Irish Raptor Study Group

Grúpa Staidéir Éan Creiche na hÉireann

ANNUAL REVIEW 2018

NEWS

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

OVERVIEW OF IRSG

FROM THE COMMITTEE

This report presents the main Raptor related news of 2018 and provides Raptor nest monitoring records submitted to the Irish Raptor Study Group for the 2018 breeding season. For the last three years the Conference as been well attended with over 100 delegates.

In 2018 the IRSG joined forces with BirdWatch Ireland and the National Parks & Wildlife Service to improve our understanding of our smallest and most elusive Falcon, the Merlin. As predicted the survey was challenging. Huge observational effort, little detection. The Merlin occurs at low densities, is often territorially isolated and subsequently demographically unstable across its breeding range. The challenges faced in the Merlin Survey were also well understood, a target unpredictable in its nest site selection, discrete and subtle in its habits, fleeting in presence, cryptic in its environment and overall, scarce. The IRSG and BirdWatch Ireland are in the process of developing a number of publications using the survey data to inform the ecological requirements of the Merlin in Ireland and drive future monitoring and conservation. The IRSG would like to thank all those who took part in the fieldwork and who often put in extra effort in an attempt to get results. Thank you also to all who submitted historical Merlin records via the online Geoportal submission form.

In order to produce a report, we need our Members and supporters to submit records. The interim total number of nest records collated so far for 2018 is currently 343. This however does not include Hen Harrier or Buzzard for which at time of publication are still to be finalised. An updated Annual Review will be available online shortly with full species data.

We will endeavour to continue to increase awareness about our native Birds of Prey in 2019, and encourage more members to engage in site visits and nest recording. While we develop an appropriate app and online platform for the digital submission of records, we have a standardised spreadsheet for reporting and an email address for which to send records to (monitoring@irsg.ie). Please get in touch if you would like more information. We are also extremely interested in any Raptor sightings, even casual records of common Raptors are of great value and are much appreciated. On that note, we would like to thank everyone who contributed Raptor nest and sighting records to the IRSG in 2018. We would like to extend our gratitude to Edward Carty who very kindly provided a copy of his entire database of Raptor records for Co. Kerry from the 1930s to present. A huge thank you to John Fields who contributed over 700 Raptor sightings records in 2018.

Recommended Citation:
Wilson-Parr, R. & O'Brien, I. (Eds.) (2019)
Irish Raptor Study Group Annual Review 2018.

MERLIN SURVEY

The Merlin Survey 2018 was coordinated by a partnership of Irish Raptor Study Group and BirdWatch Ireland under contract to NPWS

Merlin are an Annex I species on the European Birds Directive 2009/147/EC, and as such there is a requirement for Member States to take appropriate measures to ensure the protection of their populations. The development and direction of effective conservation action should be underpinned by data on the status, ecological requirements and factors which influence breeding Merlin, however these are knowledge gaps in the Irish context. For Article 12 reporting for the period 2008 – 2012, the short and long-term trends for the national Merlin population in the Republic of Ireland, as well as populations within the six Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for which Merlin are a Species of Conservation Interest (SCI) were listed as 'unknown'.

There has been no national census of breeding Merlin in Ireland. Monitoring of regional populations has provided information on long-term breeding trends, nesting ecology and specific threats to the species, however in the absence of a systematic survey, a robust population estimate and overview of the status and conservation requirements for the Irish Merlin population has been lacking. Breeding range declines of 8% and 49% over the past 20 and 40-year periods recorded by the BTO Breeding Bird Atlases have been the primary

As an upland Raptor which specialises on open-country passerines, Merlin may be especially vulnerable to the land-use changes which have modified the upland landscape over recent decades, and there is an onus to take the necessary steps to address the current knowledge gaps to inform the conservation requirements for Merlin populations."

source used to categorise Merlin as an Amber-listed Bird of Conservation Concern in Ireland. However, due to difficulties in detecting breeding Merlin, multi-species surveys such as the Bird Atlases are unlikely to provide an accurate representation of their distribution and trends.

The primary objective of the Merlin Survey 2018 was to determine Merlin occupancy, and the number, location and associated habitat of all breeding attempts within selected survey squares in Special Protection Areas (SPA) designated for breeding Merlin. A secondary objective was to determine the breeding success and outcome for each Merlin breeding attempt. A Steering Group to oversee the survey was established in early 2018 comprising Dr. David Tierney (Birds Unit NPWS); Dermot Breen (NPWS); Damian Clarke (NPWS); Irene O'Brien (NPWS & IRSG); and, Alan Lauder (IRSG) with the Project Managers for the survey (John Lusby (BWI) and Ryan Wilson-Parr (IRSG)).

Due to their widespread distribution, low population densities in remote areas and secretive breeding behaviour, Merlin are a challenging species to monitor. It was recognised that a pilot survey of Merlin within the SPA network would not be accessible to all surveyors and volunteers. The survey approach was taken to solely rely on four contracted dedicated surveyors, NPWS staff and selected skilled survey volunteers with experience of Merlin monitoring. Selected survey squares were restricted to within the SPA network. A total of 23 representative 5km x 5km (575km2) squares were selected within the six SPAs. Survey squares were randomly selected, to ensure a minimum coverage of 25% of the surface area of each individual SPA. The targeted coverage was to facilitate assessment of population size and habitat associations in each SPA.

Traditionally Merlin nested on the ground in open heather moorland in Ireland, however from approximately the 1970s there has been a shift to nesting in trees at the edge or within forest plantation. This change in nest site selection has coincided with a substantial reduction in heather cover, and the subsequent expansion of planted forest, which is now the dominant nesting choice of Merlin in Ireland. Tree nesting pairs are typically more difficult to detect than ground nesting pairs. The specific challenges associated with surveying Merlin in Ireland were highlighted by the Pilot Merlin Survey in 2010 which evaluated best practice survey methodologies to inform the most suitable approach to surveying Merlin in Ireland. The Pilot Merlin Survey showed that differences in breeding Merlin behaviour influenced detection rates between territories, which were attributed to landscape features and the availability of perches. As a result, sign searching, which is an established method for determining occupancy of breeding Merlin in the Britain, proved ineffective at certain sites. Unconventional methods to detect breeding Merlin were also tested, specifically the use of playback and artificial decoys, both of which were deemed unreliable as a stand-alone survey methods. More recently, data on Merlin derived from regional monitoring studies spanning the past 30 years were collated and analysed to determine long-term trends in breeding performance and to identify nest site and habitat selection. That study facilitated a more detailed understanding of Merlin breeding habitat selection and now provides the basis for a more relevant survey protocol. Based on current knowledge of the distribution of Merlin populations, the challenges associated with surveying the species and current volunteer capacity available to assist with Merlin surveying, the most suitable approach for the Merlin Survey 2018 was to initially focus on determining the status of populations within the SPA network, which would address important knowledge gaps and also facilitate increased understanding of the survey requirements and allow to build the volunteer network to undertake more ambitious Merlin monitoring in future.

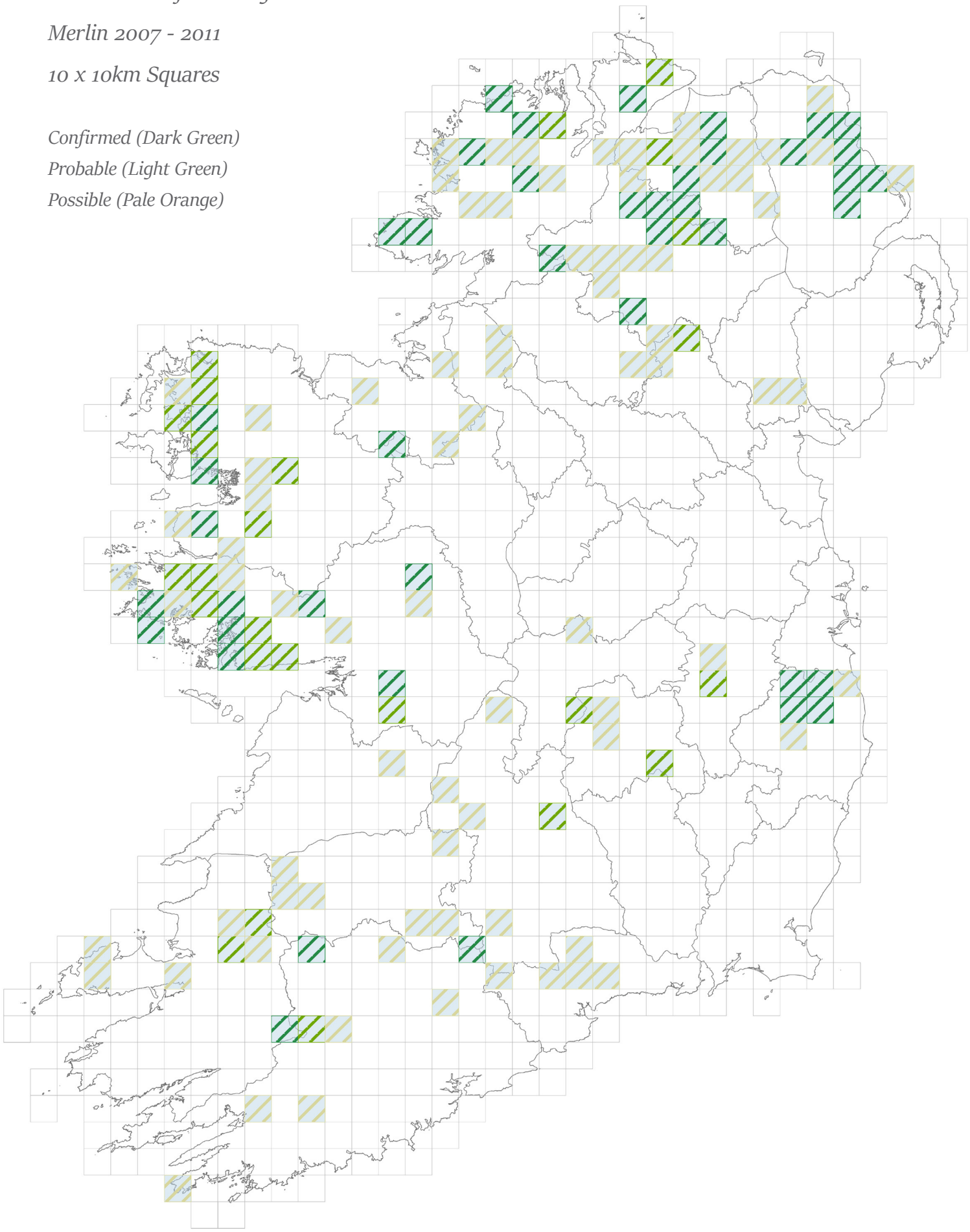
"The upland landscape within the breeding range of Irish Merlin has been significantly altered through the extensive afforestation of previously open habitats. In the absence of nesting sites such as climax stage heather moorland, the majority of breeding Merlin in Ireland now nest in the abandoned nests of other bird species in forest plantations."

Distribution of Breeding

Merlin 2007 - 2011

10 x 10km Squares

Confirmed (Dark Green)
Probable (Light Green)
Possible (Pale Orange)



To encourage participation and transfer knowledge, four survey workshops were provided in April 2018 in the Slieve Aughties (Gort), Ballycroy, Glenveagh & Wicklow. These workshops focused on Merlin ecology and monitoring methods and were designed to provide a practical knowledge transfer to inform volunteers of the survey and its objectives and equip them to initiate Merlin monitoring on a local scale. This training ultimately helped to fill in some of the gaps in relation to breeding Merlin distribution and habitat suitability, while building future capacity.

Survey findings:

Of the 23, 5 x 5km survey squares in the Merlin SPA network, six were in the Slieve Aughties, five in Derryveagh & Glendowlan SPA, four each in Owenduff Nephin and Wicklow Mountains SPA, three in Connemara Bog Complex SPA and a single square in Lough Nillan SPA. In total 61 surveyors participated in the survey, and the number of surveyors assigned to each survey squared ranged from a single surveyor to 17, which was informed by the nature of the landscape and proportion of suitable habitat for breeding Merlin.

61 SURVEYORS PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY, COVERING 23 5KM X 5KM SQUARES

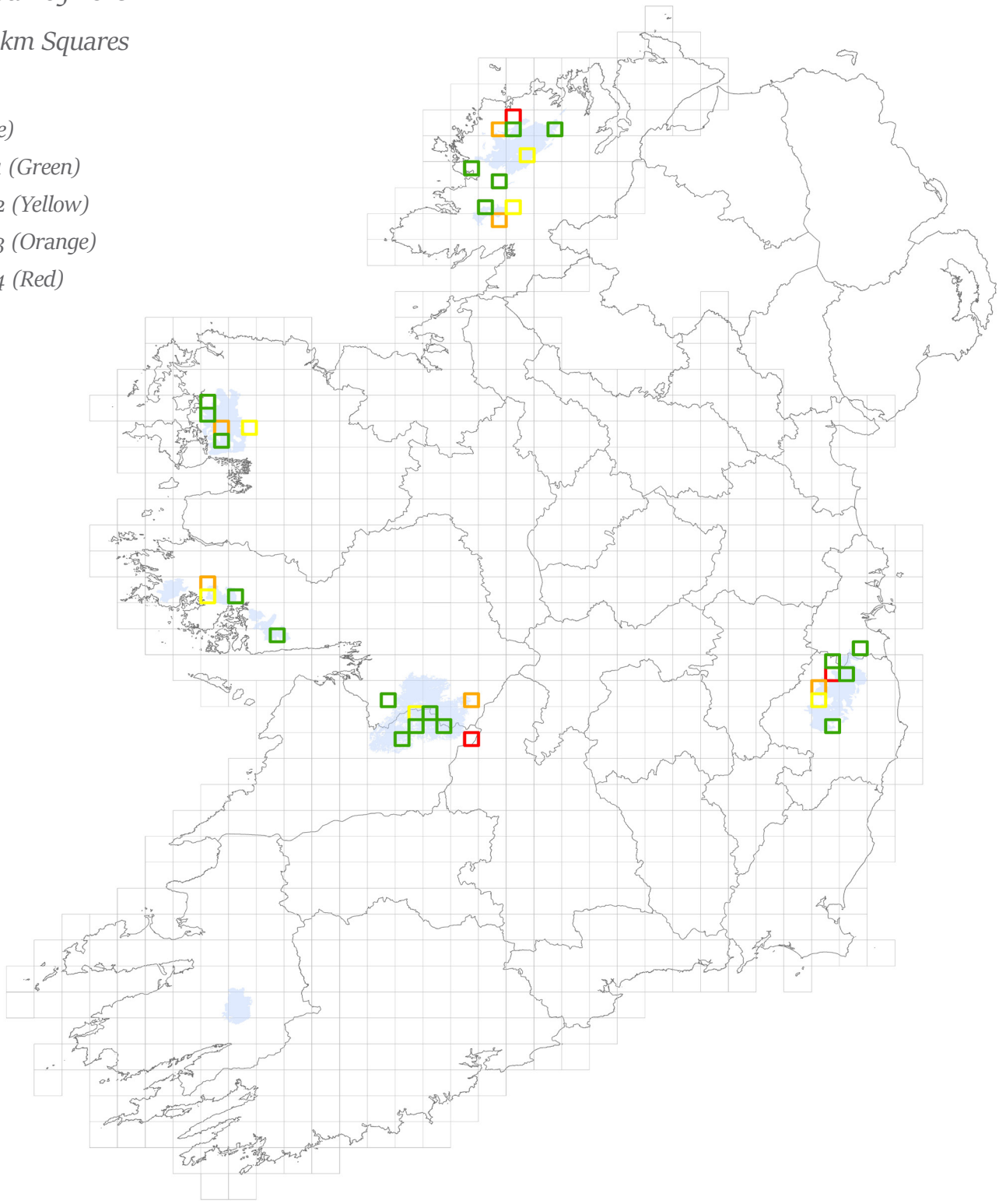
Surveyors spent over 1,300 hours conducting watches from over 160 vantage points overlooking suitable habitat for breeding Merlin. There was less emphasis on sign searching, which was informed by previous Merlin survey work in these areas and the reliability of this method in detecting presence of Merlin in certain landscapes, with an average of 8.5 hours spent searching for signs to indicate Merlin occupancy in each survey square. Of the 23 survey squares, breeding pairs were confirmed in four squares (17%), seven squares (31%) were occupied, and 12 squares (52%) were deemed to be unoccupied by Merlin. Of the four pairs, two were located in separate survey squares in Wicklow Mountains SPA, and a single pair in Connemara Bog Complex and Lough Nillan. Additional survey efforts were carried out in three of the SPA's, (Connemara Bog, Slieve Aughties & Derryveagh & Glendowlan) which involved visiting traditional sites, areas of suitable breeding habitat and collating and following up on recent records of Merlin. This survey work resulted in the confirmation of a further seven pairs. Of which, four were in Connemara Bog SPA, two in Derryveagh & Glendowlan SPA and one in the Slieve Aughties SPA. Overall, eleven pairs of breeding Merlin were confirmed within the SPA network in 2018, which included five pairs in Connemara, two in Derryveagh and Glendowlan SPA and the Wicklow Mountains and a single pair in the Slieve Aughties and Lough Nillan. It was possible to determine breeding success for the pairs in Connemara and Donegal, which showed that two of the three pairs successfully fledged young in Donegal, which were located and monitored by Martin Moloney, and all five pairs in Connemara were successful and the broods were ringed by Dermot Breen, Irene O'Brien and John Lusby.

> *"Of the 23 survey squares, breeding pairs were confirmed in four squares (17%), seven squares (31%) were occupied, and 12 squares (52%) were deemed to be unoccupied by Merlin. Of the four pairs, two were located in separate survey squares in Wicklow Mountains SPA, and a single pair in Connemara Bog Complex and Lough Nillan"*

Merlin Survey 2018

5km x 5km Squares

SPA (Blue)
Priority 1 (Green)
Priority 2 (Yellow)
Priority 3 (Orange)
Priority 4 (Red)



Defining Habitat Suitability:

The Merlin Survey also aimed identify habitats and regions which are potentially suitable for Merlin at a landscape scale. The Project collated 1,189 records of Merlin during breeding season (Apr-Jul) from relevant sources over the period 1998 – 2018 to define broad criteria for habitat suitability which can be applied on a national scale. All reliable records were grouped according to the level of breeding information (e.g. sighting in suitable habitat, breeding behaviour, confirmation of nest location etc.) and will be used to inform broad scale identification of habitats and regions which are occupied by breeding Merlin. Broad criteria for habitat and region suitability for breeding Merlin an then be defined and applied on a national scale to identify areas which may be most suitable for the species. The outcome of this work will be a spatially referenced map to include all areas in the Republic of Ireland considered to have potential to support breeding Merlin - a useful tool to aid future monitoring.

OSPREY REINTRODUCTION FEASIBILITY STUDY

RYAN WILSON-PARR

AONGHUS O'DONAILL

LORCAN O'TOOLE

The Osprey, or in Gaelic Iascaire Coirneach "Iascaire meaning a fisher or fisherman, and Coirneach meaning tonsured" was once a common and widespread native bird in Ireland. Feeding almost exclusively on live fish, the Osprey is a distinctive and exciting component of our Island's avi-fauna and a lost icon for our precious wetland ecosystems. Over the last few years the Irish Raptor Study Group have been collating historical and recent Osprey sightings for Ireland c.1790 to 2017 with an aim to informing a feasibility and acceptability study for a reintroduction. A geospatial analysis of Osprey observations in Ireland identified consistent staging and convergence zones during spring and autumn migration. By identifying and ranking the most important staging sites and core ecological networks for migrating Osprey in Ireland the Group can inform the selection of candidate release sites for the re-establishment of a breeding Osprey population. In collaboration with the Golden Eagle Trust, the Group intend to progress a feasibility document in 2019. The particular objectives of this review are:

- To review the ecology of Osprey, while considering the potential benefits to ecosystem function and ecotourism they could provide and the possible ecological risks of their reintroduction.
- To present evidence and define criteria for identifying candidate reintroduction sites.
- To identify the most appropriate source populations for potential reintroduction to Ireland.
- To identify actions and mechanisms that would maximise the benefits and eliminate or control any risks related to reintroductions.
- To make recommendations for further work that would be required to develop and implement a reintroduction programme, if this is considered desirable.

OSPREY REINTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES IN EUROPE HAVE PROVIDED CONSIDERABLE CONSERVATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BENEFITS

> *By the late 18th century the iconic sight of breeding Osprey snatching fish after a dramatic plunge-dive was no longer commonplace along Irish waterways, having been persecuted to extinction."*

"On 29 August 2018 the IRSG were granted by the Irish High Court to bring Judicial Review proceedings challenging the decision of An Bord Pleanála to approve the development of a 19 turbine wind farm in Co. Donegal. The Groups challenge alleged that An Bord Pleanála had failed to identify, assess and describe the effects of the proposed development on Hen Harrier in breach of Article 3 of Directive 2014/52/EU (the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive) and that the decision was taken in breach of Articles 2 and 4 of Directive 2009/147/EC (the Birds Directive)."

The facts grounding this legal challenge arose in the context of an application to An Bord Pleanála by Planree Limited on 15 December 2017 for a permit to construct a wind farm in Co Donegal. The development site is situated in an area which, although not designated under the Habitats Directive as a Special Protection Area, has nonetheless been identified by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) as a regionally important area for Hen Harrier given that it supports 7% of the national breeding population.

The application was accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and a Natura Impact Statement. The EIAR identified data from the NPWS indicating Hen Harrier breeding activity between 2004 and 2015 within the site boundary and within zones of 0-1 km, 1-3km and 3-5km from the site. The developer also provided details of its own surveys conducted between 2015 and 2017 which although observing some Hen Harrier activity did not identify breeding activity within the site or a 2km buffer. The EIAR concluded that "*No evidence of breeding activity was recorded for [Hen Harrier] at or within the 2km survey buffer of the development site boundary. In addition this species was not observed within the study area during the core breeding season of mid May-June.*"

THE HIGH COURT

A central aspect of the challenge was that An Bord Pleanála had failed to resolve the conflict between the conclusions of the developer's EIAR that there was no evidence of breeding activity on the site or within a 2km buffer between 2015 and 2017 on the one hand and the positive identification of two breeding pairs in the same area by the IRSG in 2017 on the other hand. Issues relating to publication of sensitive environmental information in the EIAR did not form part of the challenge since this aspect was not amenable to Judicial Review because it was not material to the decision under challenge. Insofar as it was anticipated that the parties would take issue with the IRSG's request to provide precise information on a confidential basis, the IRSG in its written legal submissions relied on Article 10 of the EIA Directive, Article 4(2)(h) of the Public Access to Environmental Information (AIE) Directive and Article 6, paragraph 6 of the Aarhus Convention which endorse the principle of confidentiality in relation to the location of rare species if it is necessary to protect the environment. In response, An Bord Pleanála asserted that Article 4(2)(h) of the AIE Directive and Article 6, paragraph 6 of the Aarhus Convention provide a basis for a refusal of requests for access to environmental information held by public authorities on grounds inter alia of confidentiality and that the IRSG was not a public authority and An Bord Pleanála did not "hold" the information which the IRSG never passed to it. The Bord submitted that its interpretation of the AIE Directive and the Aarhus Convention did not address its contention that section 146(5) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) imposed an obligation on it to make all relevant information available; and (ii) it would be a breach of the developer's right to fair procedures if it was not given the opportunity to comment on or to cross-check the information against its survey data.

.../... CONTINUED

When it came to the hearing before Mr Justice Simons in the High Court on 19 December 2018 it was immediately clear that the court considered the confidentiality issue to be central to the case. The judge had read the papers in advance and one of the first interventions made was the following observation: "*But you refuse to provide any information as to where [the Hen Harrier] are located*" the judge went on to ask how An Bord Pleanála could receive information on a confidential basis. The IRSG's counsel submitted that the AIE Directive provided such a basis, but the judge stated that there was no equivalent under the EIA and that Article 10 dealt only with commercial sensitivity. Counsel submitted that An Bord Pleanála had not responded to the IRSGs offer to provide the information on a confidential basis. In response to this submission, the judge stated that the public participation process is not iterative. The same issue was raised later in the hearing on 19 December 2018 and again the judge observed that An Bord Pleanála's procedure is not iterative and stated that it was probably prohibited from responding to the IRSGs offer to provide the location of the Hen Harrier breeding sites on a confidential basis. In its oral submissions which followed, An Bord Pleanála, reiterated its position that it could refuse a request for access to environmental information but as a matter of law "*nothing which would protect [An Bord Pleanála] from having to disclose material in response to an access to environmental information request allows the [IRSG] to withhold material from [An Bord Pleanála] or give material to [An Board Pleanála] on the basis that it won't give it to the developer*."

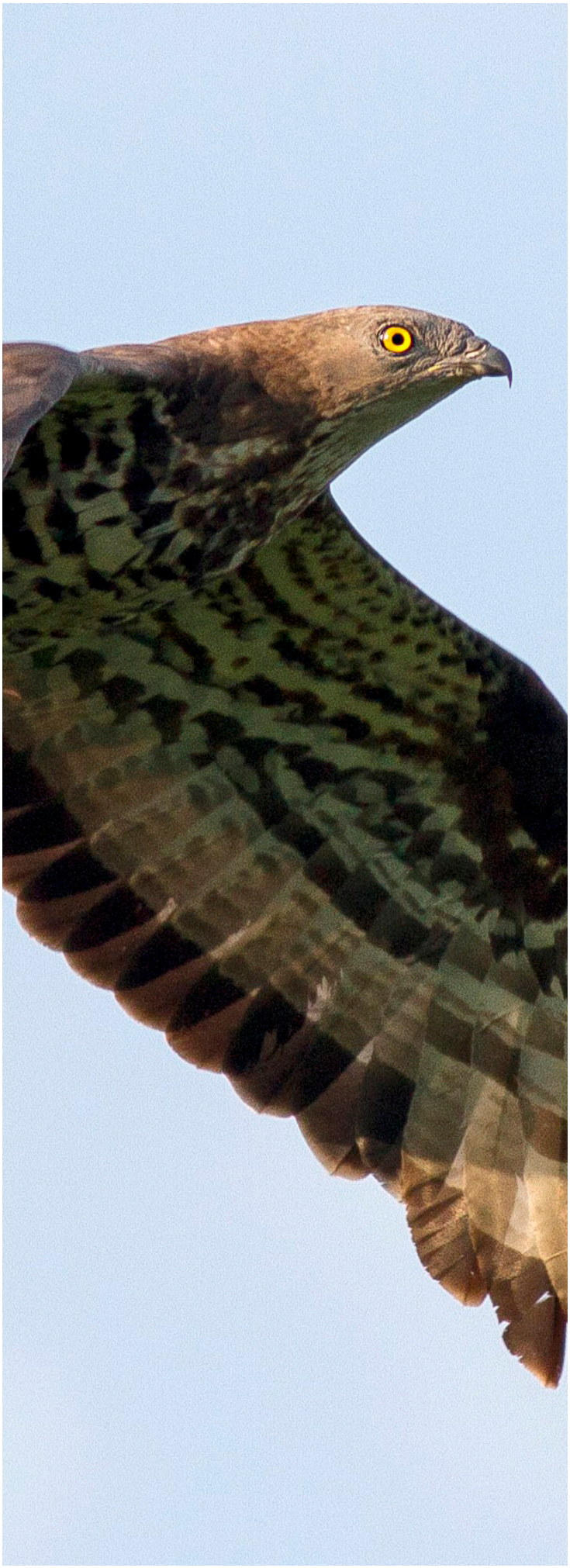
The oral submission went on to note that in the context of Article 10 of the EIA Directive, not only did national law not impose a limitation on disclosure of information but it did the opposite, it imposed a requirement of fair procedures which might require the circulation of information to the developer. At the conclusion of the first day of the hearing it was apparent, and the IRSG were advised by two Senior Barristers, that it would almost certainly not succeed in its challenge because it had withheld (albeit for genuine reasons) the precise locations of the breeding Hen Harrier it had identified. The IRSG was advised that the court would almost certainly decide that there was no legal basis for An Bord Pleanála to engage with it on how this information might be provided confidentially and as a matter of fair procedures and statute it could not treat this information as confidential, whether in terms of public dissemination or in terms of providing it to the developer and for that reason the court would find against the IRSG and dismiss its challenge. It was also relevant that there was no right of appeal available to the IRSG. The IRSG merely had a statutory right to apply to the presiding judge for permission to appeal and a similar constitutional right to apply to the Supreme Court in exceptional circumstances. In terms of the statutory application, the judge (and it is always the same judge that hears the substantive case) can only grant such permission if that judge certifies that his or her decision involves a point of law of exceptional public importance and that it is desirable in the public interest that an appeal should be taken. Similarly, a decision of the High Court may only be appealed to the Supreme Court in exceptional circumstances and with the pre-condition that the High Court decision must involve a matter of general public importance or it would be in the interests of justice.

The IRSG were advised that it would be highly unlikely to be successful in either case.

> *"the IRSG had no option other than to withdraw its challenge before the remainder of the hearing concluded."*

The unprecendented step by the IRSG to pursue a legal challenge was not taken lightly. The IRSG were intent on securing a ruling that would provide clarification on the implementation and interpretation of Regulation 27(4)(b) of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 which requires the planning authority to "strive" to avoid deterioration and pollution to Annex I protected habitats that occur outside of designated Special Areas of Conservation (transposing the Habitats Directive) and habitats supporting Annex I protected bird species outside of Special Protection Areas (transposing Article 4.4 of the Birds Directive). The "strive" in the Regulation, if transposing the requirements of the Habitats and Birds Directives, should, in IRSGs opinion, mean "strict protection". Despite the outcome, the Group have taken much from the process. There are clearly significant concerns around the use, disclosure and identification of locations of protected species in the planning system and within industry. IRSG will aim to progress improvements in existing Government policy and procedure in relation to protection of Raptors and sensitive data. We believe this case has exposed Ireland's failure to comply with the Aarhus Convention. In light of this the IRSG have submitted a Communication to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee.

We would like to thank the direction and support of our legal team, FP Logue Solicitors in taking on this case, notably Principal Solicitor Fred Logue for his time and dedication throughout.



CLAMHÁN RIABHACH

HONEY BUZZARD

PERNIS APIVORUS

The Honey Buzzard breeds in most European countries, although it generally has a southerly distribution, being absent from northern Fennoscandia. Across much of its range, its distribution is rather patchy.

In the UK, at the western extent of its range, Honey Buzzards can occur in high-quality mixed deciduous forests in the lowlands of southern England, central hill country with mixed farmland/woodland, and upland, even-aged coniferous plantations. Honey Buzzard are highly secretive and a specialist insectivore that feeds mostly on the larvae and pupae of wasps and bumblebees. When this food source is temporarily unavailable, it also eats other insects, pulli and occasionally small mammals and reptiles. The Honey Buzzard is a passage species in Ireland, arriving from Africa in May and leaves again in August or September.

There were only two noted sightings of Honey Buzzard in Ireland in 2018, notably in June at Dursey Island, Co. Cork (Clare Heardman & Dylan Hood) and in July at Dungiven, Co. Derry (David Steele).

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
-	-	-	-	-

No breeding records received.

CÚR RUA

RED KITE

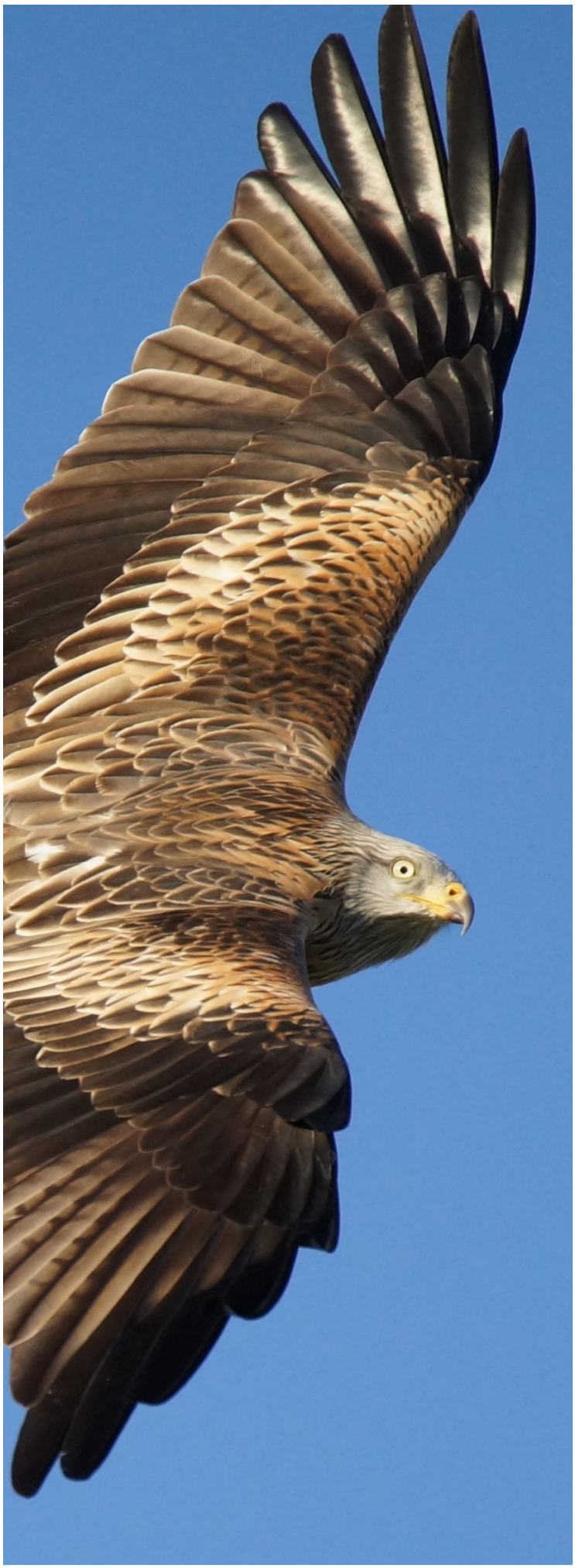
MILVUS MILVUS

In 2018 the Red Kite breeding population continued to expand with 91 territorial pairs recorded. The majority (85) of those were recorded in Wicklow, 5 pairs in Meath / Dublin and one in Wexford. There were a high number of failed pairs during 2018 due to nests blown out of their traditional sites in the "Beast from the East" and pairs which either failed to nest elsewhere or couldn't be located at subsequent nesting attempts. Many of the Kites are now untagged and several nests in Wicklow are undetected each year as the population has expanded beyond 50 pairs. tThe UK & Ireland Red Kite Steering Group have discussed the prospect of standardised monitoring squares for future surveys, with at least 14 10km squares in Ireland now requiring monitoring.

Losses were unfortunately recorded due to Carbofuran poisoning. These losses included two of our most productive Kites "Blue Black C" from 2008 whose skeletal remains were found below the nest site which failed early during 2018 and "Blue Purple W" from 2007. The latter had been poisoned by Carbofuran which was particularly devastating to the Red Kite Project team being one of the birds from the first year of the reintroduction - having been collected from Wales and was well known to the project team over the past 11 years.

An extensive wintering roost count survey across the Kite range in Ireland in January achieved a total count of 214 birds wintering in January. IRSG received a total of 86 casual sightings of Red Kite in 2018. Dr. Marc Ruddock (Golden Eagle Trust) has kindly submitted the following Red Kite Project data for 2018:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
91	-	54	37	71



IOLAR FIRÉAN

GOLDEN EAGLE

AQUILA CHRYSAETUS

The Golden Eagles had another good year in 2018 and three young fledged in the wild. This follows on from 3 young fledged in 2017. In 2018, one coastal pair reared two young and the pair in the Bluestack Mountains reared a single chick again. No pairs laid eggs in the Derryveagh Mountains in 2018. 18 young have fledged in Donegal since the first successful breeding in 2007.

5 territories were occupied including, South Derryveagh, North Derryveagh/Glenveagh National Park (where the 17-year old female disappeared in 2017, presumably from natural mortality or old age), Inishowen Peninsula, Bluestack Mountains and the Glencolumbkille Peninsula/ Slieve Toohey.

3 Scottish Golden Eagles were translocated and released in Southern Scotland in 2018. This release programme aims to release 6-10 birds in Southern Scotland over the coming years and we should expect the occasional released bird to disperse across to Northern Ireland and Donegal.

Lorcán O'Toole has summarised Golden Eagle Breeding records for 2018:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
5	2	-	2	3

IOLAR MARA

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE

HALIAEETUS ALBICILLIA

The Irish White-tailed Sea Eagle (WTSE) Reintroduction Project is managed by the Golden Eagle Trust. Releases of birds took place every year for five years (2007-2011) in Killarney National Park, Co. Kerry. In August 2011 the final cohort of 23 birds were released bringing the number released to 100 over the five year release phase of the Project. By early 2010 the first territorial pair of WTSEs had formed in south-west Kerry. This increased to 4 territorial pairs in 2011, 6 in 2012, 10 in 2013, 14 in 2014, but declined again to 13 in 2015 and 10 in 2016 and 2017.

WTSE bred in three counties in 2018: Cork (2), Kerry (7) and Galway (1). This was a relatively poor year for breeding WTSEs with the failure of pairs apparently due to a combination of extremely poor weather up to mid-May, inexperience of some pairs, one male attending females at two different nests and critically the loss of the two most experienced and successful females and a 2017 wild-bred female in early 2018 to avian influenza. Both males have since remained unpaired. A third calender year wild-bred male (Glengarriff 2016) was recovered dead on the Dingle peninsula in June, cause of death undetermined.

To date 25 young have been fledged from 47 nesting attempts to date in Ireland. Birds are now holding territory and have nested in four counties from the Beara peninsula to Connemara. It is hoped that 2019 may bring better breeding success and possibly the first Irish-bred birds to breed in the wild. Dr. Allan Mee has summarised White-tailed Sea Eagle Breeding records for 2018:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
12	10	6	4	4

CROMÁN MÓNA

MARSH HARRIER

CIRCUS AERUGINOSUS

The Marsh Harrier has a wide breeding distribution throughout temperate regions of the Palearctic, from western Europe and the tip of northern Africa throughout Asia to Pacific coasts on Sakhalin and northern Japan. The species is highly migratory, and outside the breeding season, it moves south to winter in Africa, India and south-east Asia.

A pair of Marsh Harrier attempted to breed at Tacumshin, Co. Wexford in 2016, however were unsuccessful. The Marsh Harrier was last known to have bred in Ireland around 1917. Marsh Harrier bred in Northern Ireland in 2009 and 2011, the first breeding records there since the 1840s. There was no evidence of breeding at Tacumshin in 2017 or 2018.

There has been an increase in the number of records in recent years, however over the last number of years (2016 & 2017) there has been a relatively stable c. 80 sightings of Marsh Harrier in the Republic of Ireland. 2018 saw an increase in sightings to 126 records, albeit concentrated around the South-east, but also at a small number of locations in in Co. Clare and Co. Kerry.

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
-	-	-	-	-

No confirmed or possible breeding records received.

CROMÁN NA GCEARC

HEN HARRIER

CIRCUS CYANEUS

Hen Harriers have been surveyed at a national level every five years since 1998-2000 but have also been monitored at a local or regional level by IRSG at some important sites since the 1990s. The current estimated Hen Harrier population in Ireland is between 108- 157 pairs and a declining population trend.

In 2018, as part of the Hen Harrier Locally Led European Innovation Project (EIP) extensive monitoring was carried out across all the six Special Protection Areas (SPA) designated for breeding Hen Harrier in Ireland by the Golden Eagle Trust (unpublished). Overlapping data was also recieved from the NPWS via contracted work undertaken in the Slieve Bloom Mountains SPA for a separate research project. IRSG Monitoring at several 10km Squares provided some additional information, however submissions to national monitoring effort could be vastly improved in light of the extensive commercial and research based monitoirng of Hen Harrier currently being undertaken in Ireland.

The final nest records and outcomes for Hen Harrier in 2018 are still under going analysis (January 2018) and will be uploaded on the digital version shortly.

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
TBC	-	-	-	-

SPIORÓG MHÓR

NORTHERN GOSHAWK

ACCIPITER GENTILIS

The Goshawk inhabits mature woodland, preferring areas near clearings and the forest edge. The species's optimal habitat appears to be areas of farmland interspersed with mature woodlands and forest. Goshawks are generally resident resulting in stable patterns of distribution and occupancy between seasons. There have been large scale increases in range in the UK over the last 20 years.

Goshawks are rare in Ireland, though probably under recorded. A call for indicative early season sightings within the Group in 2018 provided information on 5 possible occupied territories, notably in Bandon, Co. Cork (James O'Neill); Ballinspittle/Garretstown, Co. Cork (Michael O'Donovan); Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim (Dave Hodson); Garry Wood, Ballymoney, Co. Antrim (Thomas Patchell); and, Killeter, Co. Donegal. All these records where individual birds with no evidence of breeding.

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
-	-	-	-	-

No confirmed or possible breeding records received in 2018.

SPIORÓG

SPARROWHAWK

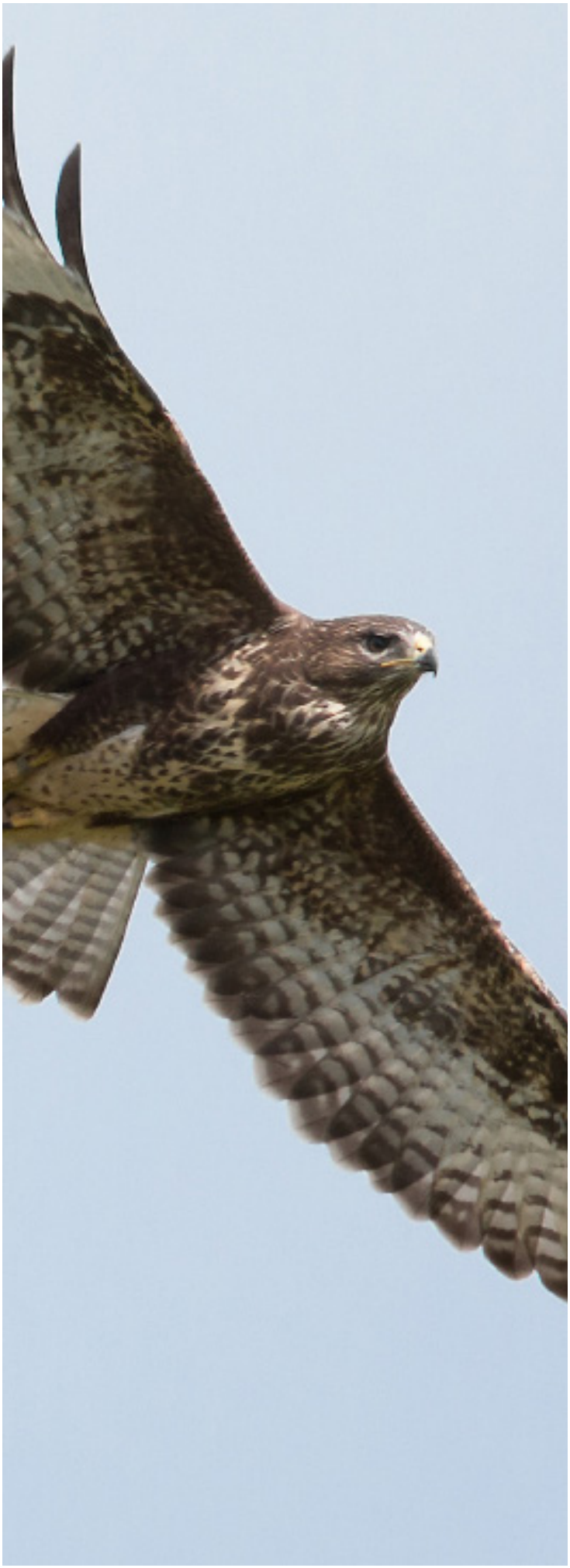
ACCIPTER NISUS

The Sparrowhawk is one of our least studied species in the Republic of Ireland. Due to the fact they are an elusive breeding species, nesting in woodland, moving nest each year. While Sparrowhawk is one of our more common species, and frequently encountered in urban settings, they are under recorded and poorly monitored throughout the country.

A pilot Sparrowhawk Project was intiated in 2015 which collated data mainly from Dublin, Donegal and Wicklow and identified 48 successful breeding sites. Monitoring of sites nationally has decreased since.

66 sightings of Sparrowhawk were submitted to the Group in 2018. The following tables summarise Sparrowhawk Breeding records for 2018:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
4	-	-	1	2



CLAMHÁN

COMMON BUZZARD

BUTEO BUTEO

The re-colonisation of the Common Buzzard throughout Ireland, is a true success story. Initially, this expansion was primarily concentrated in the eastern half of the country, as well as Donegal and Northern Ireland with large gaps along the western seaboard.

We received 18 breeding records for the Common Buzzard in 2018. These records are from several areas around the country, as the Buzzard is now confirmed as breeding in all counties including Beara Peninsula and North Kerry. Many of these records came from the IRSG sightings database. Given the abundance of Buzzard across the country, final data is not available as yet (January 2019) and will be updated shortly. A total of 348 Buzzard sightings were also submitted/collated in 2018.

The following tables summarising Buzzard Breeding records for 2018 will be updated shortly:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
TBC	-	-	-	-

CÓIRNEACH

OSPREY

PANDION HALIAETUS

In Europe, the distribution of Ospreys is largely northern and eastern. Over 90% of the breeding population occurs in Sweden, Finland and Russia.

Colour leg rings and satellite tagging has shown that most Ospreys seen in Ireland today are from the expanding Scottish breeding population, now holding over 200 territorial pairs. A proportion of Scottish Ospreys pass south through Ireland each autumn (July to October) and return north each spring (March- June) en route to and from their wintering grounds in West Africa. These migrants seem to favour several corridors in Ireland, including (1) down the east coast, (2) down the River Bann and on to the Lough Erne system and the River Shannon basin and (3) down through Lough Swilly and Lough Foyle in the north-west and on to the great lakes of Mayo and Galway.

The number of sightings over the last 15 years has steadily increased. Just over 40 sightings of Osprey were recorded in 2018, slightly down from c. 50 and 60 in 2017 & 2016 respectively. Osprey are most consistently recorded in Waterford, Wexford, Dublin and Louth. There are no published records of Ospreys nest building in Ireland in recent decades – though an occasional pair has spent the summer here.

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
–	–	–	–	–

No confirmed or possible breeding records received.

POCAIRE GAOITHE

COMMON KESTREL

FALCO TINNUNCULUS

The Kestrel population densities are highest in South-west Ireland, however many regions have recorded a long term decline, possibly linked to the effects of agricultural intensification on farmland habitats and small mammal populations.

A total of 38 breeding records were submitted, all from NPWS staff. A total of 72 Kestrel sightings were also submitted/collated in 2018.

The following table summarises Kestrel Breeding records for 2018:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
36	19	6	13	38

MEIRLIÚN

MERLIN

FALCO COLUMBARIUS

As part of the Merlin Survey, 23, 5 x 5km survey squares in the Merlin SPA network were monitored, six were in the Slieve Aughties, five in Derryveagh & Glendowlan SPA, four each in Owenduff Nephin and Wicklow Mountains SPA, three in Connemara Bog Complex SPA and a single square in Lough Nillan SPA. In total 61 surveyors participated in the survey. Overall, eleven pairs of breeding Merlin were confirmed within the SPA network in 2018, which included five pairs in Connemara, two in Derryveagh and Glendowlan SPA and the Wicklow Mountains and a single pair in the Slieve Aughties and Lough Nillan. A total of 107 Merlin sightings were also submitted/collated in 2018.

The following table summarises Merlin Breeding records for 2018*:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
11	7	-	7	TBC

*Please note the final count data on Merlin is still being analysed and will be updated shortly.

FABHCÚN GORM

PEREGRINE

FALCO PEREGRINUS

The last National Survey in 2017 recored 425 territorial pairs in the Republic. The IRSG Peregrine Steering Group are progressin the analysis and publication of the survey results in 2019.

The level of monitoring was conitnued in certain regions however there is no comparison to the coverage achieved the previous year. 89 territories were monitored in 2018 with several known sites vacant.

A total of 105 Peregrine sightings were also submitted/ collated in 2018.

The following table summarises Peregrine Breeding records for 2018:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
89	-	25	32	TBC

FABHCÚN COILLE

HOBBY

FALCO SUBBUTEO

Most individuals of the species are migratory, with western birds wintering in Africa and others in southern Asia. Birds leave their breeding grounds between August and October, arriving at wintering quarters from late October onwards. The return journey begins in March and April, and breeding territories are occupied again in May and June. Birds are usually seen singly or in pairs or family groups, even on migration, with larger groups being rare except at roosts and especially rich feeding sites. Birds almost always nest in trees, using abandoned nests of other raptors or corvids. Flying insects form the main part of its diet, although birds are often taken in the breeding season

This species is too rare and unobtrusive to be monitored in Ireland. In 2018, as per 2017 only c. 20 sightings were collated / submitted, far lower than the c. 50 sightings of Hobby recorded in 2016. Most records are from during May and June predominantly from several sites in Wicklow and Wexford.

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
–	–	–	–	–

No confirmed or possible breeding records received.

ULCHABHÁN CEANN CAIT

LONG-EARED OWL

ASIA OTUS

This is one of the most poorly monitored Irish species, being very secretive and nocturnal. Only brood size is recorded in sufficient numbers for this species, due to the vocal nature of juveniles. Monitoring for this species is currently too variable to produce any robust trend data.

Targeted survey effort for this species was last undertaken in the North-west region in 2012 using tape lure monitoring under the direction of Aonghus O'Donaill, Irene O'Brien and Joe Shannon under licence by NPWS.

A call for records of vocal Juveniles on social media platforms in 2018 yielded a burst of records argely from residential premises in urban areas across the country. A total of 37 Long-eared Owl sightings were also submitted/ collated in 2018.

The IRSG and BirdWatch Ireland hope to collate histroical and recent data on Long-eared Owl in 2019 to gain a better understanding of their abundance, distribution and ecological requirements to assit with future monitoring.

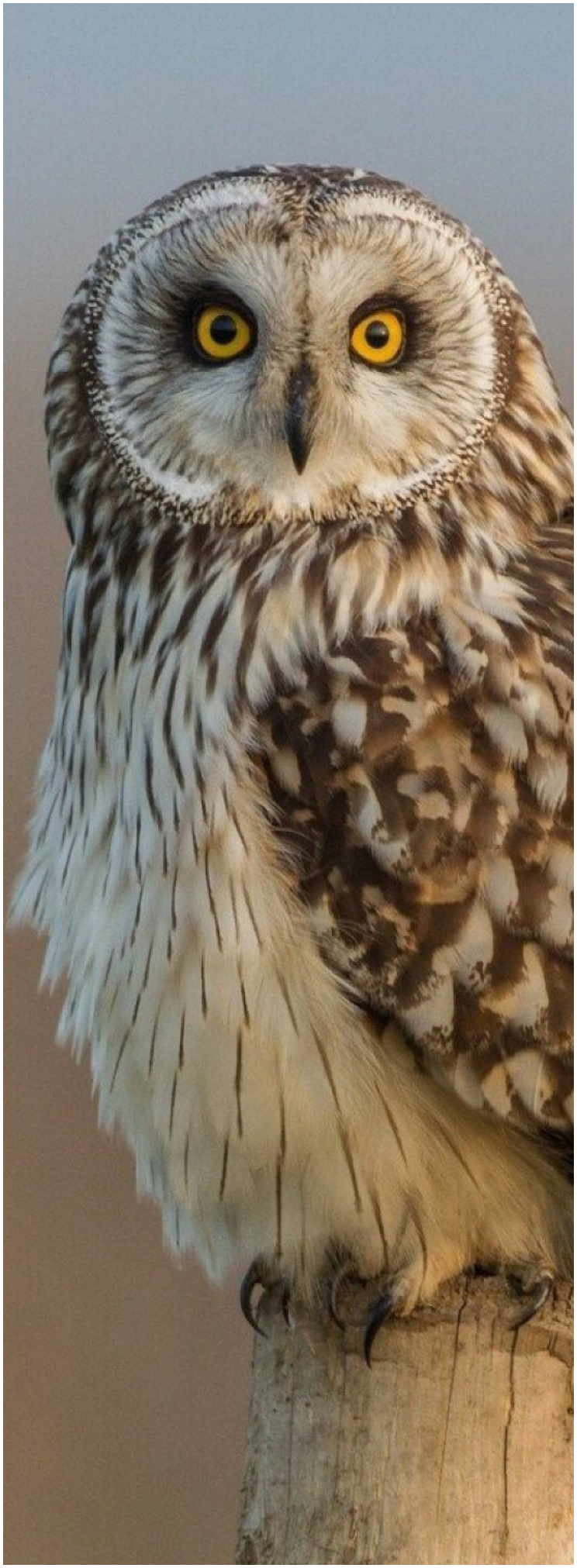
The following table summarises Long-eared Owl Breeding records for 2018:

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
20	8	-	18	31

ULCHABHÁN RÉISC

SHORT- EARED OWL

ASIO FLAMMEUS



Short-eared Owls have a scattered breeding distribution in western Europe, occurring in upland, moorland and heathland areas. In much of its range, the Short-eared Owl is migratory, moving south in winter from northern breeding areas. The species is an opportunistic feeder, heavily reliant upon vole and mice populations, upon which its distribution and nesting success tend to revolve.

This is a very scarce breeding species in Ireland and there is limited data available. The last recorded breeding in the Republic of Ireland was 1985. A total of 49 Short-eared Owl sightings were submitted/collated in 2018 the large majority comprising an influx of migrants late in the autumn.

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
–	–	–	–	–

No confirmed breeding records received.

SCRÉACHÓG REILIGE

BARN OWL

TYTO ALBA

John Lusby summarises Barn Owl monitoring activities in 2018, coordinated by BirdWatch Ireland with input and assistance from a wide network of organisations including NPWS, IRSG and individual surveyors throughout the country. Barn Owl monitoring is carried out under licence to National Parks and Wildlife Service and the British Trust of Ornithology.

Monitoring confirmed 46 pairs in 2018, of which 33 pairs were effectively monitored. Twenty-seven pairs (82%) successfully fledged young and six pairs failed (18%). Barn Owls fledged on average 2.6 young per successful breeding attempt (n = 27, range 1 – 4) and 2.1 young per breeding attempt (n = 33, range = 0 – 4).

A total of 21 Barn Owl sightings were also submitted/ collated in 2018.

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
46	33	11	27	70

FIACH DUBH

RAVEN

CORVUS CORAX

In 2018, 29 Raven breeding records were submitted, a considerable drop of from the numer monitored in 2017 as part of the National Peregrine Survey. There are on-going colour ringing and monitoring projects on Ravens in Wicklow, Sligo, Mayo and Connemara. A further 92 Raven sightings were submitted/collated in 2018.

TERRITORIAL PAIRS	PAIRS WITH EGGS	FAILED PAIRS	SUCCESSFUL	FLEDGED YOUNG
29	20	2		32

OVERVIEW OF THE IRSG

The IRSG are a voluntary organisation committed to the monitoring and conservation of Raptors and Owls in the Republic of Ireland. We depend on the hard work and enthusiasm of fieldworkers in collating and collecting data on Raptor species annually.

The Role of the Raptor Study Group in Ireland

The Irish Raptor Study Group (IRSG) has two primary aims, as stated in our group constitution, namely to (a) promote the conservation and protection of all wild breeding and migratory Raptor species and their habitats in Ireland and (b) encourage research and monitoring of all Raptor species and the publication of such work where appropriate.

Get Involved

Why monitor Raptors? Raptors, as top avian predators, are environmental indicators and the first to be affected by environmental pressures. They are barometers of ecosystem health. There are a variety of ways that you can help IRSG, depending on your skills and interests. Taking part in IRSG surveys is both enjoyable and rewarding. You can contact us through our website www.irsg.ie

Raptor Study Group Membership

The IRSG membership is open to anyone who is interested in the conservation of Irish Raptors. There are two main Membership categories, namely Full Membership and Supporting Membership. Full Members are those that are engaged in Raptor fieldwork and submit data annually (at least a single Raptor nest record annually to the IRSG). Supporting Members are those that contribute a subcription fee annually. The financial contributions made by our Members enable us to deliver the most pressing 'self-directed' work through surveys, monitoring, conferences and training workshops. Apart from merely paying a membership fee, we urge you to go out in the field and collect valuable breeding and non breeding Raptor data.

Data Policy

Personal data form an integral part of any voluntary biological monitoring scheme and it is essential to maintain an audit trail of the individuals who submitted particular records. The IRSG holds many data on the locations of rare and sensitive raptor species. IRSG will seek to ensure that this information is made available to National Parks & Wildlife Service who need such data to ensure that species and sites are adequately protected and only used by the IRSG to further conservation aims and objectives of the Group. The IRSG recognizes that it has a special responsibility to ensure that the datasets that it holds are properly managed and curated. The IRSG will manage such data securely, in line with Data Protection Rules. The IRSG will not sell, distribute or lend personal information or raptor data to third parties. Access to personal and raptor data within the IRSG is restricted to the Secretary and Chairman and not accessible or distributed to Members of the Committee. No data is stored on file hosting or sharing services.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following people contributed nest records to this report:
Dominic Berridge, Sinead Biggane, Ann Bingham, Dermot Breen, Brian Burke, Johnny Byrne, Helen Carty, Micheal Casey, Eoin Connolly, Miriam Crowley, Paidi Cullinan, Liam Doyle, Shay Fennelly, John Fields, Triona Finnen, Ann Fitzpatrick, Fidelma Flannelly, Mark Foley, Kathry Freeman, Laura Gallagher, Ita Gannon, Emma Glanville, Jean Glennon, Ross Hackett, Paulette Hartney, Sophie Hayley, Claire Heardman, John Higgins, Geoff Hunt, Harry Hussey, Sarah Ingham, Stefan Jones, Seamus Joy, Denis Judge, Kieran Kane, Elaine Keegan, Niall T. Keogh, Susan Kirwan, Alan Lauder, Elizabeth Loftus, Aine Lynch, Annette Lynch, Jen Lynch, Emmett Johnson, John Lusby, David Lyons, Alan McCarthy, Brian McCloskey, Dave McDonagh, Emer MacGowan, Emer Magee, Daniel Maloney, Martin Maloney, John Matthews, Siobhan Manning, James McGrath, Eoin McGreal, David McNicholas, Hugh McLindon, Allan Mee, Sue Moles, Jason Monaghan, Tony Murray, Tony Nagle, Barry Nolan, Micheal O'Clery, Irene O'Brien, Aonghus O'Donaill, Andrew O'Donoghue, Barry O'Donoghue, Paul O'Donoghue, Conor O'Keeffe, Patrick O'Shea, Lorcan O'Toole, Margaux Pierrel, Emmett Rees, Marc Ruddock, Micheal Savage, Hubert Servignat, Lorna Sexton, Pat Smiddy, Ray Stephens, Malcom Tanner, Rebecca Teesdale, David Tierney, Cormac Troy, Robert Vaughan, Rob Wheeldon, Andrea Webb, Peter Wolstenholme, Ryan Wilson-Parr, Gordon Young. We would like to extend gratitude to the excellent web resource of Joe Doolan & Eugene Archer at IrishBirding.com. Apologies if anyone has been omitted. This list is still being updated based on 2018 returns (2019/01/26). A revised version will be available shortly.

As always the Red Kite project is dependent on a huge number of volunteers for monitoring in particular Paul Kavanagh, Mark Lewis, Derek O'Brien, Brendan Byrne, Damian Clarke, Ann Fitzpatrick, James Cahill, Niall Harmey, Donal Hogan, Douglas Ruddock, and Lorcán O'Toole provided extensive support and efforts in identifying breeding areas and providing monitoring information during 2018. Many other observers and as always we are hugely grateful to the immense efforts of volunteers and supporters and landowners in monitoring of this population of birds in Ireland. The Red Kite population monitoring and reporting would not be possible without the huge efforts of volunteers and supporters including Marc Ruddock, Paul Kavanagh, Mark Lewis, Brendan Byrne, Bridget Byrne, Sophie Byrne, Ann Fitzpatrick, Damian Clarke, Jason Monaghan, Barry O'Donoghue, Robert Kelly, Keeva Kelly, Oran Kelly, John Byrne, Clare O'Nolan, Gillian Hicks, Michelle Curran, Jack Curran, Alan Lauder, Hugh Thurgate, Sam Rhodes, Lorcan O' Toole, Ronan Hannigan, Richard Nairn, Chris Budde-Petch, Niall Harmey, Derek O'Brien, Brigid Duffy, Richard Nairn, Mick Hetherington, Brendan Black, Phil Moore, Sean Pearce, Paul Larmor, Alan Ferguson, Conrad McGeough, Ciaran Dunne, Nessie Bergin, Eric Quinn, Sinead Cummins, Hans Visser, Stephen Woolsey, Emma Ruddock, Craig Swenarton, James Irons, Jessica Harley, Fingal BWI branch, NPWS, Welsh Kite Trust, KPMG, Burren Bird of Prey Centre, Tayto Park, Coillte, Fingal Leader, Dublin Regional Game Council, LA21. Huge thanks also to the myriad of landowners who welcome the team each year and report sightings. This project and associated monitoring would not be possible without you all. Apologies for any names I have missed – entirely unintentional!

EURAPMON
The Monitoring for Raptors in Europe (EURAPMON) scheme is a new initiative funded by the European Science Foundation to co-ordinate raptor survey and research effort across Europe. The IRSG is widely recognised as the primary non-governmental source for Raptor population data in Ireland. IRSG Committee Member Dr Allan Mee, currently serves as the National EURAPMON Co-ordinator for the Republic of Ireland.

Irish Raptor Study Group

Grúpa Staidéir Éan Creiche na hÉireann