

# BIRDLIFE OF BLACKMOUNTAIN

of the Blackmountain makes for fascinating reading yet it is rarely referred to in the natural history writings of the province.

When one begins to list the species which breed and pass along this mountain range throughout the twelve months of the year it becomes practically impossible to match anywhere on the island of Ireland.

It is undoubtedly the variety and diversity of the natural habitat which attracts such a huge array of plant life, insects, mammals and of course birds. The open moors beyond the skyline, the steep slopes with their sprawling clumps of wild blackthorn thicket and dense bracken, the natural cliff faces with their rocky outcrop, the old hawthorn hedgerows with their lush bramble base and the lower marshy fields all help to contribute to a unique natural environment absolutely teeming in birdlife and surely in such an urban setting unparalleled not just in Ireland or the British Isles but throughout western Europe.

The fact that the Department of the Environment (NI) has not yet moved to protect and enhance this spectacular natural asset over the years in itself raises many concerning questions but the fact remains today that this mountain wilderness has a natural blend of rugged beauty and quality of birdlife that demands immediate government protection.

The vast splendour of the mountain especially during the summer months has always been its ability to offer a feeling of sanctuary and escape from the demands, pressures and realities of the rat-race of everyday life below. However, the secret has always been when to go on that mountain dander and just as significant, where to go? If properly guided one can take in all the mountain features in a relaxing three hour stretch and from a 'birding' point of view the most opportune time to venture up must be early summer.

During this time of year one can walk along the cliff face and watch the peregrine falcon bring its prey to the two or three fluffy young on the sheer rock. These Falcons have graced the mountain with their presence for five successive years now since the species made its come-back from the disastrous effects of DDT, pesticides and the ruthless persecution of the 1960's.

The Raven would also nest and rear its brood of large cronking juveniles from the cliff face though up to six weeks ahead of the peregrine. It is indeed a common practice for a peregrine to use an old Ravens nest and thus the Raven has directly assisted with the re-establishment of these Falcons to many of its old former haunts.

Sparrowhawks and Kestrels are frequently reported at this time of year but their nesting locations are not exactly known. However it must be safe to estimate at least two pairs of each breeding location.

The strictly nocturnal Long Eared Owl, another early breeder, is also present along the mountain but seldom recorded until early May/June when the rowdy raucous 'rusty-gate' squeals of the demanding young brings local bewilderment and curiosity to their presence. It is a known fact that the single Long Eared Owl recorded hunting the Bogmeadows after dusk in the summer evenings of 1989 and 1990 made its way from Blackmountain via its flight-path through Falls Park and the City Cemetery.

Probably the most fascinating bird of them all and becoming increasingly rarer over the years is still being frequently reported from the slopes of the mountain each spring. The haunting eerie mystique which surrounds the elusive life of the Barn Owl seems to be sufficiently glorified and enshrined in the quiet pockets of forest, gladed glens and enchanting valleys which make the Blackmountain such a bountiful, lush larder of nature steeped in local folklore and history and who's secret paths and walkways remain privy only to a select few.

If you are fortunate enough to find yourself virtually lost on the mountain wilderness on a warm balmy evening in early summer you could quite easily stumble over all six of the pre-mentioned species.

Spring and Summer also brings its yearly influx of interesting passerines onto the slopes. The little warblers are usually the first to struggle in from their winter climes in Africa with the less common spotted flycatcher taking up the rear after the main insect hatch in early May.

With the Chiffchaffs chirping their name from high in the tree tops and the Willow Warblers calling up and down the music-scale from the lower shrubbery, the distant call of the ever reliable Spring Cuckoo from "the gully" area, Blackcap, Whitethroat and all the local garden species in superb abundance along with dozens of Wheatears, Skylarks and Meadow Pipits the blossoming Blackmountain range quite joyfully opens up into a beautiful melody and spectacular crescendo of glorious birdcall supreme.

With the Swallows and House Martins gathering their next mud from the damp lower pasture, the "call of the wild" cry of the Curlew crisply carrying from the barren damp moorland above and with the busy nest building Jackdaws 'clacking' their way from cliff crevice to field you are left in no uncertain terms by the birdlife of the Blackmountain that summer is quite literally "in the air" and isn't this the place to be!

Other exciting species which nest in and around the mountain area during the spring and summer months are several pair of Snipe and Lapwing.

Most guided walks will flush up an adult bird and if you are fortunate you might then manage to glimpse a scarpering juvenile as he calls for his parents and skulks for cover.

If you find yourself on the mountain towards Colin Glen after dusk on a bat or owl watch you will be sure to hear the unmistakable repetitive "sewing-machine chirp" of the uncommon Grasshopper Warbler. It has bred in the Colin area for these three successive years now.

This species has declined over the past decade as Belfast sprawling suburbs have crept into the countryside from every conceivable angle. With such widespread habitat loss there could now be only three pairs (maximum) breeding each spring in the greater Belfast area.

When one also considers the autumn passage of such rarities as Hen Harrier, Merlin and Buzzard just to mention the raptors of August 1991 alone, with the winter influx of Scandinavian berry-eating Fieldfares and Redwings, the slightly larger European bands of marauding Finches and if 'Jack Frost' really bites deep in Northern Europe Blackmountain and Divis can also offer sanctuary to sizeable flocks of twittering Snow Buntings, a real trick or treat for both keen amateur and dedicated professional.

So from an ornithological point of view alone this place is undoubtedly a forgotten paradise which has been left unprotected and ignored by Government departments who's obligation to the cities environment and general competence must as a result be called into serious question. Despite being referred to in practically every statutory publication right up to the most recent Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 this mountain range has been left to the ravages of illegal dumping, extensive hunting, wreckless vandalism and of course quarrying. A massive ever expanding and seemingly out of control quarry which in the unanimous words of the Belfast community can be described as nothing else but "wreckless vandalism with a licence". A licence from the same Government Department which continues to write of the beauty and the need to protect the mountain skyline. Hypocrisy seemingly abounds.

The situation has now got so serious that the Department of Environment recently appointed the Scottish consultancy firm Ash to assess the worsening prospects for the Blackmountain. Community groups and environmentalists could not wait to get discussing the reports recommendations with the appropriate statutory authority. The reports assessment of the situation and recommendations on Department of Environment policy and planning were so critical that the Department were forced to make the report confidential or as they call it, "in house". However, a most recent department glossy might yet embarrass somebody in the higher echelons of Government into confronting this gross incompetence and neglect to date. An introduction to Areas of Special Scientific Interests (ASSI'S) states in no uncertain terms that the Department of Environment (NI) has a legal obligation under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order (NI) 1985 to designate land as ASSI if deemed suitable by its advisory Council for Nature Conservation and Countryside (CNCC) Suitability depends on the quality of flora and fauna and geology etc.

The Departments publication lays out how straight forward it can be to process ASSI declaration and how the current state of habitat throughout Northern Ireland necessitates many assessments and hopefully implementations.

The Blackmountain Environmental Group believe that the birdlife on this region alone is practically sufficient to warrant designation. If all other relevant criteria were to be professionally assessed we believe that what remains of Blackmountain and the city skyline could qualify and be preserved at this late stage.

The wildlife, flowers, birdlife which include so many rare and fascinating species would then be saved for all today and generations to come. Surely no one, quarry licence holder or otherwise has a right to take such a spectacular natural asset from the citizens of Belfast. We have inherited the protection of our local environment from our forefathers and so it must be our moral duty to see it passed onto our children in as pristine a condition as we acquired it. It is sad and unfortunate that we seem to spend so much energy confronting and attempting to convince our statutory environmental departments that our local environment in its many forms from marshland/fen (Bogmeadows) through river valley (Springvale/Clowney) to mountain range (Divis/Sliabh Dubh) is really crying out to be preserved.

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