

BIRDS OF LOUGH CARRA

PART ONE

12 species of waterbirds, resident and migrant, that occur on Lough Carra

LCCA

Lough Carra Catchment Association

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INTRODUCTION

Lough Carra's unique combination of freshwater, wetland, and terrestrial habitats attracts a multitude of bird species throughout the year. It is estimated that at least 140 species and about two-thirds of the country's breeding bird species occur here. The lake is designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the European Union's Birds Directive, reflecting its importance for bird conservation at both national and international levels.

Dotted with islands, reedbeds, and marshy shores, Lough Carra provides an ideal environment for both resident and visiting waterbirds, with the lake being an important wintering ground for species such as the Whooper Swan and the Greenland White-fronted Goose.

With this rich mosaic of habitats, the lake should be a bustling breeding site for our water-birds. However, extensive research over the past fifty years tells a worrying story of decline of the waterbirds that breed in the Lough Carra catchment. Perhaps most concerning is the catastrophic drop in the duck population, particularly the Mallard, whose numbers have plummeted by up to 90%.

One cause of this decline has been the arrival of the predatory, non-native American Mink which takes the chicks and eggs of our waterbirds. Under the Lough Carra LIFE Project, the NPWS (National Parks and Wildlife Service) is implementing controls on the American Mink population around Lough Carra and reducing the Grey Crow numbers. Since these control measures have been put in place we have started to see a gradual increase in the breeding duck and swan populations.

However, other factors such as loss of breeding and feeding habitats due to drainage and changes in agricultural practices, also contribute to the declines in Lough Carra's birdlife.

General Information

Dabbling ducks are those that feed in shallow water, with rapid movements of the bill, sieving water through fine comb-like teeth to extract food. The term used for a group of ducks on the water is a raft. Whereas, in flight they are known as a flock. Swans on the water are called a 'bevy' and whilst flying a 'flight'.

Classification of Conservation Status

The conservation status for each of the waterbird species listed is either Red, Amber or Green. Red-listed are of high conservation concern in Ireland due to very low and/or declining numbers. Amber-listed are of moderate conservation concern. Green listed are currently not of conservation concern.

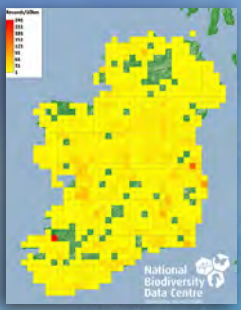
Distribution map

Each of the species illustrated is accompanied by a distribution map from the National Biodiversity Data Centre. The small coloured blocks indicate the number of records of the relevant species per 10km block. Green indicates 0 records, Yellow is 1 to 100 records. Orange - Red is 101 to 460 records. For more information visit **www.biodiversityireland.ie**

MUTE SWAN

Latin Name	*Cygnus olor*
Irish Name	Eala bhalbh
How to recognise	Distinctive reddish-orange bill. Males have large dark knob at top of bill
Diet	Aquatic vegetation in shallow water and short grass in fields
Breeding	Large nest at water's edge. Up to 8 eggs; 1 brood; March-June. Territorial and breed in the same location each year forming lifelong pairs. Breeding numbers remain low but stable around Lough Carra shores
Where to see	Often seen on the lake and in the reedbeds near Moorehall
Special Note	In flight, they don't call but do have a noisy wing beat in flight. On the ground they communicate through grunts and hisses. Lifespan 15-20 years. In Irish legend the 'Children of Lir' lived as swans by daylight
Status	Resident all year round. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern.

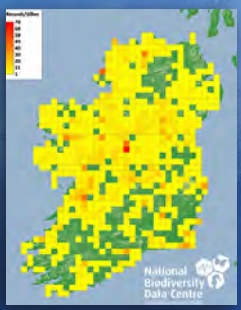




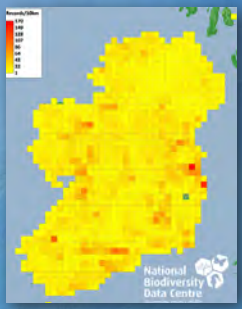
WHOOPER SWAN

Latin Name	*Cygnus cygnus*
Irish Name	Eala ghlórach
How to recognise	Yellow bill which has a black-tip. Honking call constantly whilst flying
Diet	Plucks leaves from short grassland also on stubble in fields
Breeding	Irish wintering birds breed on pools and lakes in Iceland
Where to see	In winter can be seen feeding in fields in the Carra catchment
Special Note	Distinguished from Mute Swans by their constant trumpeting calls which they make when flying, on water and on land. Numbers are increasing, and the grasslands around Carra are important feeding grounds for this bird. Lifespan is up to 10 years. The black pattern on the bill of each Swan is unique
Status	Winter visitor coming here from October to April. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern.









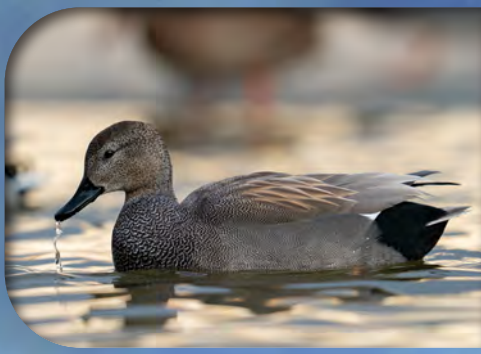
MALLARD

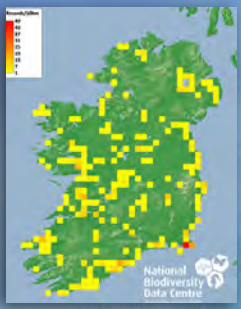
Latin Name	*Anas platyrhynchos*
Irish Name	Lacha fhiáin
How to recognise	Males have iridescent green heads. Females are mottled brown with a bright blue feather on the flank
Diet	Varied from molluscs, insects and crustaceans to seeds and roots
Breeding	They make a down-lined nest on the ground; up to 13 eggs; 1 brood; January - August. Mallard ducklings are precocial which means they are capable of foraging and swimming almost immediately
Where to see	In the bay just off the beach Moorehall, often near the reedbeds
Special Note	Probably the most familiar dabbling duck. Once found in thousands on Lough Carra, the population is now only in the hundreds. Decline is mostly due to predation by American mink.
Status	Resident birds which are joined by winter migrants mostly from Europe. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern



GADWALL

Latin Name	*Mareca strepera*
Irish Name	Gadual
How to recognise	Small white wing patch on male and female. Brown head and black stern
Diet	Dabbles and upends for seeds, insects and aquatic plants
Breeding	The nest is a down-lined hollow on ground near water; 8-12 eggs; 1 brood; April-June
Where to see	Shallow parts of the lake. They can often be spotted in the reedbeds at Moorehall.
Special Note	An elegant duck, smaller than Mallard. Relatively new arrival to Lough Carra and their small population here holds national significance
Status	Scarce resident. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern

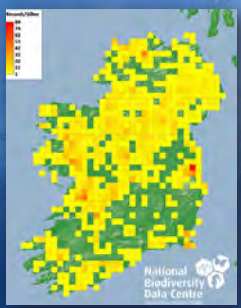


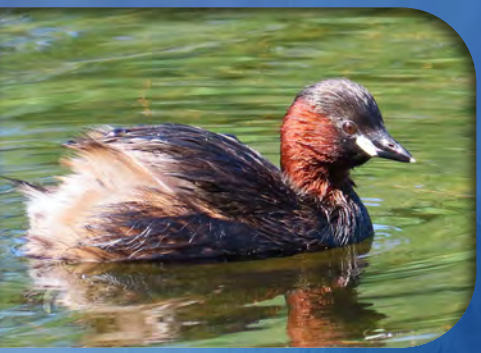


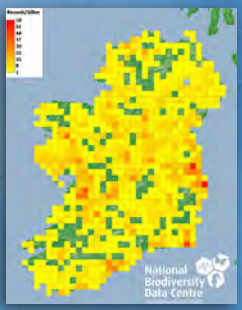
TUFTED DUCK

Latin Name	*Aythya fuligula*
Irish Name	Lacha bhadánach
How to recognise	Male has black body with white flank and a tuft on the nape. The bill is blue-grey with a black tip
Diet	Mussels, crustaceans, insect larvae such as caddis-fly
Breeding	Down-lined nest in long grass close to water; 8-11 eggs; 1 brood; May-June
Where to see	Often found in the bay at Moorehall and off Castle Island
Special Note	Feeds by diving completely under the water to feed on the lake bottom where it finds its food. Usually found in shallower parts of the lake. They are vulnerable to eutrophication of freshwater bodies which can impact their food sources.
Status	Resident birds are joined by winter migrants from northern Europe. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern





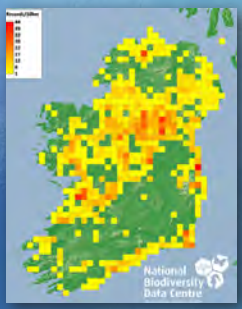




LITTLE GREBE

Latin Name	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*
Irish Name	Spágaire tonn
How to recognise	Male and female look alike. Chestnut-coloured small dumpy body, round as a ball
Diet	Dives for invertebrates, small fish and molluscs
Breeding	The nest is a floating mound of wet plant material, anchored to a stem; 4-6 eggs; 1 brood; April-June
Where to see	Usually seen in inlets and near reedbeds around the lake. Often in small numbers but in early autumn there can be groups of 10 or more
Special Note	The smallest of the grebes, they are also known as 'dabchicks'. It readily dives when disturbed. Chicks will often ride on their parents' back
Status	A resident that is Green listed and not of conservation concern





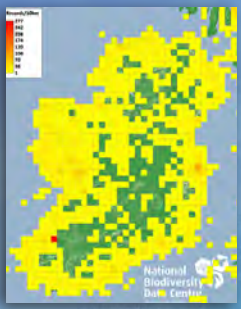
GREAT CRESTED GREBE

Latin Name	*Podiceps cristatus*
Irish Name	Foitheach mór
How to recognise	Male and female look alike. Has a long neck, pointed beak and a plume of feathers on the head
Diet	They dive to feed, mainly for fish but also aquatic invertebrates
Breeding	Nests are a large mound of aquatic vegetation which is usually concealed in a reedbed; up to 6 eggs; 1 brood; April-June
Where to see	Various locations around the lake, but there is usually a breeding pair at Moorehall
Special Note	Age of first breeding is 2 years. They have an elaborate mating dance where they rise out of the water facing each other shaking their heads to and fro, often carrying a beakful of waterweed. Chicks often ride on their parents' back
Status	Resident birds are joined by winter visitors. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern

COMMON GULL

Latin Name	*Larus canus*
Irish Name	Faoileán bán
How to recognise	Looks like small Herring gull but with greenish legs and yellow bill
Diet	Worms, insects, fish and molluscs from ground or water
Breeding	The nest is a pad of grass built on the ground, on a rock or on a wooden post; 2-3 eggs; 1 brood; May-June. On Lough Carra a 1977 survey showed 436 breeding pairs, the most recent count was just 37
Where to see	Can often be seen in Quinn's Bay and off Brownstown bay feeding on insects emerging from the lake
Special Note	It takes them three years to become adult and reach reproductive maturity. During this time the plumage changes. They are the primary reason for Lough Carra being designated a Special Protection Area (SPA)
Status	Resident birds are joined by winter visitors. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern

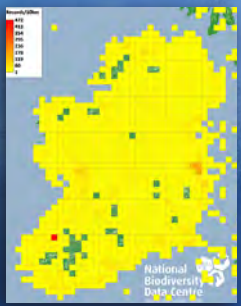




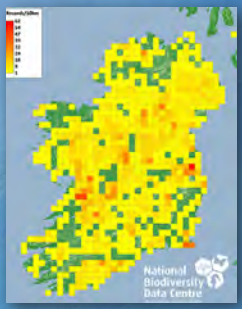
BLACK-HEADED GULL

Latin Name	*Larus ridibundus*
Irish Name	Sléibhín
How to recognise	Small silver-white gull with dark pointed wings. The head is not black but a chocolate brown in the breeding season.
Diet	Insects, fish, plant material
Breeding	Nest is made up of a pile of stems on the ground, usually on an island; 2 or 3 eggs; 1 brood; May-June
Where to see	Often seen feeding on insects over the lake near Moorehall and Brownstown
Special Note	Numbers on Carra have decreased significantly possibly due to predation but there is fluid movement of gull populations between Loughs Mask and Carra
Status	Resident birds are joined in the winter by birds from Europe. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern





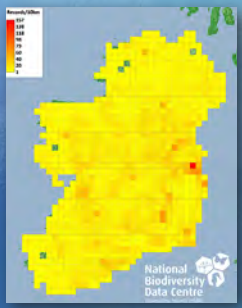




COOT

Latin Name	*Fulica atra*
Irish Name	Cearc cheannann
How to recognise	All black plumage, white beak and shield on the forehead, red eye
Diet	They feed from the water surface but also dive to feed underwater. They mainly eat plants and seeds but also eat small aquatic insects
Breeding	The nest is a shallow bowl of vegetation on a mound of floating debris at edge of water; 6-9 eggs; 1 or 2 broods; April-August
Where to see	Around the reedbeds at Moorehall with sometimes as many as 12 in a group
Special Note	Known for their squabbling behaviour. In the same bird family as crakes and rails. Unusual range of mechanical calls and whistles
Status	Resident. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern





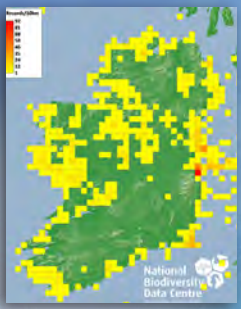
MOORHEN

Latin Name	*Gallinula chloropus*
Irish Name	Cearc uisce
How to recognise	Rich Black to brown plumage with a thin line of white feathers along the flank. The eye is red and the beak is bright red with a yellow tip
Diet	Omnivorous feeding on seeds, roots, berries, snails and insects
Breeding	Shallow bowl of leaves and stems in vegetation such as reeds; 5-11 eggs; 2 or 3 broods; April-August
Where to see	Not a common sight on Carra but can often be seen at Moorehall and Castleburke. Numbers should increase in the absence of mink.
Special Note	The Moorhen is rarely seen out on open water, unlike the Coot. It is more likely seen on the edge of reeds and will sometimes venture out on nearby wet meadows, running for cover if disturbed. The legs of the adult are bright greenish yellow
Status	Resident. Green-listed and not of conservation concern

COMMON TERN

Latin Name	*Sterna hirundo*
Irish Name	Geabhróg
How to recognise	Black cap, silvery-grey body, black-tipped bright orange bill
Diet	Hovers in the air before plunge-diving into the water for fish and aquatic insects
Breeding	Nest is a scrape in dry earth on the ground near water; 2-4 eggs; 1 brood; May-June. No previous evidence of successful fledging on Carra for many years until the recent success of the Tern raft.
Where to see	Often seen near the beach at Moorehall and Brownstown bay
Special Note	In the 19th century tern feathers were used in the millinery trade causing a large reduction in the population. In the breeding season they are found on both on the coast and inland, but in the winter they are almost uniquely found in marine environments
Status	Summer visitor spending the winter in west and south Africa. Amber-listed of moderate conservation concern





Success of Common Tern Breeding Raft

Although Common Tern have been recorded visiting Lough Carra regularly over the last number of years there have been no confirmed records of breeding pairs that have successfully fledged chicks on the lake since prior to 1940.



A lack of suitable nesting sites where these ground nesting birds are protected from predators is often a major challenge for the Common Tern. The invasive American mink has been a particular problem for ground nesting birds tern since its introduction to Ireland for fur farming in the 1950s.

In April 2026 the NPWS, along with help from local volunteers and the LCCA, placed a carefully designed predator-proof Tern raft on the lake to provide a safe nesting opportunity for the Common Terns. Not only did a pair of Terns nest on the raft in the first year of its installation they were also able to successfully fledge all three chicks that hatched thanks to this safe nesting environment.

This project marks the first confirmed record of Terns successfully fledging chicks on the lake in over 86 years so it is incredible to have all three chicks fledge successfully in the first year. It is also very beneficial for Ireland's overall Common Tern population to have a new nesting site established.







Flocks of Whooper Swans often graze in fields

For more information please visit:

www.loughcarra.org
www.loughcarralife.ie
www.biodiversityireland.ie
www.npws.ie
www.birdwatchireland.ie

Images by Lynda Huxley except: Tufted Duck,Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Gadwall which are from Pixabay library
Images of Common Tern and raft on page 11 by Michael Kingdon
Updated September 2026

Seirbhís Bainistíochta Abhantraí
River Basin Management Service

LCCA
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