

# Bird diversity in Irish forests

Ireland's forest estate has altered significantly over time through the actions of man. Far fewer specialist bird species are found here compared with mainland Europe, for several reasons including island biogeography, and the distinct west to east declining gradient in bird species richness across Europe. Bird life in coniferous forests in Ireland is less varied than that of broadleaved woodlands, though both are important habitats for birds. Appropriate management of our forests can significantly increase their suitability for birds, and allow us to maximise forest bird diversity in Ireland.



## GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER

(*Dendrocopos major*)

Absent from Ireland for hundreds of years, the Great Spotted Woodpecker has recently re-colonised Co. Wicklow. There are now at least 17 breeding pairs in the country, an exciting development following such a long absence. Woodpeckers are 'woodland engineers' and several animals benefit from the crevices and holes that they create. They are found predominantly in Oak woodlands, where they feed on insects from deadwood, and on tree seeds and birds' eggs.



## HEN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*)

Hen Harriers are among our rarest and most distinctive birds of prey, and have become much rarer in recent centuries. Traditionally regarded as birds of open upland habitats, many now nest and hunt in young conifer plantations, taking advantage of the abundance of shrub cover and prey items such as small birds and mammals.



## TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*)

These small birds are closely associated with woodland habitats in Ireland, reaching the highest densities in native broadleaved woodlands. As their name suggests, these birds 'creep' vertically up trunks and branches of trees in search of food. They feed on insects and spiders which they pick out from crevices in tree bark with their fine, curved bill, sometimes supplementing their diet with conifer seeds during winter months.



## CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*)

This is one of the few forest specialist bird species in Ireland. They are birds of coniferous woodlands where they breed in mature plantations, and feed mainly on seeds from conifer trees, for which their crossed bills are ideally suited. They are an irruptive species, being numerous and widespread in some years and less so in others. Though difficult to spot in woodlands, they can be seen all year round, mostly arriving in late March and departing in August and September.



## JAY (*Garrulus glandarius hibernicus*)

Like Coal Tits, Irish Jays belong to a subspecies found only in Ireland, and are particularly associated with Oak trees. Although brightly coloured, pink, white and blue, they are secretive birds and are seldom seen in forests. They are more often heard, and have a raucous, high-pitched call that sounds like tearing wet cloth.



## WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*)

Willow Warblers are common summer visitors to Ireland, and breed in woodland and scrubby habitats. Closely related to chiffchaffs, they have a very different song, which is one of the characteristic sounds of upland Irish woodland habitats in Spring. This species has benefited hugely from the extensive establishment of conifer plantations in the Irish landscape.



## BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*)

Buzzards usually live in landscapes with a mixture of woodland and farmland, but most often breed in woodland. These large birds of prey feed on carion, small mammals and birds. Up until a decade ago they were absent from much of Ireland, due to persecution. Increased protection of birds of prey has enabled Buzzards to re-colonise much of their former range, and they are now rapidly spreading from the north and east and breeding successfully in the south of Ireland.



## DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*)

These birds use scrubby undergrowth in forests where they feed on insects and seeds taken from the ground. There has been a long term decline in their numbers in Ireland. These ordinary looking birds, also known as hedge sparrows, are renowned in scientific literature for their unusually varied breeding habits, involving several possible mating systems with multiple female and/or male partners!



## CHIFFCHAFF

(*Phylloscopus collybita*)

These small, brown birds are found most often in open woodland and young plantations throughout Ireland. They feed on insects and other invertebrates, and can be seen all year round, but most arrive in late March and depart in August and September.



## BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*)

These familiar birds are the only thrush species in Ireland where males and females have very different plumages. Blackbirds feed mostly on insects, spiders and earthworms found on the ground, and in winter supplement their diet with berries. They breed between March and September and nest in shrubs and small trees in many habitats, including woodland.



## COAL TIT (*Periparus ater hibernicus*)

Irish Coal Tits are one of just four subspecies of birds found only in Ireland, two of which occur only in forests (the other is the Jay). Coal Tits are common in many Irish habitats, but are most abundant in conifer plantations where they nest in holes in wood, stone walls and on the ground. Like Goldcrests, Coal Tits feed on small insects and spiders in the forest canopy.



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## BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)

Blue Tits are common birds, often seen in gardens, that also live in forests and woodlands. Like the Coal Tit, Blue Tits also nest in holes, but are more restricted to holes in trees, and so benefit from older woodland and trees.