

ON THE WETLANDS

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KINGFISHER: The beautiful kingfisher is found along slow moving rivers and canal, where they breed in a tunnel excavated in a riverbank. During the breeding season they are resident along the same stretch of water, but usually all that is seen of this species is a flash of vivid blue as the bird flies away. If you're lucky enough to find a perch, you can watch it freeze motionless before darting into the water to bring up minnow, stickleback, chub or large insects.



2

EUROPEAN EEL: The European eel was once a very common and widespread species, found in rivers and lakes of all sizes. Irish eels spawn in the Sargasso Sea in the Atlantic Ocean and their young return to spend years in our rivers before migrating downstream again to return to their breeding grounds. Changes to river catchments and the erection of weirs and dams have led to a severe decline in populations, so much so, they are now critically endangered in Ireland.

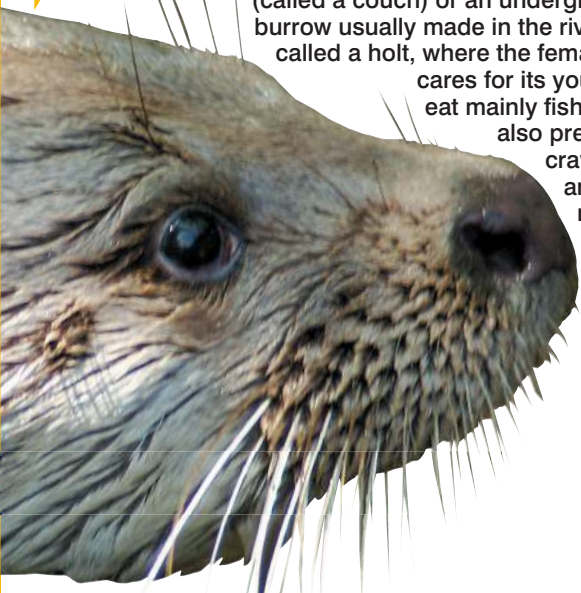
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DAUBENTON'S BAT: Daubenton's Bat is also called the 'water bat' for it flies low over the water's surface, hunting for mayflies, caddisflies and midges. It also sometimes scoops prey off the surface of the water with its large feet. Daubenton's bats roost under stone bridges, in ruins, cannal tunnels, trees and damp caves.

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OTTER: Ireland supports a very healthy population of otters, and signs of them can be found along almost any stream, river or lakeshore. Both males and females are territorial and can spend much of the time on their own. An otter usually has a number of resting sites within its territory, which can be either a hidden refuge above ground (called a couch) or an underground burrow usually made in the riverbank called a holt, where the female otter cares for its young. Otters eat mainly fish but will also prey on frogs, crayfish, birds and small mammals.



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COMMON FROG: The Common Frog is the only species of frog found in Ireland and it is protected in the European Union because its population has decreased over much of the territory, but not in Ireland. In spring frogs produce vast quantities of spawn, one of the first signs of spring. Tadpoles hatch and grow from April to May before turning into froglets and leaving the pond in summer.



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Situated as it is on the edge of the Atlantic, the Irish climate is dominated by moist warm air moving in from the Atlantic and falling as rain. Each year, about one metre of rain falls in the east of the country, up to 1.5 metres in the west, and upland areas can receive up to two metres of rainfall. That is a lot of water, and how this water flows and settles in the landscape, has determined the quality and diversity of much of our wildlife.

Wetlands come in many forms. The most familiar are the thousands of kilometres of rivers and more than 12,000 lakes that are strewn across the country. Along the western seaboard and on mountains there are wonderful expanses of blanket bog; a habitat that have been treated as utilitarian in Ireland but is a very scarce habitat globally.

But this is only the start; there are at least 33 different types of freshwater wetlands that support unique assembles of plants and animals, and perhaps the most special of them all are the 300 or so spring-fed temporary lakes, called turloughs, that occur in the west of Ireland and that are virtually unique to Ireland.

Generations have seen the naturally flowing (and flooding) River Shannon as a problem that needs to be tamed, rather than what it really is, namely one of Europe most precious and majestic naturally flowing rivers, a vital cultural and heritage artery for Ireland.

And in winter, it supports tens of thousands of wildfowl and waders, a common heritage we share with other northern latitude countries. We also share our European eel heritage with the breeding grounds in the Sargasso Sea far off in the western Atlantic.

Some of our clear flowing rivers support populations of the Freshwater Pearl Mussel, Ireland's longest living animal. Ireland is the last remaining European country where the native Freshwater White-clawed Crayfish is not threatened by other alien crayfish species, though this may be changing.

Ireland is one of the best places in Europe to encounter otters as we have a healthy population. Surveys of this species, where people go looking for evidence of otters' spraints (droppings) along river banks, usually find they are far more common than expected.

Reports are often sent to the National Biodiversity Data Centre of sightings of otter in rivers flowing through towns, where animals feed happily seemingly oblivious to passers-by.

Flashes of the intense blue of a kingfisher as it flies past, or the extraordinary mating ritual of the Great-crested Grebe resplendent with its magnificent head gear, brightens up any walk along a river or a lake.

It is always worth slowing down when visiting a wetland in order to get a better feel for the wonderful diversity of life that wetlands support. Even a cursory search of riverbank vegetation will reveal a whole world of insect diversity.

Beetles, weevils, spiders and a multitude of other creepy crawlies are there to explore and fascinate, even if it is only the most expert that would ever attempt to name them all. However, rising above them all will be the beautiful damselflies and dragonflies that adorn the water's edge, species that can with practice be easily identified.

It is often in the evening that rivers come alive. One of the most extraordinary sights of nature must be the emergence of the short-lived mayfly on some midland lakes and rivers, provoking a feeding frenzy in trout.

It is one of the few occasions that people get an insight into the hidden but fabulously diverse ecosystem of our water bodies, an ecosystem which provides society with so many, largely hidden benefits. These benefits we refer to as 'ecosystem goods and services', and there is a long list of such services.

They include provision of fresh clean water, nutrient cycling, soil formation, water purification, erosion and flooding regulation, recreational and tourism services. The quality of these hidden ecosystem services can often be assessed by looking at the wildlife assemblages that different wetlands support; certain indicator species serve as proxies of ecosystem health.

Dr Liam Lysaght, Director of the National Biodiversity Data Centre



Picture: Brian Nelson

MARSH MARIGOLD: Marsh marigold is a large and conspicuous yellow flower that grows in ponds, marshes, damp meadows, ditches and wet woodland. It is one of the first plants to flower in April, providing a beautiful splash of colour when there is little else in flower. In parts of the country it is called 'May' flower, for it was commonly in flower at the end of April on May Eve (April 30).

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BANDED DEMOISELLE: The Banded Demoiselle is one of two species of demoiselle found in Ireland. It flies in May to August and is found along slow-flowing rivers, streams and drains that have beds of silt and marginal vegetation. Males are often seen perched on bankside vegetation where they wait to attract passing females. Picture: Brian Nelson



ORANGE-TIP BUTTERFLY: The Orange-tip is one of the earliest butterflies to emerge each year. Its emergence coincides with the flowering season of the cuckooflower, for it lays its single orange egg on this plant. Orange-tip is associated with damp ground, for this is where the cuckooflower grows. The male is unmistakable as it has bright orange tips to its wings, but the females lack orange and can be difficult to separate from other species of white butterfly.

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Butterfly picture: Liam Lysaght
Flower picture: Zoë Devlin

GIVING BIODIVERSITY A HELPING HAND: WAYS YOU CAN HELP

- Allow wildflowers to grow around the farm.
- Retain any wet, waterlogged land.
- Create a pond with shallow margins.
- Reduce the use of pesticides.
- Plant native trees and shrubs.
- Plant pollinator friendly perennial plants.
- Leave patches of nettles to grow.

Pictures: iStockphoto unless specified