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WILD BIRD & BIODIVERSITY SURVEY
No.2 of 3—MILL STREAM GREEN ZONE
SKERRIES, CO. DUBLIN

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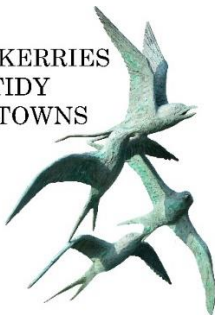
BirdWatch Ireland (Fingal Branch)

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Edited by Frank Prendergast

Presented to

SKERRIES
TIDY
TOWNS



**Comhairle Contae
Fhine Gall**
Fingal County
Council



INTRODUCTION

The Mill Stream rises outside the town of Skerries and has four tributaries. It flows eastwards towards the Dublin Road Roundabout for 4.4 km from its source in the townland of Killalane. It continues within the town for a further 1 km and enters the sea at the South Strand. The green zone associated with the Mill Stream creates a mostly east-west corridor which is the focus of this study and report (**Fig. 1**). The name 'Mill Stream' occurs in the rivers and lakes data base of the Environmental Protection Agency and is used here. It is locally named 'The Brook' by some but this is incorrect usage of the term which means a type of stream.

The purpose of this study and report is to list the variety, number and conservation status of the wild bird species which inhabit the green zone adjacent to the Mill Stream on an annual and seasonal basis and make recommendations in the context of current biodiversity planning and national monitoring of bird species.¹ A species can be resident, a winter or summer migrant, or on passage (on route to another destination). Summer migrants arrive from March onwards and depart in September/October. Winter migrants arrive from September onwards and depart in early spring. Their number and variety are partly dependent on the diversity of plant and animal life in the green zone as represented by the number of extant species (**biodiversity**).



Figure 1. Mill Stream green zone, Skerries, Co. Dublin

The green zone shown in **Figure 1** has an area of approximately 11 hectares/27 acres, excluding the playing pitches on the northern side of Skerries Mills car park. The easiest access for pedestrians and cars is the main gate located on Millers Lane. Elsewhere, pedestrian access is restricted to a minimum number of minor paths/tracks or gates distributed around the perimeter.

¹ (Fingal County Council 2022, BirdWatch Ireland 2022a)

TOPOGRAPHY & HABITAT DESCRIPTION

The green zone has poorly connected public spaces on the northern side of the stream (**Fig. 2**). The terrain is broadly flat except for a small rise just north of Skerries Mills – the location of the larger windmill. If walking eastwards from inside the wall at the Dublin Road roundabout, the visitor arrives at the first of two freshwater ponds. This is fed by the Mill Stream (Category FL8- artificial lakes and ponds).² The Mill Pond is one hectare in size and considerably infilled with reed. This pond needs management to optimise the balance between open/non-open water for birds such as **little grebe**, **moorhen** and **swan**. Adjacent tree planting has been recently carried out. The second smaller spring-fed pond (Category FP) has a considerable amount of bulrush and nesting water birds. A small freshwater reed bed (Category FS1) lies between the Mill Pond and Skerries Mills, bordering the stream. The remainder of the zone is, variously, amenity grassland (Category GA2), small wet willow-alder-ash planting (Category WN6) and mixed broadleaved planting (Category WD1) associated with private gardens flanking the stream before it enters the sea. The entire zone is close to local primary schools thus offering potential for environmental education.



Figure 2. Mill Stream green zone (delineated by the white line) and the course of the Mill Stream (blue) from the Dublin Road Roundabout to South Strand.

SURVEY METHOD

Volunteers from the Fingal Branch of BirdWatch Ireland field-walked the site in May timed to coincide with maximum bird activity. The volunteers are expert in visual identification and bird call/song recognition. The latter is especially evident during the breeding season in the months of April, May and June. The survey was conducted during this period for that reason. Dates were also chosen so as to record the presence of summer migrant species. The Branch has monitored bird populations here over decades.

² (Fossitt 2000, Smith et al. 2011)

SURVEY RESULTS

Thirty-eight species were recorded and these are alphabetically listed in **Table 1**.

TABLE 1. Species recorded in the Mill Stream green zone (ordered alphabetically).

Species	Saghas	Count	Resident	Summer	Comments	Conservation status
Blackbird	<i>Lon dubh</i>	17	✓			Green
Blackcap	<i>Caipín dubh</i>	2	✓			Green
Blue Tit	<i>Meantán gorm</i>	4	✓			Green
Chaffinch	<i>Rí Rua</i>	3	✓			Green
Chiffchaff	<i>Tiuf-teaf</i>	2		✓		Green
Collared Dove	<i>Fearán baicdhubh</i>	2	✓			Green
Coal Tit	<i>Meantán dubh</i>	1	✓			Green
Dunnock	<i>Donnóg</i>	5	✓			Green
Goldfinch	<i>Lasair choille</i>	18	✓			Green
Greenfinch	<i>Glasán darach</i>	2	✓			Amber
Grey Heron	<i>Corr réisc</i>	2	✓			Green
Grey Wagtail	<i>Glasóg liath</i>	2	✓			Green
Herring Gull	<i>Faoileán scadán</i>	5	✓			Amber
Hooded Crow	<i>Caróg liath</i>	1	✓			Green
House Martin	<i>Gabhán Binne</i>	10		✓		Amber
House Sparrow	<i>Gealbhan binne</i>	45	✓		3 colonies	Amber
Jackdaw	<i>Cág</i>	9	✓			Green
Kingfisher	<i>Cruidín</i>	1	✓			Amber
Linnet	<i>Gleoiseach</i>	7	✓			Green
Little Grebe	<i>Spáaire tonn</i>	3	✓			Green
Magpie	<i>Snag breac</i>	2	✓			Green
Mallard	<i>Mallard</i>	7	✓			Green
Mistle Thrush	<i>Smólach mór</i>	2	✓			Green
Moorhen	<i>Cearc uisce</i>	3	✓			Green
Mute Swan	<i>Eala bhalbh</i>	6	✓			Amber
Pied Wagtail	<i>Glasóg shráide</i>	2	✓			Green
Reed Bunting	<i>Gealóg ghiolcaí</i>	2	✓			Green
Robin	<i>Spideog</i>	4	✓			Green
Rook	<i>Rúcach</i>	17	✓			Green
Sand Martin	<i>Gabhán Gainimh</i>	4		✓		Amber
Song Thrush	<i>Smólach ceoil</i>	3	✓			Green
Starling	<i>Druid</i>	21	✓			Amber
Swift	<i>Gabhán gaoithe</i>	14		✓		Red
Tree Sparrow	<i>Gealbhainn crann</i>	3	✓			Green
Treecreeper	<i>Snag</i>	2	✓			Green
Willow	<i>Ceolaire sailí</i>	4		✓		Green
Woodpigeon	<i>Colm coille</i>	14	✓			Green
Wren	<i>Dreolín</i>	5	✓			Green
Species recorded		38				

The columns in **Table 1** give the common bird names in English and Irish³, the highest total recorded at the time of survey, and whether species are resident (all-year) or are a summer visitor (no winter migrants were recorded). Where a colony was observed, these are noted too. The last column in Table 1 indicates the conservation status of each species.

The conservation status shown in **Table 1** is described for each species using three colour codes based on an internationally recognised Green-Amber-Red system of the IUCN.⁴ This provides the list of **Birds of Conservation Concern** in Ireland as explained below.⁵

Green list — these are species which are **not** showing moderate or severe declines and do **not** fit into the Amber or Red categories.

Amber list — these are species with an **unfavourable conservation status** in Europe and whose population or range has **declined moderately** in recent years.

Red list — these are species that are **globally threatened** according to the IUCN criteria and whose population or range has **declined rapidly** in recent years.

The species and their number in Table 1 are further illustrated using a pie-chart (**Fig. 3**). Counts are ordered clockwise from high to low.

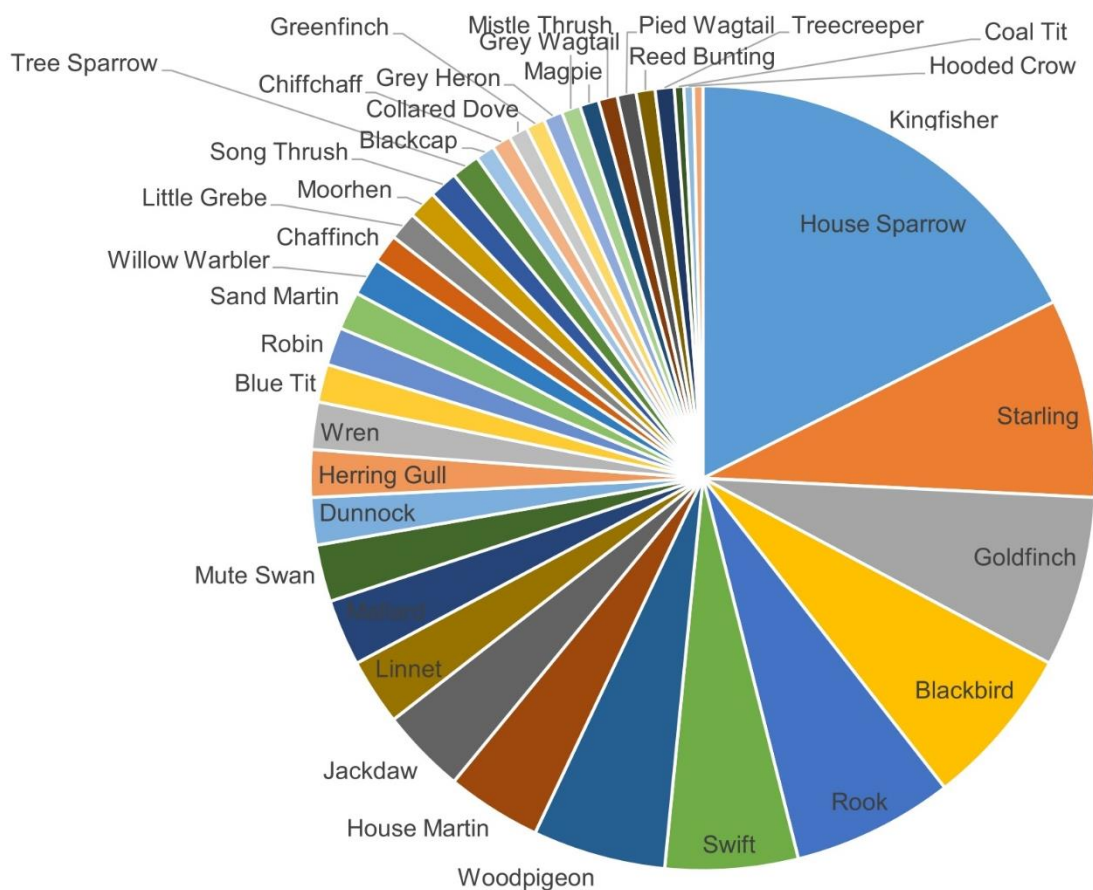


Figure 3. Species recorded (38) in the Mill Stream green zone ordered by frequency.

³ (BirdWatch Ireland 2022b)

⁴ (IUCN 2022)

⁵ (BirdWatch Ireland 2021)

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Mill Stream and associated green zone which is a floodplain within the town boundary are an important wildlife corridor providing a rich biodiversity including broad-leaved trees, wild flowers and grasses giving ground cover, and freshwater habitats. The level of water in the stream is shallow (<0.5 m) for most of the year. During periods of high rainfall it is subject to flooding due to the tributary system being 13.3 km in length (**Fig. 4**). This makes the water quality highly subject to the effects of run-off from any nitrogen-rich fertiliser and agricultural slurry from upstream. The **diversity of aquatic species** in the stream is not part of this survey but must be considered a vital part of the whole ecosystem and worthy of monitoring and protection. Hedgerow planting and management could be enhanced with obvious benefits for insects and birdlife. Over-ground electricity power lines are, currently, a hazard for flying swans.



Figure 4. Mill Stream (looking west); tributary system (inset). Map and photo by Frank Prendergast.

Table 1 and **Figure 3** show thirty-eight species of wild bird are present along the Mill Stream green zone. This number is remarkably high and includes the amber-listed **kingfisher** occasionally seen fishing in the wooded section between Holmpatrick and South Strand. The green-listed **sedge warbler**, a summer migrant, formerly bred on the banks of the stream in the section shown in **Figure 4** but no longer does so due to historic cutting of the vegetation. That practise has now been reversed and may encourage the return of this species in due course. The migratory **swift**, a red-listed species, is present in small numbers and nests nearby. A pair of **reed bunting** is present and breeding in the reed bed.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Wild bird populations are a critical indicator of biodiversity richness.
- Thirty-eight species of wild bird use the Mill Stream green zone corridor as a feeding and nesting resource and require continuing conservation and protection.
- Fingal County Council are to be congratulated for their commitment to the provision of wild meadow margins along the Mill Stream and for supporting tree planting initiatives by Skerries Tidy Towns.
- Presence of the amber-listed Kingfisher is considered significant but dependent on good water quality and aquatic life.
- The sedge warbler formerly bred in the uncut margins bordering the Mill Stream as shown in Figure 4. Widening the southern uncut margin to 2–3 m would encourage its return.
- The red-listed swift, a summer migrant, is a magical sight overflying the corridor. Current collaboration between Fingal County Council and BirdWatch Ireland will see the provision of artificial nesting blocks on the north gable of the Carnegie Library (under refurbishment). This will likely lead to an expansion of their number, currently about fourteen.
- Consider appropriate rehabilitation/rewetting of the reed bed to enhance its wildlife value.
- Provide a boardwalk through the reed bed to channel pedestrians who currently cause damage to this part of the ecosystem
- A boardwalk would also connect with the pathway leading to Skerries Mills.
- Provide a pedestrian gate at the Dublin Road Roundabout to give access to the course of the Mill Steam and allow users to walk its entire length – a proposed **Mill Stream Nature Trail**.
- The content and findings of this report, along with **No.1/3** (Ballast Pit) and **No.3/3** (Red Island/South Strand zone) suggest all three zones (**nominated by Skerries Tidy Towns**) are a corridor linking places for nature within urban spaces that will improve biodiversity locally.
- The objectives of these three reports are consistent with the aims of the **International Union for Conservation of Nature**, especially data gathering and analysis, advocacy and education.
- Disseminate these reports *via* **Skerries Tidy Towns**, **Fingal County Council** and **BirdWatch Ireland** (Fingal Branch) – a triangle of common interest, to maximise impact and create greater **public awareness** and **engagement** with the biodiversity and conservation of the **Mill Stream green zone**.

Selected birds observed in the Mill Stream green zone are shown in the **APPENDIX**. To discover more about Ireland’s birds visit BirdWatch Ireland at <https://birdwatchireland.ie/irelands-birds-birdwatch-ireland/>; for information on local wild birdlife visit Fingal Branch of BirdWatch Ireland <https://bwifingal.ie/>.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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APPENDIX—Selected species of the Mill Stream green zone

Kingfisher

Very distinctive when seen in flight with its coloured plumage especially the back, rump and tail which are a bright electric blue. Easily overlooked if perched motionless on a branch beside a stream or river on the look-out for fish. The diet is various species of small fish (stickleback, minnow and chub) and larger aquatic insects caught by plunge-diving from a perch or while hovering. Kingfishers breed in tunnels dug in vertical banks along streams and rivers.

Reed Bunting

Adult summer males have a distinctive black neck and throat, with a prominent white collar on the neck and a small white stripe from the bill to the neck. Feeds on various seeds and grains, as well as insects during the breeding season.

Sedge Warbler

Widespread summer visitor to wetlands from April to September throughout Ireland. The song is a loud, excited mix of various phrases and which may include some mimicry of other bird songs. Feeds almost exclusively on insects and other invertebrates. Sedge Warblers breed on the edge of wetlands, especially in areas of wet grassland.

Swift

About the same size as a swallow with dark plumage. Spends virtually all of its life airborne and is never seen resting on wires like swallows and martins. Has a distinctive shape in flight with scythe shaped wings held straight out from the body. One of the fastest flying birds. Breeds throughout Ireland, usually in small recesses in buildings, both occupied and derelict.



Kingfisher



Reed Bunting



Sedge Warbler



Swift

Source of images: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/>