

# MIGRATING BIRDS DURING THE WINTER



**Snipe:** winter visitor from Faeroe Islands, Iceland and northern Scotland. A relatively common wader but not easily seen, unless flushed out of marshy vegetation, when it typically towers away in a frantic zig zag fashion. The disproportionately long, straight bill is easily visible in flight. If you are lucky enough to see one standing partially or wholly out in the open (usually at the edge of reeds), you will make out the series of dark brown, pale buff and black stripes and bars on the head and body - this produces a good camouflage effect. Diet consists largely of vegetable matter and seeds, and earthworms, tipulid larvae and other soil invertebrate fauna. Highly dispersed distribution in winter. They forage across a variety of wetland and damp habitats. Particularly high concentrations are found on the fringes of lowland lakes. Amber-listed in Ireland due to concerns over the European population which has undergone a moderate recent decline.



**Light-bellied Brent Goose,** Winter migrant from high-Arctic Canada. Most occur in Ireland between October and April. Is a small dark goose, with a black head, neck and breast, and dark-brown upperparts and pale underparts. Almost whitish flanks, and small white crescent on the upperparts of the neck visible at close range. During the winter, it feeds mostly on eel-grass, which grows on muddy estuaries, and also on grasslands, usually when coastal supplies have been depleted at estuarine sites. Mostly found on coastal estuaries during the autumn and early winter, and also on grasslands from mid-winter, until departure for the breeding grounds begins in late April. Amber-listed as the majority winter at less than ten sites. The Irish population is also internationally significant, another amber listing criterion. The European population has been evaluated as Vulnerable as several important populations declined

**Whooper Swan,** Winter visitor to wetlands throughout Ireland from October to April. Is similar to Bewick's Swan, but larger, with longer neck. Yellow and black bill, with the yellow projecting below the nostril. Their diet is Aquatic vegetation, but they are increasingly being recorded grazing on grass in pasture and spilt grain, as well as potatoes from cultivated land. Most on lowland open farmland around inland wetlands, regularly seen while feeding on grasslands and stubble. Amber-listed due to Ireland hosting more than 20% of the European wintering population. Also due to the majority of Whooper Swans wintering at ten or less sites, as well as its very small breeding population. Bird Life International has assessed the European population as Secure.



**Black-headed Gull** is a small gull, slightly smaller than Common Gull. Adults are pale grey above and white below. Adults are easily told apart from other common gull species by the thick white leading edge to outer wing, which can be seen at some distance. A blackish area bordering the white leading edge of the underwing is also evident. Pointed wings, and a small tail and head in proportion to the body, along with a long neck give a distinctive profile compared to other gulls. He feeds on insects especially in arable fields. Will also exploit domestic and fisheries waste. Irish birds are augmented by wintering birds from northern and eastern Europe and can be widespread on both on the coast and inland. Red-listed due to its rapidly declining and localized breeding population. The European population is regarded as Secure, despite declines in several countries.

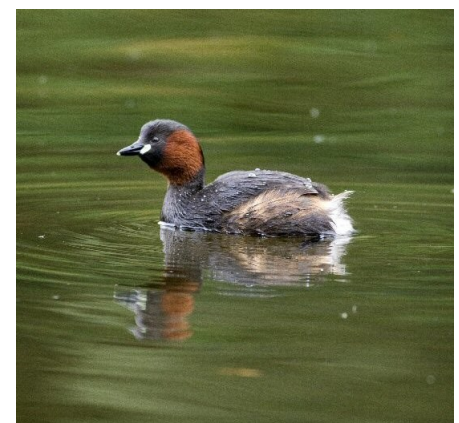
**Curlew:** Winter visitor to wetlands throughout Ireland, as well as breeding in small numbers in floodplains and boglands. The largest wader - very distinctive with long legs, bulky body, long neck and long decurved bill. Fairly uniform greyish brown, with bold dark streaking all over. Only likely confusion species is the smaller whimbrel, which occurs in spring and autumn. They feed mostly on invertebrates, particularly ragworms, crabs and molluscs. They are usually well dispersed across the estuary while feeding, but roost communally, usually along salt marshes and sand banks. Winters in a wide range of wetland habitats (coastal and inland) and other good feeding areas including damp fields. The Irish breeding population is supplemented by Scottish and Scandinavian breeders in winter.



**Greenshank,** Winter visitor to estuaries from September to April from Scotland and Scandinavia. Is a distinctive long-legged, long-billed wader, quite large, very white looking at long range, with dark wings. Bill straight with a very slight upturn. Legs a washed out grayish green. In flight, quite long-winged, shows no wingbar - just plain, blackish wings, contrasting with a long white rump and back. Not very common - typically seen singly or in very small groups. Feed mostly in deep water sites, channels, brackish pools and lakes, predominantly on invertebrates, particularly shrimps, crabs and *Hediste* sp., and small fish. They have a variety of feeding techniques, though mostly feed by pecking at the mud, water or vegetation, and catch fish by using a dash-and-lunge technique. Mostly coastal distribution - while the majority are found on estuaries, up to 30% are estimated to winter along non-estuarine coast. Amber-listed due to its (potentially) small breeding population in Ireland. The European population is considered to be secure.



**Little Grebe :** Resident on ponds and lakes throughout Ireland. The smallest of the grebes, he has a very dumpy body, a short neck, tiny straight bill and no ornamental head feathers giving a rounded shape to the head. They swim buoyantly with feathers often fluffed out at rear giving a power-puff effect. In breeding adults the throat and cheeks are a bright chestnut, the fleshy gap patch takes on a pale colour and the body becomes a rich dark brown above and paler below. Out of the breeding season birds are less striking with the neck taking on a buff-brown colour and the body becoming dull brown above and paler below. They feed a range of invertebrates (particularly insect larvae), small fish and molluscs. Little Grebes extend their wintering habitat to include ephemeral wetlands and are often encountered on sheltered coasts, estuaries and coastal lakes and lagoons at this time of the year. Amber-listed in Ireland due to a contraction in the breeding range. The European population is regarded as Secure by Birdlife International.



**Oystercatcher** is a resident & winter visitor (from Iceland and the Faeroes) - largest numbers in Ireland between September & March. He has a large, distinctive wader with long orange-red bill, black head, chest and upperparts and white underparts. The main food resource includes the larger invertebrates, particularly mussels and cockles that proliferate along sandy coasts. They also occasionally feed on grasslands where they prey on tipulid larvae and earthworms. They feed by both sight (for polychaete worms) and touch (bivalve mussels). Use all coastal habitats, and particularly favor open sandy coasts. Amber-listed as Ireland hosts internationally important numbers of Oystercatchers in winter. The European population is considered to be Secure.

**Purple Sandpiper** is a winter visitor from NE Canada, Greenland, Scandinavia, Russia & Siberia - most occur between September & April. Shares the same kind of habitat as Turnstone - rocky shorelines, headlands, islands and harbours - sometimes on sandy shores where rotting seaweed is piled up. Roughly same size and shape as Dunlin. Its non-descript, dull, slate grey plumage with dark streaks make it surprisingly difficult to see against seaweed covered rocks. Legs are yellowish orange, bill is fine and slightly down curved, yellowish at the base with a dark tip. In flight, wings and upperparts a uniform dark grey, with just a thin white wingbar. Feed in areas overgrown by seaweed - gastropods and other molluscs mostly. Locate prey by sight, and also feed on the larvae, pupae and adults of kelp flies. Occurs at many rocky shore sites and harbours all around the coast. Green-listed in Ireland. The European population is considered to be Secure.



**Red-throated Diver** is a winter visitor to all Irish coasts from September to April. There is a very small breeding population in County Donegal. Red-throated Divers are the smallest of the divers found in Ireland. The distinctive red neck develops in the build up to the breeding season (spring) and fades over the autumn. During the winter the neck plumage becomes more than half-white distinguishing Red-throated Divers from Black-throated Divers (50/50 white/black on neck). Other characteristic of this species are its grey-brown plumage and up-tilted bill, which birds usually hold pointing slightly upwards when on the water and in flight. He feeds small fish such as sprats, sand eels, codling and flatfish. Other food items include fish spawn, frogs, shrimps, molluscs, water insects and annelids. This species is most numerous in Irish coastal waters out of the breeding season, although resident breeding pairs and non-breeding birds may be encountered during the summer. Red-throated Divers start to arrive in Ireland from their northern breeding grounds in September and winter numbers peak in January and February. During the winter they are well distributed around the Irish coastline and are typically associated with shallow sandy bays. Amber-listed due to its very small breeding range and population. The European population is considered to be depleted, due to a large historical decline. The small Irish breeding population is very vulnerable to disturbance.



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**Whimbrel** is a passage migrant in autumn (August/September) and spring (April/May). Similar in appearance to the Curlew, but slightly smaller. Whimbrel has a similar down curved bill, but this is slightly shorter than that of the Curlew. When seen well, distinctive "striped" head pattern can be discerned - formed by a dark crown, with a pale streak through the centre, a pale supercillium and a dark eyestripe. The call is also one of the best ways of finding a flock of migrating Whimbrels passing overhead. He feeds Molluscs, crustaceans & polychaete worms. A few Whimbrel winter in coastal areas, mainly along the south and east coast. The main wintering range extends from southern Spain along the west African coast to southern Africa. Green-listed in Ireland. The European population is considered to be Secure.



**Wigeon** is a common winter visitor to wetlands throughout Ireland from September and April. He has a medium sized, with large rounded head, small bill and pointed tail. Male - head and neck chestnut, with creamy-yellow crown and forehead. Breast pinkish-grey, and the rest of the body is grey and white with black stern. Female rufous brown or greyish with various mottling. Speculum dull, dark. Wigeon graze on coastal seagrass and algae, particularly on *Zostera* spp. and *Enteromorpha* spp., and also feed regularly on grasslands and cereal crops. Widespread - they occur on coastal marshes, freshwater and brackish lagoons, estuaries, bays. Many on inland wetlands, lakes, rivers and turloughs. The Icelandic breeding component of this population winters mostly in Ireland and western Britain, though some continue on to parts of continental Europe. Amber-listed in Ireland as the majority winter at less than ten sites. The European population is regarded as Secure.



**Woodcock** is a resident & winter visitor from Scandinavia and Russia. With its long straight bill and plump body, it resembles a large, fat Snipe. It is rarely seen on the ground, due to its secretive nature and cryptic plumage (which mimics dead leaves) and spends most of its day hidden amongst vegetation on the woodland floor. The best way to see a Woodcock is to wait at a good vantage point on a forest track or firebreak at dusk during spring or early summer. Feed predominantly on earthworms, at night. Wider distribution in winter, occurring in woodland, also scrub and some open areas (bracken and heather-covered hills). Amber-listed in Ireland, due to a decline in the breeding population. The European population has been evaluated as Declining, due to a moderate recent decline.

