

County Cork, Sep 28th –Oct 3rd 2017

(PMC & APM)

This was our first birding trip to Southern Ireland, and we timed our visit to catch the tail end of Nearctic wader season (which usually peaks mid-September) plus hopefully the earliest American vagrant passerines (which usually peak the second week of October). There was also the chance of some good seawatching: 2017 saw a surprising number of Wilson's petrels and large shearwaters, and although most of these were gone by the end of September, there were plenty of Long-tailed Skuas and Sooty Shearwaters reported.

Atlantic weather in August/September 2017 was dominated by coastal hurricanes in the US and blocking anti-cyclones over Europe, creating persistent southerlies and westerlies over Ireland and a series of major weather fronts. It was a week of very mixed weather, and we soon realised that, in forecaster-speak, "scattered showers" meant persistent drizzle, and "occasional showers" meant regular torrential downpours!

The prevailing wind direction resulted in very few European vagrants arriving in Cork (a handful of Melodious Warblers, Wrynecks, and shrikes comprised one of the poorest showings for years), however a propitious alignment of Atlantic depressions on Sunday 1st October created a good outlook for Nearctic vagrants.



Lesser Yellowlegs at Lough Loral, Cape Clear

Itinerary:

- Thu 28th Sep - Arrive Cork airport 11:00; Ballycotton early afternoon, for reported American Golden Plover; drive to Rosscarbery. *Clear skies and fresh SW wind.*
- Fri 29th Sep - Check Cloheen marsh (Clonakilty Harbour) for Semipalmated Sandpiper; search gardens behind Galley Head and Shite Lane; return to Clonakilty; seawatch from Galley Head. *Sun and cloud with locally heavy showers, brisk SW wind.*
- Sat 30th Sep - Mizen Head all day: check gardens, seawatch from the Head, and view Lissagriffin Lake. *Overcast, persistent drizzle a.m., clearing in the afternoon.*
- Sun 1st Oct - Set out to seawatch from Galley Head, but terrible visibility; check Shite Lane and Cloheen Marsh again; check Seven Heads area. *Cloud & strong SW wind.*
- Mon 2nd Oct - Drive early to Baltimore; check gardens around the harbour; catch 11:00 ferry to Cape Clear Island, Lesser Yellowlegs on Lough Loral; return on 16:00 ferry; check Ilen estuary on way back. *Overcast, light SW wind, showers midday, clear evening.*
- Tue 3rd Oct - Check Shite Lane again, early morning; check Cloheen marsh again; hear news of red-eyed vireo 12:30 & drive straight to Mizen Head; drive back to Cork airport, fly out 20:15. *Clear and dry, light W'ly winds.*

Accommodation and food

We flew Aer Lingus from Heathrow to Cork and got good flight times for a reasonable price. Our self-catering accommodation was at Iris Cottage, Rosscarbery, right next to the estuary and within walking distance of the village. West Cork is gaining a reputation as a gastro-destination, and Rosscarbery has a selection of good pubs and restaurants. We tried the 'Market House' in the high street, which lived up to its reputation. Near Mizen Head we were impressed with the Crookhaven Inn, just down the street from the famous O'Sullivan's bar. The Mizen Head café was also pretty good.

Information and Maps

We were equipped with the OS Road Atlas Ireland (€10, ISBN 978-1-9097122-30-9) and hoped to muddle through between this and our SatNav. However, a generous departing birder handed us his

1:50,000 OS Discovery Series Map 89 (£6, ISBN 1-901496-78-3), which covered the Clonakilty/Skibbereen area and proved extremely useful; maps numbers 88 and 87 in the same series would cover you for this whole corner of Cork. A superb online resource is the "Where to Watch - West Cork Coast" pdf guides 1 & 2 (C.Cronin, K.Grace & P.Wolsthenholme), which cover the area from Dursey Island round to the Old Head of Kinsale. While in-country, we also encountered many other birders to swap information with (despite having being told how under-watched this section of coast is!)

Travelling around Cork

Road signs and driving regulations are basically the same as the UK; we saw no fixed speed cameras during our visit, but did spot two mobile police camera units. The landscape was very like rural Cornwall, with narrow lanes between stone walls, making it frustratingly difficult to park in many places; although relations between locals and birders are generally friendly, conflicts have arisen in the past when twitchers have parked in farm gateways.

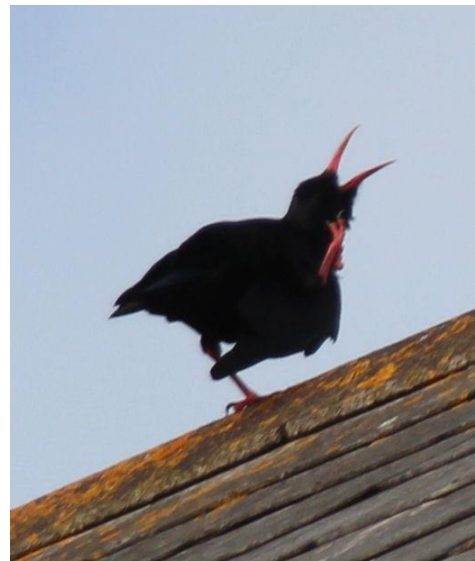
SITES VISITED (ordered east to west)

Ballycotton

This estuary southeast of Cork has an impressive record of wader rarities; we headed there after an American Golden Plover was reported nearby. The area is difficult to work: although a causeway cuts across the estuary, it's too narrow to park so we drove south towards Ballycotton village and took a minor road on the left with a 'Low Barrier Ahead' sign. Although it looks like a private driveway, this road soon bears left down a track to a small parking area, from where you can cut through scrub to the mouth of the estuary. Plenty of wigeon, curlew and other birds were here, though no golden plover flock.

Courtmascherry Estuary

This promising-looking estuary lies at the head of Courtmascherry Harbour, upstream from the town of the same name. It is very easily worked from a popular pathway along the south side; among the usual godwits and redshank we found a flock of eight Ruff.



Chough enjoying a scratch at Galley Head

Seven Heads

This was suggested to us as an alternative seawatching spot between Galley Head and the Old Head of Kinsale, however we tried and failed to find a road towards the cliffs. Arriving in the village of Butlerstown from the north, following the same road southwards eventually brings you to a crossroads (Lat58.587751, Lon-8.7203336). The minor road south from this crossroads passes a number of holiday homes and eventually terminates at a small parking area. Just to the east of this is a cove and a promising looking shrubby valley for passerines; unfortunately there isn't an easy way to view this valley, except distantly from the road.

Turning right at the aforementioned crossroads takes you along a minor road parallel to the headland; just north of this road, we found a scrubby hollow by a farm entrance (Lat 51.584718, Lon - 8.7379423) that looked good for picking up migrants; a couple of willow warblers were hiding in here.

Clonakilty Estuary

This well-known wader area held a Semipalmated Sandpiper during our visit, though we failed to get to grips with it on several visits. The two halves of the estuary are quite extensive, and the best chance to view stints is when the incoming tide pushes them onto the surrounding fresh marshes, although they don't stop anywhere for long. The north half of the estuary ('Clonakilty Harbour') is best viewed from the road south out of Clonakilty, towards Inchydoney. The incoming tide here pushes waders closer to the seawall; also, at this road's end there is a fresh pool between two dead-end turnings, known as the 'corner lake'. This pool can apparently be very good for waders, although we just saw a few Redshank.

The southern half of the Clonakilty estuary ('Muckness Strand') is backed by White's Marsh to the north which has a muddy central peninsula, and by Cloheen marsh to the west, which has attractive muddy pools at its north and south corners, where the Semi-P was reported from. Parking is tricky: there are laybys along the minor road towards Muckruss at the southwest corner of the estuary, while at the northwest corner it's just possible to park near the start of the minor road towards Inchydoney.

Galley Head

Galley head is one of the great seawatching sites in Ireland. After parking just before the castle wall, ignore 'keep out' signs and walk south to the lighthouse compound. The gates here have recently been padlocked, so you now have to clamber over some substantial gates to get into the compound, from where you can seawatch.

We made several trips to the area; starting from the castle wall, we explored the gardens for a mile or so north along the road, where you arrive at a crossroads. The minor road east from here (note that it is almost impossible to park on this road) leads down to some gardens and a sycamore copse known as 'Dirk Bay' which has produced Swainson's thrush in the past among other rarities.

The minor road west from the crossroads leads down to a junction around a hamlet nicknamed 'Shite Lane', which has gained a reputation over the last few years after turning up rarities such as Hermit Thrush. We spent several mornings at this site, which was surprisingly lively with Spotted Flycatcher, Willow Warbler and Redpoll around the gardens and hedgerows.



'S**** Lane' at Galley Head, viewed from the road stowards to the headland.

Rosscarbery

Basing ourselves at the village of Rosscarbery brought the advantage of an attractive estuary right on our doorstep. This has a record of attracting species such as Ring-billed Gull and Nearctic waders, and each evening saw a huge congregation of gulls, Sandwich Terns and commoner waders, with many of the latter viewable at close range from the causeway. The reedy pool at the west end of the causeway is also supposed to be good. Gulls and terns also congregate on the beach at the mouth of the estuary, and the shrubs here turned up a Grey-cheeked Thrush later in October 2017. During our stay, we didn't see anything rarer than Mediterranean Gulls

Mizen Head & environs

This clutch of sites around Mizen comprise one of the best locations for American passerines; we spent a whole day in the surrounding area, working the various gardens along the road and checking the renowned Lissagriffin Lake in addition to a short seawatch from the Head itself. Right at the end of our holiday, on 3rd October, a Red-eyed Vireo and a Scarlet Tanager turned up on Mizen within hours of each other. Unluckily, the Vireo went to ground and we had to leave for our flight ten minutes before the Tanager was discovered.

If approaching Mizen from the east, Lissagriffin Lake is visible on the left as you arrive at the village of Barleycove. These shallow lagoons have a great record of Nearctic rarities. Turning left around the Lake takes you to the village of Crookhaven, which is the base for an observatory run by visiting birders during the month of October.

Continuing from Barleycove, minor roads wind northwards between several isolated houses, one of which had a Red-eyed Vireo in their garden during our visit. The main route west towards Mizen Head passes through rough pastoral country; there's ample gorse and bracken for birds to hide in, but the well-planted gardens of the houses along this road act as a focus for more tree-loving species. After leaving the outskirts of Barleycove, the first hamlet you pass through, ('main garden') is famous for hosting an Ovenbird on 30th September 2014, and a Scarlet Tanager in October 2017. The next hamlet to the west ('Chas's Willows') is known for the Yellow Warbler found in August 2017. Beyond this, the only decent cover is one house on the right with an overgrown garden, shortly before the Mizen Head café car park.

Apparently seawatching is normally done from the Mizen Head car park, but we decided to pay the €7.50 to enter the Signal station museum next door and walk out to the headland, the most south-westerly point in mainland Ireland (closes 5pm). Normally this can be fantastic for cetaceans, but in 2017 the perturbed waters prevented fish from shoaling, so the spectacle of Fin and Humpback Whales seen in May-June was not repeated in the autumn. An hour's watch in quite calm conditions produced just one **Minke Whale**, plus plenty of Common Dolphin and Harbour Porpoises and a Great Skua.

Cape Clear Island

This island, which local birders refer to as 'Clear', has high peaks and is therefore larger than it appears on the map. However, rare passerines always seem to end up in one of two sheltered spots: Cotter's Garden by the north harbour, or the 'Nordy Wood' along the lane to the south harbour. Both spots are very close to each other and easy to access.

In previous years, the island would host 50-60 Irish birders during the month of October, but these days many people choose to stay on the Cork coast instead, and the island is only booked out in the second week of October (which this year produced a Swainson's Thrush). Though the second week is the best, it's worth



Cape Clear, north harbour: the famous Cotter's Garden is over the wall on the left; the white building in the distance is the Observatory.

remembering that Clear's most famous recent rarities, Blue-winged Warbler and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, arrived in the first and fourth weeks of October respectively.

We planned to make one trip to the island, and plumped for Monday 2nd after a good series of transatlantic depressions on the Sunday. The sea was still quite choppy, so it took 55 minutes to sail from Baltimore on board the *Cailin Oir* (€16 return, pay on the boat). Before sailing, we spent an hour checking the gardens around Baltimore village, which can hold migrants, but not much on our visit.

We arrived on Clear to learn that the **Lesser Yellowlegs**, which had been seen flying around the area over the previous two days, had just been relocated at Lough Loral, providing excellent views for the dozen birders staying on the island. A Barred Warbler had also been frequenting the 'Nordy Wood' over the last week; we may have glimpsed it, but the dull conditions didn't help. October 2017 also witnessed a Swainson's Thrush, Rustic Bunting and Spotted Sandpiper on the island.

On the way back from Baltimore we checked a few places along the Ilen estuary, by taking a turning along minor road on the left (the last one before the Insh Beg gardens turning). Commoner waders and gulls were among the numerous islets here, which looked like a really good spot for otter.

BIRD SPECIES LIST (total: 86)

Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*)

Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*): A few at Ballycotton, Clonakilty and Lissagriffin Lake.

Wigeon (*Anas penelope*)

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Teal (*Anas cricca*)

Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*): 1 at Ballycotton.

Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)

Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*): 1 over Galley Head, 3rd Oct.

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*): Several on the pond on Clear, also near Ballycotton.

Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)

Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*)

Mediterranean Gull (*Larus melanocephalus*): 6 seen at Rosscarbery (eleven reported in total).

Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

Common Gull (*Larus canus*)
 Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)
 Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)
 Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)
 Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*): 1 off Mizen Head.
 Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*)
 Guillemot (*Uria aalge*)
 Razorbill (*Alca torda*): Only 2 seen, off Galley Head.
 Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*)
 Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*)
 Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)
 Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*): 4 at Lissagriffin Lake.
 Knot (*Calidris canutus*): 1 at Ballycotton; 4 at Clonakilty.
 Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)
 Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*): 2 seen at Clonakilty (6 reported to be here in total).
 Ruff (*Calidris pugnax*): 1 at Rosscarbery; flock of 8 on Courtmacscherry estuary.
 Redshank (*Tringa totanus*)
 Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*): Extremely common during our visit.
 Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*): One located on Cape Clear Island at Lough Loral ('the Lake') on 2nd October. This bird had been glimpsed flying around the island over the previous two days, and was later caught and ringed (only the third one ringed under the BTO scheme).

Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*): 2 at Rosscarbery were the only ones seen.
 Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*): A few among the more numerous Black-tails at various sites.
 Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*)
 Curlew (*Numenius arquata*)
 Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*): Only 1 seen, on 'the pool' at Rosscarbery, 1st Oct.
 Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)
 Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*): Incredibly common all along the coast.
 Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*)
 Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*): Two heard calling at Clonakilty.
 Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*): Only three heard/seen during the trip.
 Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon (*Columba livia*): Occasional wild-looking pairs around the coasts, but also some feral flocks, notably at Courtmacsherry and Skibbereen.

Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*)
 Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)
 Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*): 1 hunting near Crookhaven, 9pm on 30th Sep.
 Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)
 Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*): 1 near Cork city.
 Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*)
 Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*): 1 hunting over Clonakilty.
 Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*): 1 on 'the pool' at Rosscarbery.
 Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*): Occasional singles; 5 migrating over Galley Head on 3rd Oct.
 Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*)
 Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*)
 Rock Pipit (*Anthus petrosus*)
 Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinera*)
 Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*)
 Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*)
 Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)
 Starling (*Sternus vulgaris*)
 Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)
 Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*): A few around but generally elusive.
 Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*)
 Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola*)
 Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*): 3 at Ballcotton, 2 at Galley Head, 2 at Mizen Head.
 Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*): Several at Galley Head, Mizen Head, Cape Clear.
 Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*): Several at Galley Head, Mizen Head, Seven Heads, Cape Clear.
 Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*)
 Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*): 1 at Galley Head, seen over several days; also 2 on Cape Clear.

Blue Tit (*Parus caruleus*)
 Great Tit (*Parus major*)
 Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*)
 Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*)
 Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*)
 Raven (*Corvus corax*): Not as common as expected; a distant pair near Clonakilty, also individuals heard briefly on Cape Clear and Galley Head.

Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*): Surprisingly easy to see, with superb views of birds at Mizen Head, Galley Head and elsewhere along the coast.

Magpie (*Pica pica*)
 House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)
 Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*)
 Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)
 Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*): 2 at Galley Head; 2 at Clonakilty.
 Siskin (*Spinus spinus*): 4 over Mizen Head; also heard at Galley Head.
 Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*)
 Redpoll (*Acanthis cabaret*): 2 at Galley Head.
 Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*): 1 at Ballycotton.

Other birds reported in the county of Cork during this week were: Scarlet Tanager, Red-eyed Vireo, Semi-palmated Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, American Golden Plover, Pectoral Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Yellow-legged Gull, Long-tailed Skua, Sooty Shearwater, Red-backed Shrike, Hoopoe.

MAMMAL SPECIES LIST

Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)
 Brown Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*): 1 at Galley Head.
 Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*): 1 spotted crossing the road at night, on the way home from the Crookhaven Inn.

Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)
 Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*): 1 seen from Mizen Head.
 Short-beaked Common Dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*): A large pod off Mizen Head.
 Harbour Porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*): Very common off Mizen Head.

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