

## BIRDS OF THE BOREENS

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*Hon. Secretary, Cape Clear Bird Observatory*

“Gale warnings for sea areas Fastnet, Shannon, Rockall”—we all know the familiar phrase. But where is Fastnet, and what is it? It is a tiny lump of rock set in the Atlantic four miles beyond Cape Clear Island, which would otherwise be the southern tip of Ireland. Like “The Cape”, as the island is known locally, it was once part of a ridge of hills running south-west from somewhere near Skibbereen; but the land has sunk and been broken into a line of islands forming the south side of one of the “rias bays” of west Cork and Kerry.

Cape Clear presents a formidable aspect as one approaches on the 50-ton mailboat from the village of Baltimore, four miles away “in Ireland”, as the Cape Clear people say. At a distance of two or three miles, it seems a sombre, depressing, massive hill; it seems incapable of scenic beauty, of cultivation, of supporting the life of man or beast. But this is as false as it is possible for a first impression to be. In fact it supports something over 200 people; in the past, numbers were nearer the 2,000 mark, which is considerable for an island of 1,500 acres, even when many are away fishing. Now there is room enough for each family to have at least a small croft, with a field for potatoes, a field for the cow, and perhaps some space for a few cabbages and turnips. The hens, of course, can live in really free range, for an island is secure against foxes—in the same way as, it seems, it is against the police, who hardly ever visit the community that prides itself on being able to look after itself!

The scenery, at close quarters, is amazingly beautiful. Everything is lush and green, except in autumn when the bracken that grows in the corners of all the tiny fields turns orange and red. Each field is surrounded by a dry stone wall, which is itself capped by a growth of honeysuckle and pennywort. Gardens are bordered with *Escallonia* or *Fuchsia*, while little streams trickle along the sides of the “boreens”, the narrow unsurfaced roads. The whole island is hilly, with outcrops of dark grey Devonian rock at all altitudes. The coast is bordered with cliffs, some of which drop vertically for a couple of hundred feet, but most are so inclined that one can scramble down. All round the island are little coves and bays, and many caves, and the sea here is deep and clear and beautiful. In a storm, it leaps over the 100-ft. high Fastnet rock, and justifies the names of the bay between Cape Clear and Ireland—Roaringwater Bay; on a calm summer day, it laps the harbour walls with the gentleness of a lake shore.

Four years ago this summer, a party of five visited the island to spend some time in systematic bird-watching, to discover what, if any, migration could be seen there. That summer there was but one other visitor, and it was easy to rent a lovely house by the South Harbour. To-day, that house is a Youth Hostel, and the Bird Observatory is established in an equally fine house in the North Harbour. Tourists and ornithologists—we insist on a very important distinction!—visit the island all through

the year, and the islanders have come to know that they must always speak to us in English, as our Gaelic is not very good, and that even if we are enjoying ourselves, our "holiday" is not wholly play. They remain, however, as kind as they were the day we first landed, and indeed without their help and their friendliness our visits to the island would lose much of their enjoyment and all our work would be far more difficult.

The principal object of Cape Clear Bird Observatory, as of almost all the twenty or so Bird Observatories in Ireland and Britain, is to record all the migration that can be observed on the island. This is then co-ordinated with the information from the other stations both coastal and inland, and thus a general picture obtained of what is happening and how this is affected by the weather and other circumstances. The coast of France is 500 miles away and this is a long way for a small bird to fly across water; nevertheless we regularly and at all seasons have scores of species coming in from there. In the early spring, the Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers and Swallows come on their migration northward; in April and May, the Hoopoe or the Golden Oriole that appears on the island has "over-shot" its destination in France or Spain; by August, the Wheatears may be freshly arrived from Greenland—perhaps thirty hours or more non-stop flight; in September and October, birds from all Europe may be found on this western island, wandering, or blown off course in a south-east gale—Melodious Warblers from France, Icterine Warblers from no nearer than the Low Countries, Red-breasted Flycatchers from further east and Lapland Buntings from further north; a Red-tailed Shrike came from the Middle East and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak from America. The prominent position of the island off the south coast of Ireland makes it a gathering ground for all the birds that are on the move and a visit to the Observatory can make one realize how much is moving and how small distances can be to a bird.

As far as we know at present, most of the migrant birds seen at Cape Clear are likely to have come a long way before they appear on the island. Most small birds migrate at night, and so birds leaving Ireland at dusk normally fly over the island without our knowing anything of them—though we do occasionally hear the call of a wader flying south. The seabirds that pass in huge numbers may often be on vast feeding movements, taking them in a huge circle round the Biscay area and reaching Cape Clear at the north-west tip of their journey. But others are migrants, either from the south into their breeding areas in west Ireland, or, in autumn, away from their breeding grounds to their wintering areas in the middle or even the southern Atlantic.

Another aspect of the Observatory's ornithological work is the study of the resident birds. For an island only three miles long and one mile wide, the numbers of breeding small birds are extraordinarily high. Until the last bitter winter, there may have been 500 pairs of Wrens breeding, and even now there are perhaps 200; Robins, Dunnocks and Yellowhammers all occur in three-figure numbers also. The population of Stonechats is especially interesting; a very high figure—perhaps 100 or more breeding pairs—was present in 1961; but a short spell of cold weather may have been responsible for reducing the numbers to about

twenty-five pairs in 1962, and now in 1963 only one pair has been proved to have bred; at most one other pair has been present. These are only a few of the breeding species of the island, which also include Choughs, Black Guillemots, Ravens, Corncrakes and Rock Doves—birds with much appeal both because of their own charm and because of their relative scarcity. The variety combined with the high numbers makes it difficult to census the island in its entirety. Consequently, we have now started a comprehensive census of a sample area of about 250 acres, where the population can be counted exactly and compared from year to year.

Sea-watching is a part of the daily routine of the Observatory, and a part that is very popular. For if you are sitting on the southern cliffs looking out to the clear blue Atlantic, while Manx Shearwaters are flying west past the island in an unbroken line hour after hour; if you are sitting there while Sooty Shearwaters, from the south Pacific, come wheeling past, or the Great Shearwaters from Tristan da Cunha; if you have had the fantastic luck to see a sight unprecedented in Ireland or Britain, of the rare Cory's Shearwaters passing at a rate of seventy birds an hour; if you have seen any of these things and have any interest in birds, and any feeling for beauty or wonder, you will have seen something you will never forget. And all this leaves unmentioned the sea sparkling with phalaropes flitting over the surface, or the urgent rushing flocks of auks hurrying to their breeding grounds.

Besides this, there is the occasional sighting of an Otter offshore, the Killer Whale or the Basking Shark, silently and sedately cruising past, or the schools of porpoises that play off-shore or round the mailboat on her crossing. Rare is the ornithologist who is not interested in some other form of natural history, and the Bird Observatory itself is most anxious that these other topics should receive more attention than they do now. We know that whales and sharks are passing the island—but no one has recorded how many or how often. We know that it is easy to see migrant butterflies, and we even see them over the sea; but we have few systematic records of their occurrence. We hope that it will be possible to find naturalists who would be interested to come to the island and work on these matters.

With the loan of instruments from the Irish Meteorological Office, we are now able to keep our own weather records. This is a first step towards a closer study of the climate of the island as a whole. This should then be followed by more detailed study of the various parts, which could well differ very substantially, as the cloud base with a warm front is regularly at only 300 feet, 250 feet below the highest hill on the island. The island has so oceanic a climate that the summer is never very hot—the temperature never rose above 64° F in the whole of June, 1963; but on the other hand, frost is rare and snow is rarer, and even in the last severe winter we understand the temperature was never for one whole day below freezing. The sea remains warm, and a November bathe is reputed to be quite pleasant.

A closer knowledge of the local weather should be an invaluable asset in the work on plant ecology which is another subject we should like to see developed at the Observatory. The island's flora is not vast nor

famous for rare plants ; but its distribution over the varied terrain, and in relation to differing degrees of moisture or exposure, is extremely interesting.

The Observatory is manned entirely by amateurs, who come and stay for their holiday period. They are out in the field all day, observing and noting as much as they can see ; in the evening comes the equally important part, stretching perhaps far into the night, of writing up the day's observations. The ornithological records are made in logs with standardized recording sheets obtained from the British Trust for Ornithology ; the weather records are entered on sheets supplied by the Meteorological Office, and ready for sorting on a punch-card machine ; the records of occurrence and distribution of flowering plants go on a card index, and the records of whales and of lepidoptera in the " Island Log ". Everyone has played a part in accumulating a mass of information that will help us to understand the wildlife of the island and how it is affected by its inter-relationship with the other elements of the fauna, and thus in time for us to know if any part is in jeopardy and even why it should be so.

The Observatory was started by a group of ornithologists who felt that the island offered so much of interest that many people would value a visit to it, and this group forms the basis of its Committee. After our first season, we rented another house on the island, and furnished it simply for the accommodation of the observers coming to the island. Now we have bought a pleasant house by the harbour, while keeping the other one as a supplement to our accommodation. The financing for this, and the current expenditure, comes from a modest charge made for staying at the Observatory, from a few grants from generous bodies and especially the British Trust for Ornithology, and from the subscriptions of the " Friends of Clear ". We are always anxious to extend our membership, and we will be pleased to send further details to anyone who writes to the Secretary at The Old Barn, Sonning Common, near Reading, England.

With such growth, we hope to come soon to other projects that are in our minds—the next item now is to build a laboratory, and then perhaps another year we can think of appointing a warden. So, we hope, the Observatory will develop, and will play an ever increasing part in the study not only of ornithology but of all aspects of natural history.