

*Galloway is an extraordinary place to enjoy birdlife. Much of this is down to its diverse landscapes and habitats, from rugged sea cliffs and vast estuarine mudflats to fields, woods and boggy uplands. Taking into account resident, wintering and passage birds, the range of bird species and the year-round interest, the birds of Galloway make the area a great destination for birdwatchers and also signal its rich but vulnerable biodiversity.*

Nearly twenty years ago I washed up on the Machars of Galloway. Named after the sadly long-gone *Machair*, the coast is still rugged and unspoilt, with its raised beaches, densely wooded *heughs* and stunning rocky coastline.

Every day I walk the shores of Luce Bay, and look out for birds.

When I moved here all those years ago, a wildlife artist, seeking inspiration, it was February and snow fell. Hundreds of Wrens came to the coast in search of an extra degree of warmth. Dazed Snipe appeared in the street unable to feed inland. Far out in the bay I could see the Rhins of Galloway, the Isle of Man and, waiting for its influx of breeding Gannets, the Scare Rocks.

The winter shorebirds never disappoint. Hundreds of Knot and Golden plovers join the usual gathering of Turnstones, Redshanks, Ringed plovers, Oystercatchers and Curlews. At sea, Red-throated and Great Northern divers are wintering. Pinkfoot geese chatter as they fly back and forth in skeins across the water to the Rhins; occasionally a group of Brent geese hangs about on the shore. Over in Wigtown Bay the ducks gather; Wigeon, Teal and Pintail mingle with a growing population of Little Egrets. Whooper swans feed in the fields. If you're lucky you might spot a Greenland White-front among the flocks of geese. Or a Kingfisher at the local reserve.

Spring brings an odd fall of migrants passing through; in April there's a group of Whimbrel. Sandwich Terns chide and a single Black Redstart bobs among the Linnets and Pied Wagtails. Grasshopper warblers stop off in the scrubby no-man's-land behind the beach. Stonechats do their chatting from the taller twigs and Whitethroats rasp. The Rock pipits welcome the longer days with their plummeting displays and just inland, the Skylarks rehearse a more sophisticated version of the same dance. Suddenly, seemingly on a single day, the Chiffchaffs arrive, followed by Yellowhammers, Sedge warblers, Willow warblers, Swallows, House martins and a handful of optimistic Swifts.

Just a small glimpse of an ordinary, undesignated, bit of Galloway's coast: not the seabird colony on the Mull of Galloway with its teeming Guillemots and Razorbills (and the occasional Puffin), not the inner Solway reserves with Svalbard's entire population of wintering Barnacle geese. Not either the moorland and upland areas with their raptors (including Golden eagles). Just my local patch of scruffy, unloved, unnoticed bits which have so far largely escaped "improvement" of one sort or another: a treasure trove of the ordinary and not so ordinary birds available to anyone who cares to look, every day of the year.

And not all of those ordinary birds are so common any more. When I moved here from suburban England I was amazed by the flocks of House sparrows; a Red Data Book species doing rather better in South West Scotland. Other garden birds seemed more abundant. Bird watching isn't necessarily about catching a glimpse of some rarity: it's one of the few ways we can witness and engage with the natural world on a daily basis.

Not all the news is good. Galloway's farmland birds have suffered from intensification, drainage, pesticide and herbicide use. Our breeding Curlews and Lapwings are in decline and our geese and seabird populations continue to be affected by Avian flu. Very unusually I haven't seen a single skein of geese over my house this winter. I see fewer Yellowhammers and Skylarks here than I once did. New absences are noticeable every year. If our birdlife is an indicator of how well we are caring for our natural capital the verdict is: "Could do better". The many existing, excellent, reserves in Galloway will not save the Skylark. Birds are quintessentially creatures which cross boundaries and management at scale is needed. My hope is that a National Park will provide a focus for this. We owe it to the birds.

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