

Nature Conservation in Europe: Approaches and Lessons

Annex IE.3. Examples of Species Protection Measures in Ireland

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The examples below are by way of illustration of work undertaken and are not a comprehensive summary.

As part of the implementation of Ireland's first *National Biodiversity Plan* (DAHG, 2002), and later in response to the CJEU's judgments against Ireland in C-418/04 and C-183/05, a series of species action and threat response plans have been prepared, with priority given to species of highest conservation concern. To date, plans have been prepared for Irish Hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*, endemic to Ireland), Corncrake (*Crex crex*), Pollan (*Coregonus autumnalis*), Irish Lady's-tresses orchid (*Spiranthes romanzoffiana*), Otter (*Lutra lutra*), Kerry Slug (*Geomalacus maculosus*, another species endemic to Ireland), Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*), Killarney Fern (*Trichomanes speciosum*), the nine vesper bat species, Irish Red Grouse (*Lagopus lagopus hibernicus*), cetaceans, the Freshwater Pearl Mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*) (NPWS, 2020a), and, most recently, the Lesser Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*) (NPWS & VWT, 2022). Implementation of the 2009 plan for cetaceans is said by NGOs to have 'stalled' in 2014, and a government 'delivery grid' was last updated in May 2015 (Nature Scorecard, 2018).

To address the CJEU's finding in C-418/04 that Ireland had failed to transpose and apply obligations to protect bird habitats outside the SPA network, the government funded the development and implementation of habitat-based action plans. These group species action plans identified conservation needs and species-specific priorities for ten individual but overlapping groups of birds. Implementation is led by the NGO BirdWatch Ireland, adopting a multi-stakeholder approach. A subsequent prioritisation exercise identified two groups — breeding waders and farmland birds — that would most benefit from management measures. The success of the action plans will be dependent on continued funding for implementation and the broadening of the scope of the implementation phase beyond the selected 'priority' species groups. In parallel to these efforts, and unconnected to C-418/04, programmes to reintroduce three raptor species - Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), White-tailed Sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), and Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*) - have met mixed success (EPA, 2016). The persecution of raptors that led to the local extinction of such species has unfortunately not entirely disappeared; NPWS (2020b) provides an overview of 338 incidents between 2007 and 2019.

More generally, wildlife crime remains of serious concern in Ireland. Wildlife Crime Ireland (2020) maintains an unofficial database of the small number of prosecutions that are pursued (last updated December 2020). Ireland's Green Party Minister for Heritage committed in October 2020 to establish a new Wildlife Crime Unit as part of the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) and launched a joint protocol on wildlife crime between the NPWS and An Garda Síochána (Ireland's police service) in 2021 (DHLGH, 2021), following a 'staggering' increase in 2020 in the number of detected violations of prohibited vegetation cutting during the bird nesting season (O'Keeffe, 2020). However, in 2022 it was reported that plans 'to establish a dedicated Wildlife Crime Unit to crack down on attacks on nature have been dropped and replaced with proposals to increase the number of general wildlife rangers instead' (O'Doherty, 2022). In early 2023 it was reported that NPWS staff 'had successfully prosecuted 31 cases during 2022 and were progressing 43 more', compared 'with 21 successful prosecutions in 2021 and on average just ten a year in the previous decade' (O'Doherty, 2023). The Minister further reported that under the banner of 'wildlife crime operations', 110 NPWS staff were working on wildlife crime, and he promised to increase numbers further (O'Doherty, 2023). However, the Irish Wildlife Trust continues to push for a dedicated wildlife crime unit, arguing that this would be more effective (O'Doherty, 2023).

The first national survey of breeding Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) in Ireland was coordinated by the NPWS between 2015 and 2017 and revealed an estimated population of just 138 pairs, an estimated decline of 96% since 1988–1991 (Curlew Task Force, 2019). This rapid decline suggests that breeding Curlew in Ireland may only have 5–10 years before becoming locally extinct. A Curlew Task Force was established in Ireland in 2017, resulting in an agreed set of recommendations in 2019 (Curlew Task Force, 2019). The Curlew Conservation Programme, operational since 2017, reports annually on progress. In 2021, the ‘Programme focussed on nine of the most important areas in Ireland for breeding Curlew, including the Stack’s Mountains in Kerry, Lough Ree, Roscommon/Mayo, Leitrim, North Monaghan, Donegal, Lough Corrib, Slieve Aughties and Laois/Kildare. In each of these areas, local teams surveyed for Curlew, engaged in nest protection efforts and liaised with landowners. Funding was made available for landowners and communities to engage in efforts on the programme, including habitat improvement works’ (NPWS, 2023).

More than half of Ireland’s 97 wild bee species have suffered substantial declines in their numbers since 1980. In response an All-Ireland Pollinator Plan was initiated by Professor Jane Stout of Trinity College Dublin and Dr Úna FitzPatrick of the National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) as a shared plan of action for all pollinators on the island of Ireland (NBDC, 2015). Over 70 organisations, north and south of the border, agreed to work together to implement the Plan, which has garnered widespread media attention and adoption from civil society and is thus prompting action from many groups and individuals. The surge in public and media interest for protecting pollinators has been a very welcome consequence of the Plan and many positive actions have been taken to provide pollinator-friendly management in, for example, public parks, schools and universities, as part of community projects, and in private gardens. A second iteration of the Plan was published in 2021 (NBDC, 2021).

Other species conservation efforts include, for example, monitoring and conservation efforts by NGOs and the NPWS in relation to Ireland’s bat species (Aughney *et al.*, 2018); Freshwater Pearl Mussel plans drawn up pursuant to the WFD (EPA, 2009); EU LIFE-funded projects aimed at the Roseate Tern (*Sterna dougallii*); Freshwater Pearl Mussel (KerryLIFE); Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), Merlin (*Falco columbarius*), Atlantic Salmon and Brook Lamprey (*Lampetra planeri*) (Raptor LIFE); and a pond-creation and captive-breeding and release project for the Natterjack Toad (*Epidalea calamita*) between the NPWS and Fota Wildlife. Most recently, €4.3 million in EU funding has been awarded to a consortium led by the NPWS for a LIFE project focused on improving the conservation status of the Corncrake in Ireland, a Birds Directive Annex I species once synonymous with the Irish countryside whose population has declined by 85% since the 1970s (Corncrake LIFE, 2023).

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