



**BirdWatchIreland**  
Fingal Branch  
bwifingal.ie

# WILD BIRD & BIODIVERSITY SURVEY

## No.3 of 3— RED ISLAND/SOUTH STRAND SKERRIES, CO. DUBLIN

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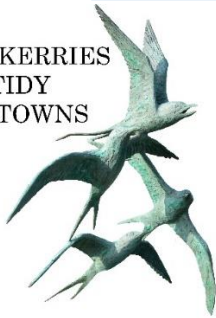
BirdWatch Ireland (Fingal Branch)

2022 June 23

*Edited by Frank Prendergast*

Presented to

SKERRIES  
TIDY  
TOWNS



**Comhairle Contae  
Fhine Gall**  
Fingal County  
Council



## INTRODUCTION

The scope of this report is centred on the eastern coastline of Skerries and the three Skerries Islands – Church, Colt, and Shenick. The maritime zone extends for 2.4 km in a north-south direction from Red Island to Shenick Point and offshore for 1.7 km from South Strand to Church Island, the outermost island of the three (**Fig. 1**). Rockabill Island which is 7 km offshore and has internationally important tern colonies (arctic, common and roseate) is excluded, being beyond the scope of this report.

Skerries has diverse built heritage and extensive opportunities for leisure in terms of marine activities and coastal walking. It won the National Tidy Towns Award in 2016 and is designated by Fingal County Council as the prime tourism destination town. Resident and tourist numbers continue to grow with related shoreline activities having a consequential impact on the local wild bird population in all months.



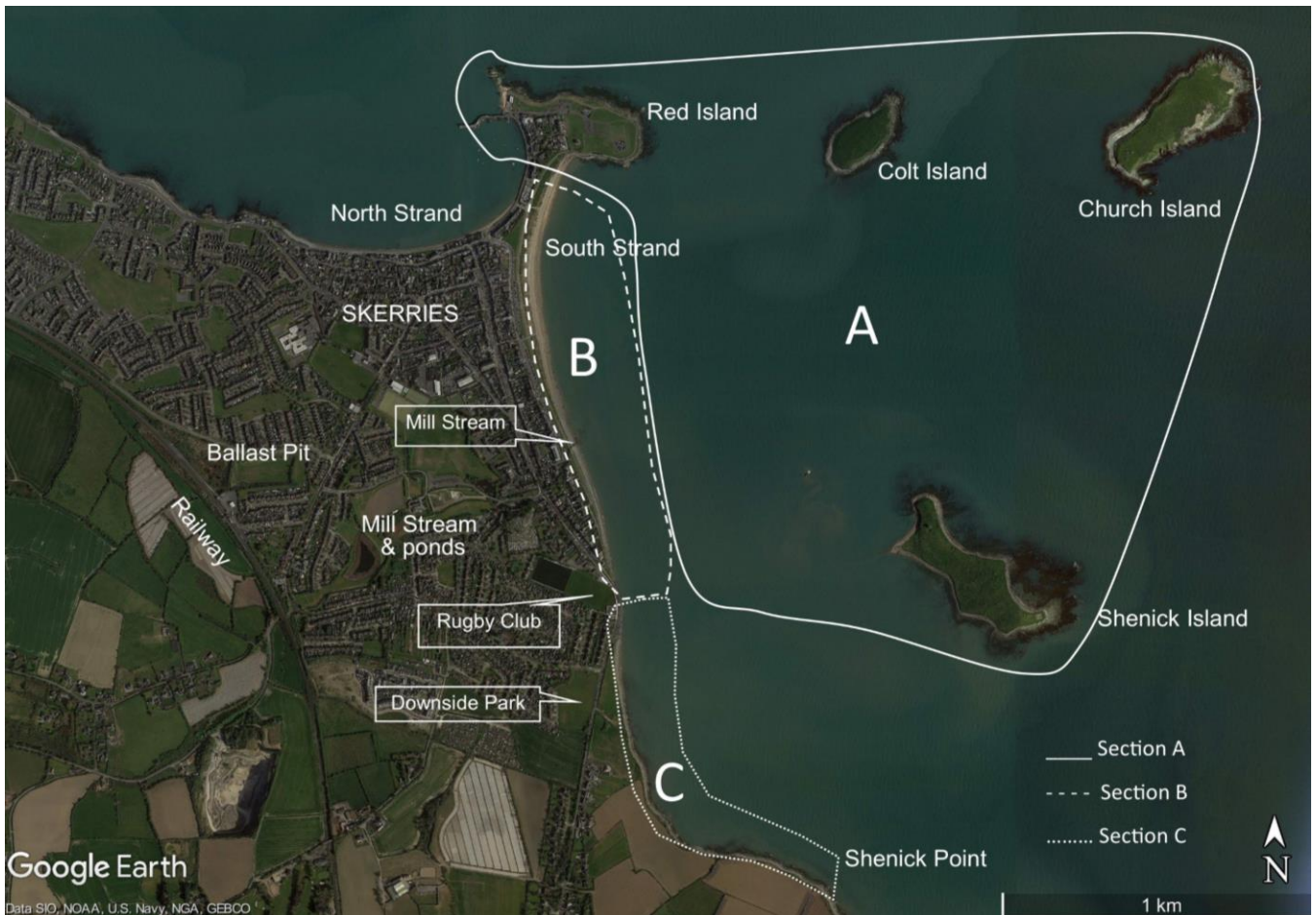
**Figure 1.** Red Island–South Strand coastal zone, Skerries, Co. Dublin

The purpose of this report is to list the variety, number and conservation status of the wild bird species which inhabit the coastal and inshore zones on an annual or seasonal basis and make recommendations in the broader context of biodiversity and national monitoring of bird species.<sup>1</sup> A species can be resident, a winter or summer migrant, or on passage to another destination. Summer migrants arrive from March onwards and depart in September/October. Winter migrants arrive from September onwards and depart in spring. Resident birds and summer migrants mainly breed offshore on the islands. Their number and variety are partly dependent on the diversity of plant, animal and marine life as represented by the number of extant species (**biodiversity**).

<sup>1</sup> (Fingal County Council 2022, BirdWatch Ireland 2022a)

## TOPOGRAPHY & HABITAT DESCRIPTION

The diversity of wild bird species and habitats requires simplification for discussion purposes. While not exact or standard, wild birds are grouped here into two categories - marine and non-marine. Marine species which include pelagic species, mainly feed/forage on the sea or in the inter-tidal zone. Non-marine species include those which inhabit and breed on land (including passerine species). Habitats are broadly zoned as Sections A, B and C (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Sections A, B, and C, Red Island/South Strand, Skerries, Co. Dublin

### **Section A—Red Island and offshore islands**

Section A is primarily open marine water (Category MW1) with exposed rocky shores (Cat. LR1); also shingle, gravel and sand shores (Cat. LS1 & LS2).<sup>2</sup>

### **Section B—South Strand to Rugby Club**

Section B is coastland with embryonic dunes (Cat. CD1), littoral sediment-sand shore (Cat. LS2) and a wide intertidal zone. During spring tide low-water the sand shore can be exposed for up to 800 m from the mainland (Cat. LS2) as far as Shenick Island. All three Skerries Islands have different private owners.

### **Section C—Rugby Club to Shenick Point**

Section C has a rocky intertidal zone (Cat. LR1), littoral sediment-sand shore (Cat. LS2) and a 10 m high sedimentary sea cliff (Cat. CS3).

<sup>2</sup> (Fossitt 2000, Smith et al. 2011)

## SURVEY METHOD

Volunteers from the Fingal Branch of BirdWatch Ireland field-walked the coastline on two dates in May. Dates were chosen so as to include summer migrant species. We also include winter migrants, drawing from prior survey data obtained by us during annual coastline monitoring of wetland birds conducted for the Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS) and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).<sup>3</sup> Due to copyright issues, these data are necessarily generalised in this report.

## SURVEY RESULTS

Thirty non-marine species (passerines) were recorded in Sections A, B and C and are alphabetically listed in **Table 1**.

**TABLE 1.** Non-marine species (passerines) recorded in Sections A, B and C (ordered alphabetically).

Species	<i>Saghas</i>	Count	Resident	Winter	Summer	Comments	Status
Blackbird	<i>Lon dubh</i>	6	✓				Green
Blue Tit	<i>Meantán gorm</i>	2	✓				Green
Buzzard	<i>Clamhán</i>	1	✓			Hunts along cliffs	Green
Chaffinch	<i>Rí Rua</i>	2	✓				Green
Chiffchaff	<i>Tiuf-teaf</i>	2			✓		Green
Dunnock	<i>Donnóg</i>	1	✓				Green
Goldfinch	<i>Lasair choille</i>	16	✓				Green
Grey Wagtail	<i>Glasóg liath</i>	1	✓				Red
Hooded Crow	<i>Caróg liath</i>	15	✓				Green
House Martin	<i>Gabhán Binne</i>	2			✓		Amber
House Sparrow	<i>Gealbhan binne</i>	75	✓			3 colonies	Amber
Jackdaw	<i>Cág</i>	21	✓				Green
Linnet	<i>Gleoiseach</i>	15	✓				Green
Meadow Pipit	<i>Riabhóg Mhóna</i>	3	✓				Red
Pied Wagtail	<i>Glasóg shráide</i>	4	✓				Green
Robin	<i>Spideog</i>	2	✓				Green
Rock Pipit	<i>Riabhóg Chladaigh</i>	2	✓				Green
Rook	<i>Rúcach</i>	7	✓				Green
Sand Martin	<i>Gabhán Gainimh</i>	4			✓	Colony on cliffs	Amber
Short-eared Owl	<i>Ulchabhán réisc</i>	12		✓		Winters Shenick Isl.	Amber
Skylark	<i>Fuiseog</i>	2	✓				Amber
Snipe	<i>Naoscach</i>	2	✓				Amber
Song Thrush	<i>Smólach ceoil</i>	1	✓				Green
Starling	<i>Druid</i>	57	✓				Green
Stock Dove	<i>Colm gorm</i>	2	✓				Amber
Stonechat	<i>Caislín cloch</i>	2	✓				Green
Swallow	<i>Fáinleog</i>	6			✓		Amber
Wheatear	<i>Clochrán</i>	2			✓	Passage migrant	Amber
Woodpigeon	<i>Colm coille</i>	2	✓				Green
Wren	<i>Dreolín</i>	4	✓				Green
<b>Total species</b>		<b>30</b>					

<sup>3</sup> (National Parks and Wildlife Service 1994–present, Pierce 1998)

The columns give the common names in English and Irish<sup>4</sup>, the highest total recorded, and whether species are resident all-year or are a summer or a winter visitor. Where a colony was observed, these are also noted. The last column in Table 1 indicates the conservation status of each species.

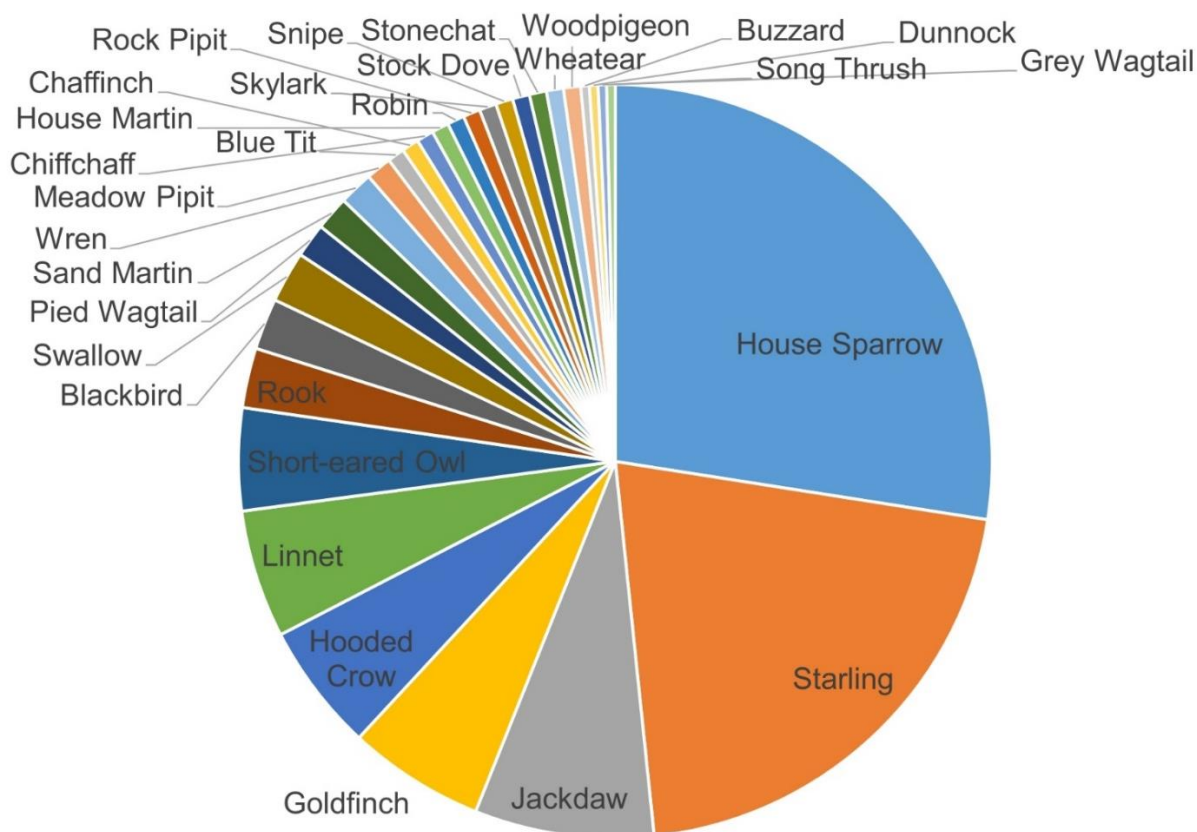
The conservation status of each species in **Table 1** (and Table 2) is described using three colour codes based on an internationally recognised Green-Amber-Red system of the IUCN.<sup>5</sup> This provides the list of **Birds of Conservation Concern** in Ireland as explained below.<sup>6</sup>

**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.** Non-marine species (passerines) recorded in Sections A, B ordered by their frequency.

<sup>4</sup> (BirdWatch Ireland 2022b)

<sup>5</sup> IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature <https://www.iucn.org/>

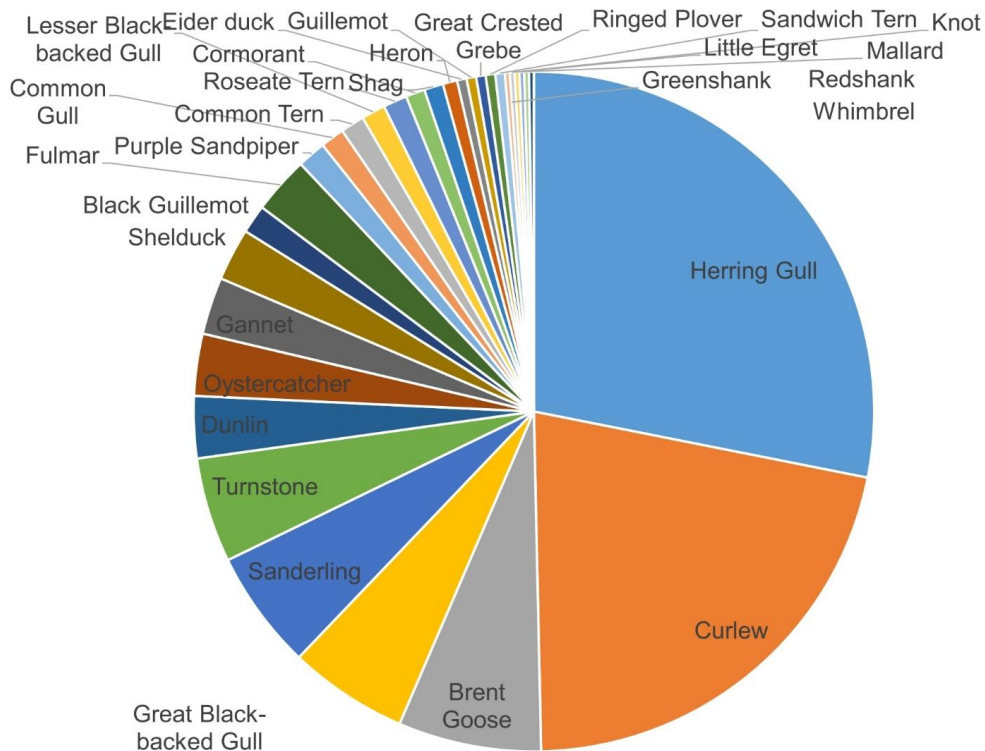
<sup>6</sup> (BirdWatch Ireland 2021)

Thirty-one marine species (including pelagic) were recorded in Sections A, B and C and are alphabetically listed in **Table 2**.

**TABLE 2.** Marine species (incl. pelagic) recorded in Sections A, B and C (ordered alphabetically).

Species	<i>Saghas</i>	Count	Resident	Winter	Summer	Comments	Status
Black Guillemot	<i>Foracha dhubh</i>	6	✓				Amber
Brent Goose	<i>Cadhan</i>	30		✓			Amber
Common Gull	<i>Faoileán bán</i>	5	✓				Amber
Common Tern	<i>Geabhróg</i>	5			✓		Amber
Cormorant	<i>Broigheall</i>	4	✓				Amber
Curlew	<i>Crotach</i>	95	✓	✓			Red
Dunlin	<i>Breacóg</i>	13		✓	✓		Red
Eider duck	<i>Éadar</i>	2	✓			Nests islands	Amber
Fulmar	<i>Fulmaire</i>	12	✓			Shenick Isl.	Green
Gannet	<i>Gainead</i>	12	✓			Fishes offshore	Amber
Great Black-bk. Gull	<i>Droimneach mór</i>	25	✓			Breeds islands	Amber
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Foitheach mór</i>	2	✓	✓			Amber
Greenshank	<i>Laidhrín glas</i>	1		✓			Amber
Grey Heron	<i>Corr réisc</i>	3	✓				Green
Guillemot	<i>Foracha</i>	2	✓				Amber
Herring Gull	<i>Faoileán scadán</i>	124	✓				Amber
Knot	<i>Cnota</i>	1		✓			Amber
Lesser Black-bk. Gull	<i>Droimneach beag</i>	5	✓				Green
Little Egret	<i>Éigrit bheag</i>	1	✓				Green
Mallard	<i>Mallard</i>	1	✓				Green
Oystercatcher	<i>Roilleach</i>	13	✓	✓			Green
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Gobadán cosbhuí</i>	6		✓			Green
Redshank	<i>Cosdeargán</i>	1	✓	✓			Red
Ringed Plover	<i>Naoscach</i>	2	✓	✓			Green
Roseate Tern	<i>Geabhróg rósach</i>	5			✓	Breeds Rockabill	Amber
Sanderling	<i>Luathrán</i>	25		✓			Green
Sandwich Tern	<i>Geabhróg scothdhubh</i>	2			✓		Amber
Shag	<i>Seaga</i>	4	✓				Amber
Shelduck	<i>Seil-lacha</i>	11	✓				Amber
Turnstone	<i>Piardálaí trá</i>	22		✓			Green
Whimbrel	<i>Crotach eanaigh</i>	1		✓	✓	Passage migrant	Green
<b>Total species</b>		<b>31</b>					

The species and their number in Table 2 are further illustrated using a pie-chart (**Fig. 4**). Counts are ordered clockwise from high to low.



**Figure 4.** Marine species (incl. pelagic) recorded in Sections A, B ordered by their frequency.

## PROTECTED COASTAL SITES IN SKERRIES

Under the terms of EU Directives and Irish legislation a site is given protection using a range of designations based on **qualifying criteria/interests** *i.e.* have listed rare and vulnerable species, regularly occurring migratory species, or wetlands of international importance. Designations include National Heritage Areas (**NHA**), Special Areas of Conservation (**SAC**), Nature Reserves, and Special Protection Areas (**SPA**).

### WHY PROTECT?

'Ireland is home to 28 species of land mammal, over 400 species of birds, more than 4,000 plant species and over 12,000 species of insect. If we want all of this to survive, we must ensure that there are enough suitable areas for all these species to flourish. **Conserving** species in their natural habitats requires a **strategic approach** to succeed. One of these is to ensure the **adequate conservation of habitats** where many of our plants and animals live.'<sup>7</sup>

#### Skerries Islands —Special Protection Area (SPA)

The Skerries Islands are a designated SPA. The qualifying interests (current) are based on their populations of cormorant, shag, light-bellied brent goose, purple sandpiper, turnstone and herring gull.

#### Rockabill Island —Special Protection Area (SPA) & Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Rockabill Island is a designated SPA & SAC. The qualifying interests for SPA are based on its populations of arctic tern, common tern, roseate tern and purple tern. Rockabill Island is not considered further in this report.

#### Red Island/South Strand coastal zone

The Skerries coastline is not designated but many of the above species, especially the winter migrants, interact with the shoreline to feed and roost in large numbers. Awareness by walkers, especially those with dogs, is critical to minimising disturbance. Unintended disturbance of wild birds in winter causes them harm.

<sup>7</sup> (National Parks & Wildlife Service)

## DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The coastline of Skerries and its nearby islands are, without question, an area of special conservation value and rich biodiversity. This is reflected in the high number of wild bird species dependent of its natural resources which provide food and roosting. A rich flora, supporting birds and insects, has developed along the sand dunes in Section B. The rare sea kale is found along the shingle beach in Section C.

The growth in numbers of residents and visitors frequenting the coast for leisure in all months of the year will see pressure on wild life inevitably increase. Managing the competing interests and needs of the human and wild life populations will require discussion, education, policy implementation and good will.

### COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Wild bird populations are a critical indicator of biodiversity richness.
- Sixty-one species of wild bird inhabit the coastal zone making it a locally important wildlife resource.
- The list of birds includes five red listed species which is significant.
- The range of amber and green-listed species of bird is diverse.
- Proximity of the Skerries Islands (a designated SPA) to the shore brings considerable numbers of marine birds inshore to feed and roost.
- Beach walkers, especially with those dogs off-lead, can cause considerable stress to birdlife.
- Simple avoidance of feeding/roosting flocks would largely resolve the conflict.
- Erect an information panel:
  - requesting beach walkers to avoid roosting flocks;
  - restrain dogs from running amok amongst feeding bird;
  - highlighting the national/international importance of the SPA;
  - illustrating the key species for members of the public.
- Create a **Marine Protected Area** for Sections A, B and C to halt the alarming decline in coastal biodiversity.
- The content and findings of this report, along with **No.1/3** (Ballast Pit) and **No.2/3** (Mill Stream green zone zone) suggest all three zones (**nominated by Skerries Tidy Towns**) are a single corridor linking places for nature within urban spaces and will help build biodiversity.
- The objectives of the 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* the web sites/networks of **Skerries Tidy Towns**, **Fingal County Council** and **BirdWatch Ireland** (Fingal Branch) – a triangle of common interests, to maximise impact and create **greater public awareness** and **engagement** with the biodiversity and conservation of the Red Island/South Strand zone.

Selected species of birds observed in the zone are shown in **APPENDIX I & II**. To discover more about Ireland's birds visit BirdWatch Ireland at <https://birdwatchireland.ie/irelands-birds-birdwatch-ireland/>. For information on the local birdlife of Fingal visit <https://bwifingal.ie/>.



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## APPENDIX I—Selected marine species

### Brent goose (pale-bellied)

The brent goose is a winter migrant from high Arctic Canada, flying more than 5000 km across Greenland and Iceland to reach here. They feed mostly on eel-grass which grows on muddy estuaries and also on grasslands, usually when coastal supplies have been depleted at estuarine sites.

### Curlew

The curlew is our largest wader and red listed with numbers declining substantially due to increased afforestation and agricultural improvement. Breeds in floodplains and boglands. Numbers in winter are inflated by migrant birds from Scotland and Scandinavia. They feed mostly on crabs, ragworms and molluscs.

### Eider

Eider feed by diving in sea water up to 20 m deep for mussels, other molluscs, crustaceans and echinoderms. They breed around the coast with about 100 pairs known. Several birds occupy the Skerries Islands.

### Great black-backed gull

The largest widespread gull to be seen in Ireland. Breeds on vegetated ground on islands. Feeds on fish, waste from commercial fishing, offal, and other birds.

## Sanderling

These small waders are winter visitors from Siberia. Feed predominantly on small invertebrates. They have a highly characteristic feeding technique of rushing along the tidal edge (as though on wheels) foraging for prey items such as small polychaete worms and shrimp-like crustaceans.



Brent goose (pale bellied)



Curlew



Eider



Great black-backed gull



Sanderling

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

## APPENDIX II—Selected non-marine species

### Buzzard

A medium sized raptor (bird of prey) with broad wings, a compact body, short neck and medium-length tail. Largely resident but with birds from Britain here in winter. Often seen sitting on fences and telegraph posts or soaring high in the sky, where it shows a fan shaped tail and spread outer wing feathers. Has a loud mewling call which it uses mainly in flight. Takes a wide variety of prey items including small mammals, birds, rabbits, insects, earthworms and amphibians.

### Short-eared owl

A scarce winter visitor throughout Ireland. Favours coastal lowlands and several birds feed and roost on the Skerries Islands. Their diet comprises small mammals, frogs and birds.

### Grey Wagtail

A widespread resident along fast flowing streams and rivers throughout Ireland. A pair can be regularly seen feeding at the mouth of the Mill Stream. Grey Wagtails feed mainly on insects caught on the ground or in flight. Breeds mainly along streams and rivers, frequently building its nest under a bridge.

### House Martin

Common summer visitor throughout Ireland from mid-March to late-September. Between Sand martin and Swallow in size. In all plumages has a large white rump, a feature not shown by either Sand Martin or Swallow. Like Swallows and Sand Martins, House Martins feed on insects such as aphids and mayflies caught in flight. Similar to Swallow, the House Martin constructs a nest out of mud. It is usually sited underneath the eaves of a house. Also nests on cliffs. Usually raises between two or three broods every year, with some fledging as late as October. Winters in tropical Africa.

### Wheatear

Widespread summer visitor to uplands and scrubland throughout Ireland, from mid-March to early-October. Common passage migrant to all coasts in spring and autumn so often seen on Red Island and South Strand. Feeds on insects and other invertebrates.



Buzzard



Short-eared owl



Grey wagtail



House Martin



Wheatear

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