

# Nature Notes - June 2022

By John Moore



Nature Notes is an occasional series which is not published on a regular basis.

## Disclaimer.

I am not an expert on birds and wildlife.

I do not consider myself to be an ornithologist or a naturalist.

I am interested in birds and wildlife and Nature Notes comprises my personal thoughts and comments on these subjects.

I make every effort to ensure Nature Notes is factually accurate.

## Photo credits.

Any photos taken by myself are identified appropriately.

All other photographs used are obtained from Google Images.

## Introduction

The nights are on the turn again and at the time of writing this, it is less than six months to Christmas, so you'd better start planning your Christmas shopping.

We haven't had much of a summer yet compared to the last couple of years when, by this stage we had had almost 3 months of good weather and high temperatures. I haven't even taken our garden furniture out of storage in the garden shed yet. In the previous couple years, the garden furniture was out from early April. In summer of 2018 we had a hosepipe ban imposed by NI Water – I don't think that will happen this year!

## At the bird table.

Fortunately for the birds visiting our bird table, the Sparrowhawk hasn't returned.

I was pleased to see 5 or 6 Greenfinches frequenting the bird table for a couple of months, but they haven't been seen for the last few weeks. I haven't seen any Siskins, Redpolls or Long Tailed Tits for a while.

On 16/05/2022, I was surprised to see a Tree Sparrow at the bird table. House Sparrows are very infrequent visitors, so it was a real treat to see a Tree Sparrow. The image below illustrates the differences between these birds.



These are the dates we saw the first juveniles of the following species at the bird table:

21/05/2022 – Goldfinch. We will probably see the second brood of Goldfinches very soon.

23/05/2022 – Robin

24/05/2022 – Bluetit and Great Tit

## Winter Migrants

The winter migrants are long gone and pairs which bred successfully probably have their first broods fledged or close to fledging.

The Whooper Swans were last seen on 19 March 2022. Around 50 were at Kinnego Embankment at Oxford Island and around 100 were in the fields along the Lagan Canal (Whitehall Road near Aghagallon, Google Maps link <https://goo.gl/maps/j7ygfMK8rUuLhDCq7> )

Last year, large numbers of Brent Geese were hanging about until late May. This year, the vast bulk of them seem to have departed in late April, leaving only a few stragglers on the east coast of the Peninsula and the Lecale coast. Our last Brent sighting was three birds flying past Rossglass on 17/05/2022.

Why do Brent and Whoopers undertake such long and difficult migrations that expend huge amounts of energy? There are two main reasons:

1 – The birds over-winter in Ireland to avoid the harsh arctic winters with a couple of months of near total darkness. Many (but not all) of the resident species that over-winter in the arctic hibernate and vegetation is usually covered in snow, so there is not much to eat for both carnivores and herbivores. The arctic winter is a long, harsh and lean time for all winter residents.

2 – In late spring, the birds migrate back to arctic regions to take advantage of the arctic summer. Arctic spring, summer and autumn last around 6 months in total. During the arctic summer, there is an explosion of life, both flora and fauna, as everything has to reproduce in about half the length of time it would normally take in more temperate climates. Brent and Whoopers take advantage of this abundance. Several months of virtually 24-hour daylight allows the birds to maximise their feeding opportunities to feed themselves and their newly-hatched brood.

The first Brent Geese could be back on Strangford Lough in the early September which is only 10 weeks away.

Brent Geese are viewed as a winter migrant in Ireland as they do not breed here. However, if you consider that the first Brent usually arrive in Ireland in early September and the last depart in mid-May, this means a few Brent spend almost 9 months a year in Ireland. I would guess that the vast majority of the population spend at least 7 months per year in Ireland. Based on this, one could make the argument that Brent are Irish birds that just happen to breed in arctic Canada!

## Summer Migrants

All the summer migrants are back, though based only on my observation, the numbers of some species seem to be low. There is no shortage of Willow Warblers, Sedge Warblers and Blackcaps.

These are the dates and locations we saw the first arrivals of the following species:

**Swallow** – 12/04/2022 at Listooder.

**House Martin** – 17/04/2022 in the Downpatrick area.

**Sand Martin** – On 10/05/2022, Liz and I went to Ballyhornan Beach to see if the Sand Martins had returned to their colony there, but there was no sign of them. They are not usually so late. We went back on 09/06/2022 and saw only about 5 or 6 Sand Martins flying over the beach and there was no sign of any activity in their burrows. Usually, you will see adults flying in and out of their burrows to feed their young and there will also be a few adults sitting in their burrows. The weather on 09/06/2022 was foul, cold, windy and showery. In this sort of weather many birds keep their heads down and don't venture out of their nests. Also, there will be very few insects flying, so Sand Martins are only wasting their energy hunting for insects that aren't there. The other possibility is that there has been a drastic decline in Sand Martin numbers (I hope not!). We will go back to Ballyhornan beach soon to see if what's going on with the Sand Martins. ***If anyone has any information about what's happening with the Sand Martins, I would be keen to hear it. Please contact me on [genericaccount@keemail.me](mailto:genericaccount@keemail.me)***

**Swift** – 25 May 2022 along the Newry Canal @ Tandragee Road. I haven't seen any more Swifts since then.

**Willow Warbler** – 17/04/2022 in our garden. Fortunately, it didn't stay! Willow Warblers have a very loud call, at least as loud as a Wren and they call incessantly. They just don't shut up. Much as I like birds and birdsong, listening to a Willow Warbler calling incessantly for 15 or 16 hours per day in your garden for a few weeks becomes sort of tiresome.

**Blackcap and Sedge Warbler** – 22/04/2022 on the path along the Broadwater (Soldierstown Road, off the A26 near Moira, Google Maps link <https://goo.gl/maps/q3t8fB1YVb9VcFMJ7> )

**Chiffchaff** – 26/04/2022 along the Quoile near Steamboat Quay. The Chiffchaff is practically identical to a Willow Warbler. Only very experienced birders (usually with the help of a telescope) can tell them apart visually. I certainly can't. However, both species have very different calls which readily identifies them. The name "Chiffchaff" is onomatopoeic i.e. it is named after the sound of its song which is a random string of "chiffs" and "chaffs" and a typical song might be something like this - "chiff chaff chiff chiff chaff chiff chaff"

**Wheatear** – 02/05/2022 at Kearney. I haven't seen many more since then. We did not see our first Wheatear last year until August. There seem to be fewer Wheatears about over the last couple of years.

**Gannet** – 30/03/2022 at Rossglass. There were very few Gannets about last year. There seem to be more this year, but numbers are still relatively low.

**Whimbrel** – 02/05/2022 at Kearney. This is a passage migrant rather than a summer migrant. Passage migrants do not stay all summer. As the name implies, they are just passing through. In the UK, this species only breeds in north Scotland. It is a passage migrant

to other areas in spring and autumn on its way from and to its wintering areas in Africa. Most people would mistake a Whimbrel for a Curlew as they are visually very similar – please refer to the photo below. The key differences in their appearance are that the Whimbrel is slightly smaller, has a shorter beak and a prominent pale eyebrow stripe (known as a supercilium). Over the years, I have noticed a significant difference in their behaviour and I find this is the easiest way to tell them apart. Curlews are very wary of humans and fly off at first sight, presumably because of centuries of hunting and persecution which has driven them close to extinction. Curlews will fly off when humans get within 50m or 60m which is the maximum range at which a shotgun can kill a bird. I imagine that behaviour isn't just a coincidence! Whimbrels do not have that same fear of humans and they tolerate humans getting much closer, say to around 15 m.



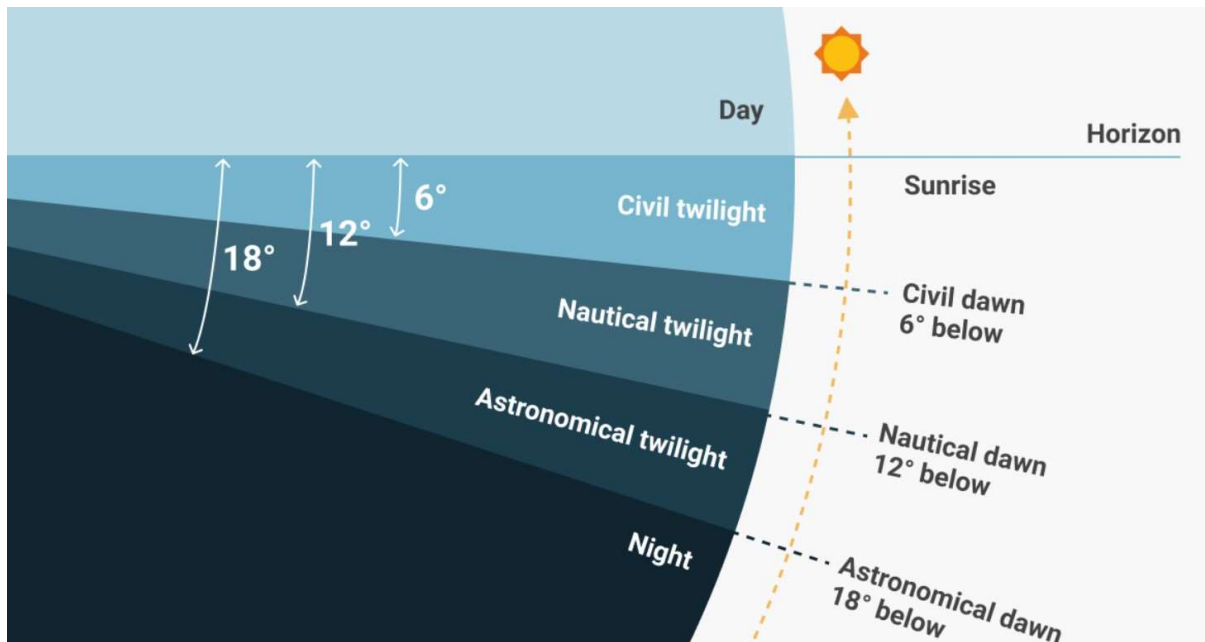
As readers of previous editions of Nature Notes are probably aware, I have an interest in Brent Geese and as a consequence, I have a reasonable knowledge of the reasons they migrate to over-winter in Ireland. I had never given summer migration much consideration, so I did a bit of research and I was surprised by what I found.

Summer migrants travel north, many from Africa to take advantage of abundant food and longer days during the breeding season. When the weather gets colder and the days shorten, they make the return journey south to the tropics of Africa.

### **Testing the theories about migration.**

It appears to me that day length is a significant factor in both summer and winter migration so I consulted timeanddate.com (<https://www.timeanddate.com/sun/@2656483>) an excellent website I frequently use. I checked the day length at summer solstice in the Northern Hemisphere on 21/06/2022, the longest day of the year for the places the birds are migrating to and from.

To understand the following information fully, I need to explain that there are three levels of twilight i.e., civil, nautical and astronomical twilight and these are defined by the angle the sun is below the horizon as shown by the diagram on the following page. Astronomical twilight, the darkest, occurs when the sun is between 12° and 18° below the horizon.



If you looked outside at astronomical twilight, it would be to all intents and purposes “dark” and if you wanted to drive your car, you would have to have the headlights on to see where you are going.

## DATA AND ANALYSIS

**DAY LENGTH AT BALLYNAHINCH ON 21/06/2022 = 17 hrs 04 min**

The benchmark for making comparisons.

**DAYLENGTH AT NAIROBI, KENYA ON 21/06/2022 = 12 hrs 03 min**

Nairobi is practically on the equator and many summer migrants come from this general area. Because Nairobi is practically on the equator, day length is more-or-less the same all year round with the shortest day being 12 hr 03 min and the longest being 12 hr 12 min. So, by migrating north to Britain and Ireland, the summer migrants are gaining a significant 5 hours extra feeding time which is a significant breeding advantage.

**DAYLENGTH AT MOUNT RANDALL, ELLESMERE ISLAND, CANADA ON 21/06/2022 = 24 hrs (i.e. the sun never dips below the horizon).**

This is the general area Brent Geese migrate to for breeding. It is worth noting that daylight at Ellesmere Island lasts from 13/04/2022 to 30/08/2022 i.e. there is 24 hour daylight for 139 consecutive days.

When the Brent arrive from Ireland in mid- to late-April there will be 24 hours of daylight every day until 30/08/2022.

Once into September, day length reduces really quickly e.g. by 14/09/2022, day length will have reduced from 24 hrs to 15 hrs 20 min, a massive reduction of 8 hr 40 min in only 15 days. For comparison, over this same period, Ballynahinch will lose a total of 64 minutes of daylight.

This very rapid reduction in day length is obviously what triggers Brent Geese to head back to Strangford Lough in early September.

Referring back to my comments about astronomical twilight, it is also worth noting that at Mount Randall, the closest thing to daylight between 29/11/2022 to 14/01/2023 is eight hours of astronomical twilight every day. To all intents and purposes, that is 46 days of total darkness. I can't say I fancy enduring that. You can see why the Brent hightail it back to Ireland in early September.

What publication other than my Nature Notes would make a comparison between Ballynahinch, Ellesmere Island and Nairobi?

This was fascinating to research and has given me added insight into bird migration. As the old saying goes, "Every day is a school day".

### **Strange Blackbird behaviour in our front garden.**

At the end of May, I noticed several Blackbirds behaving strangely and very aggressively in our garden. There are usually several Blackbirds poking around the garden at various times looking for worms and insects and they generally mind their own business and ignore each other. I realised something unusual was happening. Here's what happened:

**Day 1** – I noticed several Blackbirds behaving strangely and very aggressively. It occurred to me that their behaviour was unusual, but I did not give it any more thought.

**Day 2** – 4 or 5 Blackbirds were continuing to behave very aggressively. At that point, I realised that I was witnessing some sort of behaviour I hadn't seen before, but I couldn't figure out what was going on.

**Day 3** – I studied the Blackbirds a bit more closely and noticed that an adult male and female were aggressively chasing 3 juveniles around the garden. At that point, the penny finally dropped. I realised that the adults considered the juveniles were capable of looking after themselves and were chasing them out of their territory.

**Day 4** – Things were back to normal in the garden with the two adult Blackbirds poking around as usual and not a juvenile to be seen anywhere.

This type of behaviour is quite common in the animal world, not just amongst birds. It seems to be harsh and cruel, but that's the way Nature is. There is a logic to the way Nature operates. By chasing the juveniles out of their territory, the adult Blackbirds will have less competition for food and as a consequence they have a much higher chance of successfully raising a second brood.



### **Goldfinch chase-off.**

A couple of days after the Blackbird incident I saw a pair of Goldfinches chasing off two juveniles. When adult Goldfinches have a dispute, they have a “challenge flight” (my term to describe it). This involves the birds hovering in flight a few inches apart facing each other and they then flutter up vertically about 20 feet and back down again while flapping and trying to intimidate each other. By the time they get to the bottom one bird will usually back off and fly away. This dispute resolution appears to be ritualistic rather than violent. It is a good survival strategy as the vanquished bird escapes with nothing more than wounded pride and lives unscathed to fight another day.

The actual chase-off involved the two adult Goldfinches and the two juveniles involved in a four-way challenge flight as described above. It was the first time I witnessed this behaviour in Goldfinches.

### **Butterflies.**

Last year there seemed to be very few butterflies about. In April and May of this year there seemed to be a lot of butterflies. I would suggest that in this period, I saw more butterflies than in the whole of 2021. However, the numbers of butterflies has dropped off again. I’m not sure what the reason is, but I would suggest the foul weather is certainly a contributory factor.



Common Blue at Castle Espie - July 2018  
Photos by John Moore

### **One lucky Stoat and one unlucky Stoat.**

I have been lucky enough to have a brief glimpse of a Stoat seven or eight times in my life.

The most memorable sighting was over 15 years ago in our garden where a Stoat was doing the “Stoat dance”. I never gave much thought to the Stoat dance until I was researching for this edition of Nature Notes and the explanation is quite surprising and gross. The Stoat dance is a reaction to parasites in the Stoat’s nasal cavity – see link to explanatory video below.



One Stoat sighting was at Castle Ward near Audley's Castle. The remaining Stoat sightings were on local roads within half a mile of my house.

Then on 26/05/2022, I saw not one, but two Stoats! That's something to be happy about. Well, no actually, read on. We were driving about a quarter of a mile from our house and a Stoat carrying a rabbit kit darted out from the right verge to cross the road. I had to swerve and brake hard to avoid the Stoat, and fortunately, I didn't hit it. That's one lucky little Stoat.

About 15 minutes later when driving between Temple and Lisburn, I saw a Hooded Crow trying to pick up a dead Stoat from the road. It looked like the Stoat hadn't been dead for long. Its luck had obviously run out. It is such a pity to see things like this.

So, I did see two Stoats on 26/05/2022, but it was very unfortunate that the second Stoat was dead.

Link to a one-minute video explaining the Stoat dance (**warning – it's pretty gross**) - <https://www.wonderstrucktv.com/video/why-do-stoats-dance>

### **Gulls and slurry.**

We live in a rural location some distance from the coast. The only time we see gulls is when the local farmers are ploughing or spreading slurry. Unfortunately, where we live, a lot of the fields are used to grow up to three crops of hay or silage per year, and every time the grass is cut in a particular field, a few days later, there is a liberal application of slurry, so it can be pretty stinky for a few days. It's all part of living in the country. I am thankful for the EU Nitrates Directive which stops farmers spreading slurry between November and February.

I often wondered why slurry spreading attracted gulls and my initial thought was that the gulls were after intestinal parasites that had been expelled from the cows that produced the slurry (**Yuk!**).

After some research, I found that is not the case. Spreading slurry over grass fields flushes earthworms from their burrows to the surface to form a readily available food source for birds.

Large numbers of earthworms are also taken by gulls and corvids (members of the Crow family) during ploughing.

The one thing that still puzzles me, considering we live in an area where gulls are largely absent is how do the gulls find out that someone is spreading slurry? Can gulls smell slurry from a distance of several miles? It is not an unreasonable hypothesis as some carrion eaters can smell a dead animal from a distance of several miles.

Similarly, if we throw a few scraps of fatty meat into the back garden with not a corvid in sight, why is it that within less than 10 minutes a Magpie, Rook, Jackdaw or Hooded Crow arrives to scoff the scraps?

If anyone has answers to these questions, I would appreciate your comments on [genericaccount@keemail.me](mailto:genericaccount@keemail.me)

### **Rossglass Kestrels.**

In the previous edition of Nature Notes, I mentioned the fantastic sightings of a pair of Kestrels at Rossglass and Minerstown. Well, we haven't had a sighting since then. I have previously noticed

this behaviour in Kestrels. I don't know why it happens, but my theory is that Kestrels will stay in a particular area while there is adequate food. Once the food supply gets below a certain threshold because of their hunting or other unrelated reasons, they move on to a new territory. I sometimes bump into Chris Murphy (a local ornithologist) when I am in this area, so I will ask him for his thoughts the next time I meet him.

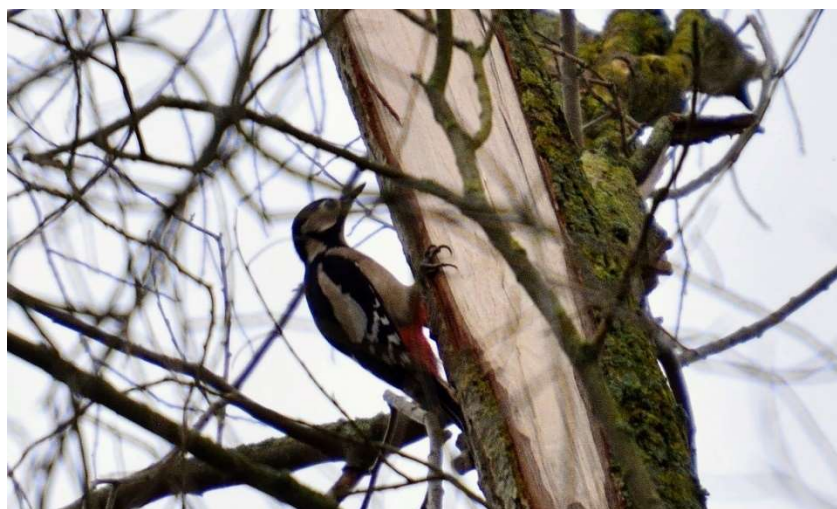
### **Mute Swans with cygnets.**

We saw these recently hatched cygnets on the Lagan Canal on 12/05/2022. It appeared that the cygnets were being gently directed towards their first swim.



### **Woodpecker at Mount Stewart**

On 21/03/2022 we heard a Woodpecker drumming several times near Ploughman's Hill. Unfortunately, we did not see the Woodpecker. In over three decades visiting Mount Stewart, this is the first evidence of Woodpeckers on the estate.



Great Spotted Woodpecker - Oxford Island - 04 February 2018 - Photo by John Moore

### **Cuckoos at Murlough.**

We didn't see any Cuckoos at Murlough last year. We went looking for them on 26/05/2022 and didn't see or hear any Cuckoos. It was disappointing.



### **Red Kite sighting.**

Only one Red Kite sighting to report this time and that was on 07/05/2022 at Ballynoe Stone Circle.

Google Maps link to Ballynoe Stone Circle - <https://goo.gl/maps/WwQKGTwjN8oRAHy69>

Photos of Ballynoe Stone Circle – <https://photos.app.goo.gl/mCZkffpefcTSF9sX8>

### **Planned future editions of Nature Notes.**

Some of my ideas for future editions of Nature Notes will be stand-alone special editions and some will be incorporated into routine editions such as this one. I've no idea when I will get around to publishing these.

#### **Stand-alone special editions**

Corvids (Crow family) – these are amazing birds.

Cats – because I'm a cat lover.

The cruel face of Nature – if any of you think nature is cute, fluffy and sweet, you're in for a shock!  
Have you ever heard of Coots "Tousling"?

***Continued on page 12.***

**Other ideas that may be incorporated in regular editions of Nature Notes**

Bird senses – how do Buzzards detect thermals? Bird navigation using the earth's magnetic field, birds differing visual abilities etc.

Bird Song – it's really all about sex and violence!

Leucism in birds.

Why do juvenile birds have different plumage to adult birds?

Sexual dimorphism in raptors.

Why do birds not sing if it is windy?