

BLOCK 11



WETLAND BIRDS



BLOCK 11.

Wetland birds

Wetlands in the broad sense of the term are the areas with landscape characterised by the presence of extensive shallow water reservoirs. These include, among others: marshes, fens, bogs, swamps and turloughs. These are areas where the water level is above the level of the ground, and thus covering vegetation. Wetland plants are adapted for partial immersion. Among them, we can find high clumpy rushes formed mainly by sedges, reed manna grass *Glyceria maxima* and reed. In the higher areas, there are often clumps of willow shrubbery surrounded by lush herbaceous vegetation. The nature of the vegetation depends on the elevation of the area above the water level. The plants typical of these areas include: marsh marigold *Caltha palustris*, buckbean *Menyanthes trifoliata*, common horsetail *Equisetum arvense*, lots of grasses and mosses. The swamps are inhabited by a specific, rich group of birds, mainly from anatidae, snipes, gulls, terns, streams and various songbirds.

From the ecological point of view, these areas are homes of many rare animal species. They also play the role of natural biological filters that retain impurities and also a water retention function, stabilising the local water balance. At the same time, they belong to the most endangered types of environments, which are endangered by the intensification of agriculture, regulation of rivers or runoffs of harmful substances on a scale exceeding the self-regulatory capacity of these areas. Wetlands, as habitats very sensitive to water shortages, quickly disappear after drainage and regulation of rivers to prevent their floods. They are also adversely affected by the construction of reservoirs dams, which by preventing periodic river floods cause drying of the swamps below them.

It is enough to observe puddles after heavy rains, in order to imagine very easily how a swamp can arise and how quickly it can disappear. After evaporating first become muddy and then gradually dry up. Ireland has many extensive areas which are recognized as areas important for the protection of birds on a European scale but between 1990 and 2006, it is estimated that there has been a 10% decrease in area covered by wetlands in Ireland (CORINE).

Species of birds inhabiting marshy areas in Ireland include the marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, the ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, the swan *Cygnus*, various species of ducks, the little egret *Ardea garzeta*, grebes *Podicipedidae*, cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo*, and songbirds such as common reed bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*, Eurasian reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and sedge warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*.

It is worth paying attention to the characteristic adaptations in the construction of many wetland birds to this specific environment. These birds have a long, straight or slightly curved beak that can penetrate the mud without fear of spraying the nostrils. The beak is innervated and provided with sensory bodies, which facilitates the location of the victim in the ground (the birds cannot look in the mud), and the soft end of the beak acts like pliers, with which birds such as Eurasian curlew *Numenius arquata* or Common snipe *Gallinago extract* different invertebrates from the substrate. Long and sometimes very long legs (the little egret, Eurasian curlew *Numenius*



arquata) facilitate wading in shallow water.

In the aquatic environment, birds deal with the water surface in different ways. Different birds have separate morphological traits which allow them to feed on separate sources of food. Consider the mallard duck *Anas platyrhynchos*! The beak is wide, flattened, covered with sensitive skin, with overlapping lamellar appendages at the edges. These birds, searching for food in water, pass water between the plates, filtering out invertebrates and plants that constitute their food. This beak therefore acts like a sieve.

Observation of nature in wetlands provides many adventures, but it is not possible to move around independently without a guide who knows the area well. Moving around swamps and peat bogs can be dangerous, so you should only explore during a specific time of the year and under expert supervision. Information on whether there is a possibility to visit a designated wetland can be obtained in the National Parks and Wildlife Service (<https://www.npws.ie/protected-sites>). Wet meadows are relatively safe to explore, however, it is important to remember to buy suitable waterproof footwear and clothing appropriate to the weather conditions. Of course, children should only go when accompanied by an adult. It is also worth remembering that in areas with high humidity, there are many mosquitoes, gnats and other insects, so you should take appropriate protective measures.

If you are interested in the vegetation found in wetlands, it is best to visit these places in the late spring period, because it is the time of flowering most species of plants, which will make it easier to find and recognize them. If there is a pond or lake in these places, it is worth



FIG. 1. SNIPE
Źródło: Płxabay

paying attention to which plants are closer and which are further from the shore of the water reservoir. We will then be able to determine which of them prefer more or less boggy terrain. However, if the objects of interest are birds, then we should go on a trip a little earlier - preferably in May, when most species of these areas already settled breeding sites. Small birds sing intensely when designating their territories. In addition, most of them have colorful plumage at that time. However, we must remember that during this period the area

may be more hydrated due to the last of the winter-spring rains. Of course, we must behave in such a way as not to scare the birds and not stay too long in the place where we suspect or know that there is a nest with eggs or chicks. Startled birds often leave nests in which there are eggs, and even chicks that have just hatched. If we move in an area full of ponds or lakes, let us pay attention to their size, the nature of the shoreline and the surrounding vegetation. We will then be able to determine which of them are more attractive to birds and why. Larger and more diverse reservoirs, give better opportunities for hiding and foraging. Similar observations can be made by moving over riverside areas - the more the coastline is varied, and diverse the vegetation, the greater the probability of encountering different species of birds or other



animals.

Naturally, unregulated rivers flow, meandering along the way, which significantly extends their course. In addition, bends and shallows form along the way, often transforming into islands, and characteristic willow bushes appear on the banks. All this creates excellent conditions for aquatic animals. In addition, such watercourses may spread over riverside areas which retain excess water and thus reducing the risk of flooding on other riverside areas inhabited by humans. Therefore, there is a need to preserve such natural retention reservoirs.

Periodic flooding of rivers is a recurring phenomenon, therefore construction of houses should be avoided on river areas adjacent to the river embankments, treating them as natural flood control reservoirs. In 1971 in Iran, in Ramsar, an international convention (World Wetlands Convention) was signed to protect wetlands on earth and make people aware of their importance (including economic). The Convention has so far been ratified by 123 states, including Ireland in 1985. The anniversary of the signing of the Convention, which falls on February 2, is now celebrated as the World Wetlands Day.

Equally important for nature conservation are river valleys, especially riverine forests that are biodiversity-friendly tropical forests of Europe. Unfortunately, the situation of many valuable wetland areas in river valleys is deteriorating, as much of it is not sufficiently protected. As a result of drainage works, intensification of agriculture and progressing urbanization processes, they are destroyed. A serious problem in the protection of wetland areas is often their unregulated ownership status, hindering protective activities, as well as the need for active forms of protection, such as grazing and mowing, which in turn prevents the overgrowing and moulting of these areas. At the moment, worldwide riverside wetlands are particularly threatened by river regulation projects such as damming for water supply to human populations.

Maintaining the proper state of wetlands is important for maintaining biodiversity, as a refuge for many animals that have specialised in the use of food resources acquired in this environment. Drying these areas will result in the extinction of a huge number of plant and animal species. Wetlands are also important for the human population, as an important resource of fresh water, which we are missing. The Ramsar Convention Secretariat warns that unless measures to protect wetlands are intensified, by 2050 in at least 60 countries the situation will worsen. with a shortage of water. At the same time, the threat of floods will increase significantly at this time. Although efforts to protect wetlands have increased in recent years, from around 600-900 million hectares of wetland ecosystems that collect fresh water in the world, only 60-70 million hectares, or less than 10%, are protected. Over half of the wetlands in the world have been destroyed in the last 100 years. At the same time, the consumption of fresh water resources has increased six-fold, whilst the human population has doubled. Today, over 800 million people in the world do not have access to clean fresh water. If people's approach to wetlands does not change, by 2050 2 out of 3 people in the world will live in such conditions. (Source: Ramsar Convention of February 2, 1971).

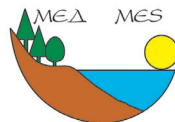






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BirdWatch Ireland is a non-governmental organization with a public benefit status, dealing with the protection of wild birds and the places where they live. The aim of the Society is to preserve the natural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations. BirdWatch Ireland is the Irish partner of the global federation of bird protection societies - BirdLife International.



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