNP?**

- Trail bikes are now been used by NPWS staff on pathways in the area. This will put into place one of the Department's initiatives to promote sustainable transport amongst its employees. They are been used for site monitoring, patrols and are proving to be a great way to hear and approach wildlife.
- Rhododendron clearance work has commenced on NPWS lands at Claggan Mountain. It is a laborious task and will continue into the Spring. Good farming practice includes the control of invasive species. You can contact your REPS or NPWS farm planner for advice.

The Heritage Council Biodiversity Grant, funded by NPWS, will also consider applications from people for this type of work on their lands. Contact the Heritage Council on 056- 777 0777 or [www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie)

- The Greenland white fronted geese survey continues this year (see issue 2) and we would like to ask local people to help out by informing us of any roost or feeding site that they are aware of. They didn't use the bog on the SPA during the really cold icy weeks we had (the ground was frozen and they would have been unable to feed here). But where did they go? Any sightings or information you have would be greatly appreciated. Contact Nicola Carroll at the Lagduff office.

### Flora:

**Heather** - When heather is mentioned a lot of people think of just one plant. There are three common heathers on the Blanket bog in the area. Ling (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bell (*Erica cinerea*) and Cross leaved (*Erica tetralix*). The flowering season for these heathers usually lasts from July to September. Cross leaved been the first to emerge, followed by Bell and then Ling. The flowering season for heathers is staggered and extended which is of great benefit to insects. Cross leaved heather likes the wet edges of bogs, Bell heather likes the drier areas and Ling heather likes the drier areas too usually the moss hummocks.



Irish Heath (*Erica erigena*)

There are however other species of heather growing here. In Ireland, Irish heath (*Erica erigena*) is confined to West Mayo and Galway. It also grows in Spain, Portugal and France. This plant is in full bloom now since late November, which is unusual as it normally flowers in March.

Heather was so highly regarded in the past that it earned its place in the Brehon Laws on trees and shrubs, (Brehon Law was Irelands indigenous system of Law from Celtic times to the 7<sup>th</sup> Century). It was unlawful to clear a whole field of heather and was subject to a fine of one *dairt* (a year old heifer).

### Useful Information

A guiding course, "Marine and Countryside Guide Cert", recognized by Fáilte Ireland, is been organized this year. It runs until July and involves two evening classes a week. Contact Oliver O' Cadhla (Ionad Deirbhile) on 087-6844203 for details.

This newsletter and all past issues are now available on our website at [www.ballycroynationalpark.ie](http://www.ballycroynationalpark.ie)

If you would like to be included on the mailing list, contact the Lagduff office.

If you think of anything you would like to see covered in the next edition, let us know.

- Fáilte Ireland is funding the purchase of new signage/waymakers for the Bangor Trail. This is one requirement to upgrade the Trail to National Waymark Way standard and is necessary work in order to get insurance cover on the Trail from Mayo County Council. The Waymarks (made from recycled plastic) have been sourced in Mayo and it is intended that the erection of the Waymarks be carried out by local people through the Rural Social Services. This work forms an important part of Mayo County Councils Walking Trails Strategy.
- The Hen Harrier (see issue 4) winter survey is continuing in the area. Casual sightings and dedicated Roost watches are been monitored and recorded. If you have any sightings please contact the Lagduff office.
- The winter site visits for the Bird Atlas 2007-11 survey, coordinated by Bird Watch Ireland (BWI), part funded by NPWS, are again underway. The Mayo branch has recently launched their new website [www.birdwatchmayo.org](http://www.birdwatchmayo.org). They have outings organized and are seeking people, regardless of their knowledge on birds, to join them. This may be a good way to brush up on your bird identification skills and then maybe you might think about assisting us to get the whole area covered for the BirdAtlas, there are still loads of squares to be surveyed.

- A Sappers mark (Goose Claw/Crows foot) on the Bangor Trail was kindly pointed out by Pat Gallagher to field staff. These bench marks were hand cut into stone by a Sapper (an Engineer soldier usually in the Commonwealth/British Military service) in the mid 1800's and are found throughout Ireland forming a framework of accurate height points for Planners, Surveyors and Engineers. If you know of any areas where similar markings may be, please contact the Lagduff office.



- The off wintering period for stock on the Owenduff/Nephin SPA continues until the 13<sup>th</sup> of May (with the usual break from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 13<sup>th</sup> February). Ground and aerial monitoring will continue during this time to monitor compliance.
- Trespassing stock on NPWS lands is been closely monitored and recorded. If you need confirmation of boundaries or have any queries please contact the Lagduff office. Stock may be impounded if continuous trespassing continues and a penalty could follow.