

INTRODUCTION.

Welcome to the Mizen Vision : Irish Wildbird Seabird observation room. The aim of this room is as follows:

- _ Provide an introduction to all young and old to the birds of the south west of Ireland.
- Provide a base from which to study both Seabirds and Cetaceans (Whales and Dolphins.)
- _ Increase the public awareness of Irelands seabird wealth, the treats and conservation methods.
- _ Provide information on the Irish Wildbird Conservancy.

As you browse around the room you will notice displays and information on the common and not so common seabirds to be seen at the Mizen.

Depending on the time of the year, different species will be resident on the cliffs, feeding offshore, or passing by on passage offshore. Some of the birds will be obvious in particular the Gulls whereas others will be more difficult to make out due to the fact that they are offshore.

The South-Western coastline of Ireland is dotted with islands, such as the Blaskets, and the Skelligs. These provide nesting sites for a whole range of seabird, such as: Gannets, Kittiwakes, Storm Petrels, Auks, and Manx Shearwaters. These breeding species are exploiting the breeding sites. Proximity to rich feeding grounds,

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the mixing of the warm waters of the Gulf stream with cold deep water, rich in nutrients, at the Continental Shelf, and the strong tidal mixing create a rich ecosystem. At different times of the year different species of bird may be observed utilising the abundant foodstores offshore.

Seabirds can be difficult to watch, particularly those passing offshore. An seemingly empty sea can with close examination with a pair of binoculars or telescope come alive with birds passing offshore in great numbers under ideal- conditions, offshore winds, rain, drizzle or fog numbers may reach several thousand per hour- this is brought about by the birds being either blown towards shore seeking shelter or trying to stay within sight of land. These to a "Birdwatcher" are ideal "Seawatching Conditions." Generally in late Spring, late Summer and Autumn when rare seabirds from as far as the South Atlantic, such as the Great Shearwater or the Sabines Gull from the Canadian Sub-Artic may be seen, not to mention thousands of our commoner seabirds.

Headlands such as the Mizen, Galley Head and the Old Head of Kinsale, and offshore islands such as Cape Clear (which has a bird observatory) are ideal places not just for seabirds but also for observing the migration of songbirds. These headlands and islands tend to be the birds first landfall after the long sea crossing and the birds will congregate here in what may be large numbers, this is termed a "Fall."

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Falls of migrants on Mizen generally occur during Spring and Autumn migration, particularly after South Easterly winds, with rain overnight. The gardens and ditches around the Mizen, Barlycove and Crookhaven can be teeming with migrants under these conditions. Often not just comprising of common birds such as, Swallows, Winter Thrushes, Chiffchaffs and other summer or winter visitors. Rare migrants from as far away as Southern and Northern Europe North America, and Eastern Siberia have been recorded on a regular basis. No matter what the time of the year it is worth checking the gardens, gullies and ditches, birdwatching always has its surprises

The Diversity of habitats on Mizen Head also include Lissagriffin Lake. This brackish lake is famous in Europe for the fact that particularly after strong westerly winds in late August - September, there have been a few occasions when North American Waders have outnumbered their European counterparts.

The sanddunes around Barleycove are also worth a check for Choughs, (a crow about the size of a Jackdaw with bright red legs and bill.) These birds are now confined to the Western seaboard of Ireland, (although some nest inland,) and parts of Scotland, a few linger in Wales. This bird may be familiar to some in the Cornish coat of Arms.

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The Moorland behind the headland can also be productive for birds such as, Peregrine Falcons, and our smallest falcon, the Merlin on migration. Indeed Irelands first Isabelline Wheatear turned up here.

As you can see the Mizen offers a wide variety of habitats and birds, on a good day, it should not be hard for an experienced birdwatcher to observe about 80 species, but really this Observation Room is to give those interested in Birdlife on MizenHead an introduction to the wealth of Birdlife to be observed.

A FEW TIPS ON THE ART OF BIRDWATCHING:

1. A pair of binoculars is an invaluable asset, generally 7x and 8x magnifications are best.
2. A good rainproof dull coloured jacket, something warm as it does tend to get cold and wet on the Mizen.
3. Wear sturdy waterproof boots or wellingtons.
4. Bring Oilskins if your seawatching.
5. A telescope is not an essential, but it does allow you to get closer views, particularly of seabirds, who fly by often a mile or more out to sea.
6. Two or three people together is an ideal number as a single person may miss something of importance. Whereas a larger group tend to talk creating disturbance, especially if looking for songbirds.
7. A good field-guide. Ask any birdwatcher or contact the Irish Wildbird Conservancy (details in Membership Leaflet.)

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8. Bring a pencil and notebook-if you see a bird that you cannot identify draw it and note its features, you can then use your identification guide at your leisure later.

9. Always observe the Country Code and exercise caution around Cliff Tops.

COMMON BIRDS OF MIZEN HEAD.

1. LANDBIRDS.

As you ~~walk~~ amoung the gardens, ditches and shrub, it is hard to miss birds such as, Robins, Blackbirds, Songbirds, Woodpigeon, House Sparrows and Wrens . However a closer examination will often reveal such birds as: Goldcrest, the smallest Irish bird with gold crown. Look out also in the Spring to Autumn for small Warblers such as: Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers, or maybe all year round the secretive Dunnock, a small sparrow type bird with a grey head. Collared Doves may be seen sitting on telegraph poles and the elusive Kestrel may be seen hovering over a field. Finches such as: Linnets, and Goldfinches can be observed feeding in the fields on weeds and in areas with trees, Greenfinches, Chaffinches and maybe a Bullfinch or two are common.

In open fields look out for Skylarkes and Meadow Pipits, which look like small Skylarkes, without the crest.

In the late Autumn and Spring winter visitors include, Northern Thrushes, such as Redwing and Fieldfare, also look out for Siskin particularly around older trees. All year round brightly coloured Blue and Great Tits, a periodic Coal Tit, or parties of Long-Tailed-Tit may be seen in gardens or in areas with trees.

In the marsh areas look out for Reedbuntings and Piedwagtails throughout the year. In Summer Sedge Warblers(with their harsh calls among the reeds) Swallows, a few Sandmartins and Housemartins may be observed in the Spring, Summer and Autumn. You cannot miss the Jackdaws Rooks and Magpies, but keep an eye out for the Ravens and Choughs.

On the dunes Wheatears are common in the summer, and on the cliffs Rock Doves and Rock Pipits are resident.

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2. WETLAND AND COASTAL BIRDS.

The main concentration of Ducks and Swans is at Lissagriffin.

The commonest duck of all is the Mallard, the male having a green head. Teal are also common, and there is usually a few Shelduck to be seen either at Lissagriffin or Crookhaven. Most obvious of all are the Mute Swans which breed at Lissagriffin. In winter the duck numbers increase with migrant Wigeon, the periodic Shovler, easily recognised with their long shovel-like bills. Look out also for Little Grebe, and although not ducks they share the same habitat generally staying to the margin of the lake.

In late Autumn and Winter you may also be lucky to see Whooper Swans on the lake, these birds originating like most of our wintering Wigeon in Iceland.

Around the margins of the lake you may also observe Moorhen, a smaller version of the Coot, both black birds but with the larger Coot having a white Forehead (Shield.)

It is hard to miss the resident Grey Herons as they stay in the shallows in search of fish, frogs and insects.

In Winter, Crookhaven and Lissagriffin also play host to wintering Redbreasted Mergansers, a "sawbill" duck with a shaggy crest behind the head, the brightly coloured male outshining the brown female. Divers such as, Great-Northern-Diver and the Red-Throated-Diver are seen in the bays, but also look out for the rarer Black-Throated-Diver. Common Scoter and Great Crested Grebe also occur occasionally, although the Common Scoters are more regularly seen on seawatches flying by.

Waders common in the Mizen area which congregate at Lissagriffin to the greatest extent during Autumn and Spring migration, as well as during the Winter months include; Dunlin, Redshank, Greenshank, Curlew, Black-tailed-Godwit(in small numbers) Ringed Plover(which breed) and Sanderling on the Beaches.

Great flocks of Golden Plover and Lapwing occur mostly in Winter sitting on the wind or wheeling about overhead. Another Plover, the Grey Plover tends to be more solitary and usually occurs on its own or in small parties. It is easy to identify in flight by the black arm pits.

At times in the Autumn, the Curlew Sandpiper which migrate from Siberia to Africa may be found in good numbers(20) at Lissagriffin, although this varies from year to year. Look out also for the odd Whimbrel, the smaller cousin of the Curlew, with its striped head.

Other less common Waders to occur include; Knot, Ruff, Little Stint, Spotted Redshank, and Purple Sandpiper.

Gulls are always obvious around the Mizen, from the small Black-Headed - Gull(which in Winter has a white head with a black spot behind the eye) to the larger Great-Backed-Black-Gull(the scourge of the seabird colonies.) Herring Gulls are also common but in recent years their numbers have declined. In Winter great numbers of Common Gulls can be seen at Lissagriffin, along with flocks of Wintering Lesser-Black-Backed-Gulls, whose numbers have increased in recent years. Due we think to the greater availability of food from dumps and fishing boats.

Rarer Northern Gulls such as; Iceland and Glaucous Gulls also appear regularly in Winter.

Not to be mistaken for Gulls are the Terns which in the Summer, may be seen diving for fish in the bays or resting on the sandflats. The Common Tern being the more usual to be seen although at times they can be outnumbered by the Larger Sandwich Tern, particularly during the Autumn Migration.

In Spring and Autumn Little and Artic Terns occur periodically. The Artic Tern which passes on migration from the Subartic Winter off the Antarctic, have the distinction of being the furthest migrating bird of all species.

All these names may at first seem confusing and the list is by no means complete, however with a little perserverance a pair of binoculars and a field guide you should in no time be seeing some of the species metioned above.

SEAWATCHING.

Seawatching is the term used by Birdwatchers to describe the art of observing seabirds passing offshore.

It takes practice to become a good "Seawatcher" as the birds often pass far out at sea, and may only be seen as they pass between wave troughs.

A good seawatcher using binoculars or a telescope can identify a Manx Shearwater, a seabird the size of a Cuckoo, at 3 miles under good conditions.

Seawatching can be cold, wet and frustrating, especially if someone else keeps trying to point out birds which you are missing.

To try and pinpoint a bird at sea, the hours of a clock are used, with 12 o'clock being straight out and the distance described in respect to the horizon. A passing boat can be a real bonus, for use in pin pointing a seabird.

As you may gather Seawatchers like all Birdwatchers have a tendency to abbreviate bird names, this helps to cut down on the time needed to pass on information.

It is best to Seawatch in groups of say four, one taking notes, one using binoculars, for the birds close to the shore, and two using telescopes for the birds further out to sea.

Best Seawatching conditions at Mizen are during South to West-South-West Winds, with rain, mist, or fog just after dawn and towards evening. This is due to the fact that the birds tend to stray towards land during bad weather and onshore winds. Seabirds will always be visible whatever the weather or time of day.

Numbers of Seabirds can reach very high figures, several thousand may pass in the space of just one hour. As the birds pass you may notice a type of Gullpass close inshore, as do Terns, and Gannets a bit further out, then the Manx-Shearwater and the Auks such as Razorbills, Guillemots and maybe a few Puffins, Fulmers which are related to the Albatrosses, may pass further out to sea and the larger rarer Shearwaters generally pass just outside the Manx-Shearwater stream. Storm Petrels may be seen with a bit of luck fluttering over the water among the Manx-Shearwater. During the Late spring and Summer breeding Auks, Fulmers Kittiwakes and other Gulls as well as Gannets, and Manx-Shearwater will all be milling around offshore feeding. At times the sea may seem alive with birds generally. when this happens you may also see Porpoises and Dolphins and maybe even some Whales.

Not all seabirds will be offshore from March to July the cliffs around the Mizen hold good numbers of breeding, Kittiwakes, Razorbills, and Guillemots Herring and Great-Black-Backed-Gulls, Shags, Fulmers and Gannets may be flying almost overhead but not stopping off.

If you look at the cliffs in detail you will see that certain seabirds tend to nest in different locations. The Fulmers nest towards the top of the cliffs on ledges. The Razorbills and Guillemots on ledges in tight packs, from the bottom to half way from the top. Shags tend to nest towards the bottom of the cliffs and Kittiwakes nest on almost sheer cliff faces about half way up. See if you can spot any more trends.

For the ardent seawatcher the Mizen holds great potential seawatching has not been carried out to any great extent here. However some of the rare seabirds seen include;

Carys Shearwater (Mediterranean) Great S Shearwater (South-Atlantic) Balearic Shearwater (Mediterranean) Sooty Shearwater (South Atlantic) Pomarine and Great Arctic Skuas (North Atlantic Subarctic) and what else is anyone guess so get seawatching.

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BEST BIRDWATCHING SITES.

SEAWATCHING:

Mizen Head- At the seawatch station.

Brow Head- A short walk from Crookhaven.

Three Castle Head- A long walk.

SHOREBIRDS:

Lissagriffin- The lake and reedbeds.

Crookhaven - Around the sandflats.

Barleycove - Check along the beach here.

SONGBIRDS:

Just about anywhere you could be lucky but try some of these;

The road to Mizen from Barleycove.

Around Barleycove Hotel and back east along the hillside
to the school near Lissagriffin.

The dunes around Barleycove.

The gardens of Crookhaven and the back road out of the
village.

Brow Head.

Lissagriffin Reedbeds.