

Where to watch

By **Alex Copland**



Top 5 sites:

Turraun Nature Reserve. – Tom Egan (Bord na Móna)

1 Little Brosna (Ashton's) Callows

Target species: Greenland White-fronted Goose, Black-tailed Godwit, Garganey

Access: The Little Brosna Callows are best viewed from minor public roads running parallel to the River Little Brosna on its northern side between New Bridge (next to the Angler's Rest pub) and Victoria Lock. If scanning fields from this road ensure that cars are well off the road, and do not block any gates.

Ashton's Callow hide (which is maintained by the Tipperary Branch of BirdWatch Ireland) is accessed from the R348 Borrisokane-Cloghan Road. Park adjacent to the Angler's Rest and walk south to the first road on the right. Take this road past two houses and, where the track turns sharp right, go straight ahead through the gate and follow the path as it meanders through the woodland, out onto the open bog and back into woodland around the hide. This track can be flooded in winter, so wellies are recommended.

Habitats: Predominantly lowland wet grasslands, which are flooded in winter. Some stubble fields also provide interest.

Birds: Winter is the best time of year to view this site. Large flocks (1,000+) of Black-tailed Godwit and over 100 Whooper Swans and Greenland White-fronted Geese are regularly seen, as are thousands of Wigeon, Teal, Lapwing and Golden Plover and significant flocks of Pintail and Shoveler. Scarcer birds can also be found at this time: Little Egret is increasingly regular and rarities such as Green-winged Teal have been recorded.

If the water levels are right, the callows can be excellent in spring for passage waders such as Whimbrel. Late-staying Black-tailed Godwit can be seen in breeding plumage in April, when Spotted Redshank and Ruff may also be seen. Garganey have become almost annual, and Marsh Harriers are regularly recorded. Rarities in recent years have included Common Crane and Long-Billed Dowitcher.

The New Bridge over the River Little Brosna at the Angler's Rest is a good location for Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail, and Dipper has bred here in recent years.

Alex Copland

Whinchat



2 Shannon Callows

Target species: Corncrake, Whinchat, Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank

Access: In Offaly, access to the callows is easiest at Clonmacnois, Shannonbridge, Shannon Harbour and Banagher. Most of the callows have tracks for tractor access, and these can be used by birdwatchers on foot. However, the callows are privately-owned farmland and, due to the risks of disturbing or trampling ground-nesting birds, please do not walk through the grasslands, and keep dogs on a lead.

Habitats: The Shannon Callows are the natural floodplain of the River Shannon between Lough Ree in the north and Lough Derg at the southern end. The majority of the callows comprises lowland wet grasslands that are either grazed during summer or left for hay, which is mown in the autumn. The callows in winter can range from being almost dry to being under several feet of water, depending on rainfall.

Birds: The Shannon Callows are one of the last remaining refuges of breeding Corncrakes in Ireland. Snipe can be heard drumming in the evening when listening for Corncrakes, as can other summer visitors such as Sedge and Grasshopper Warblers or the very rare Quail or Spotted Crake. During the day it is worth looking out for waders such as Lapwing, Redshank and Curlew, which all still breed on the callows. Whinchat and Stonechat can be seen perched on fence-posts or tall vegetation in the grasslands during May and June, and Great-crested Grebe can be seen on the river.

The whole landscape changes with the winter floods. At this time of year, thousand-strong flocks of Wigeon, Golden Plover and Lapwing are not unusual, interspersed with smaller numbers of Whooper Swan, Pintail, Shoveler, Teal, Dunlin, Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit. These birds range up and down the river so no one place can guarantee birds. Any of the minor roads that pass along the callows' edge are well worth investigating, and the callows at Shannon Harbour are often very productive. Ruff are regular in small numbers, and occasional rarities such as American Wigeon can be found amongst the larger flocks.

Pádraig Kavanagh



Greenland White-fronted Geese at Annagh, Ashton's Callow