

DONEGAL WILDLIFE: *A regularly updated pictorial narrative of the wildlife around Raphoe, Donegal*

<http://www.donegal-wildlife.blogspot.com>

THE WAY I'VE COME

It is now 12 years since I started blogging about the wildlife in my local patch, and I think it would be worthwhile to summarise the findings to date.

I began in 2003 with my first digital camera, a Fuji 2800z, and began to photograph and identify the local plants on a particular hedgerow here: <http://homepage.eircom.net/~hedgerow>



My first discoveries were:

- that there were more plants than I anticipated (around 90 species).
- what I had previously thought was a single species was sometimes actually two, three, or more different species.

So in the first year, I discovered that I had a rich local environment but also that I had much to learn.

In the second year, I began to look at the insects as well as the plants, and I took notice of some of the larger fungi as well. I also began to extend the area of survey to include mixed woodland and a river system. I also got my second camera, a Fuji s7000, which enabled me to get much more detailed images of insects.

This extended geographic area is documented in:

<http://homepage.eircom.net/~hedgerow2> and this blog ran until 2008, when I switched to the current format on blogspot:
<http://www.donegal-wildlife.blogspot.com>

My main discoveries during this time were:

- Different habitats contain different species
- Species interact in many different ways
- There is a lot we don't know about our wildlife
- Wildlife is important for our survival
- Documentation to assist with identifications can be out of date, incomplete or hard to find
- There is some uncertainty about the identity of some species
- Things are changing over time
- Soil type governs which species can be found in a particular place
- It's complex out there
- I could, and did, add species to the Irish list

Some of this all seems so trivial now, but during this time I was building up an understanding of the complex network of species that go to make up our wildlife. I also learned that this complexity is not widely understood, and that this lack of understanding is a serious problem for the survival of our wildlife, and ultimately for us as a species.

As a generalist recorder, I try to identify everything that I find. I was constantly told by specialists that I must find my niche and focus on particular groups, since nobody can do it all. But I find everything interesting, and if I ignore a particular group, then I'm leaving gaps in my knowledge. It is true that specialisation is the key to gaining full understanding of a group, but I like the fact that I can delve into flowering plants or wasps or fungi or spiders or whatever group as and when I like. I thrive on variety and switching my focus keeps things fresh for me. An additional benefit of my 'pan-group' recording is the overview that I get: specialists have a detailed view of their own group, but can be quite unaware of related events in others.

At first, I published my blogs as an information resource to show what was out there (a kind of scrapbook), but I quickly realised (or was forced to realise) that formal recording is important: we need to know what's out there. So I began to join various recording schemes and I submit data to these. (I am still creating retrospective formal records from the days before I started to make them, so older records will continue to surface as time permits). But I began to realise that my information was also being used as an educational resource, and I switched the emphasis of much of my text away from formal fact towards a more educational and instructive format.

The internet has been vital in a number of ways. First of all, it's a place to store my text and images in a place where anyone has access to them. Secondly, there are many on-line forums where experts gather together to discuss various groups. So it is relatively easy to find experts and get help with identifications. Thirdly, I can email images to people anywhere at the press of a button. Communication has never been easier. Central databases of national records are also available, and this lets us see distribution maps for species. This can be helpful in determining whether a potential identification is reasonable, or if further work (validation) needs to be done before a record would be acceptable.

Records are maintained in a single, central, database per country (I submit records to both Ireland and Northern Ireland) and submitted records need to be validated before being added to the reference database and being made publicly available. Validators are people who can assess the likelihood of a submitted record being correct, or whether further evidence (photograph or perhaps a specimen) is required. Validators tend to specialise in one or more groups, such as flies, fungi, bryophytes, flowering plants, spiders or beetles and basically act as filters to increase the reliability of data.

On a couple of occasions, I have contacted data centres to ask who the validator is for a particular group only to be told "actually, that would be you". It is almost frightening to realise that some of the top-level expertise is held by absolute amateurs like myself, but this is actually a reflection of the lack of investment (actually,

reduction in investment) by governments in professionals to hold positions where this expertise would naturally reside. This short-sightedness is another indicator that the importance of our wildlife is not understood.

I suppose one of the most surprising discoveries that I have made over the years is that there is still a degree of uncertainty no matter in which direction you choose to look. The vast majority of specimens can be readily identified from reasonably easy to obtain reference books, but I have found that when it comes to identification of some specimens I inevitably end up looking for an obscure paper from some journal or other. Once the paper has been secured, and I look for further advice or expertise, I can find that the number of people who can assist me further can be counted on the fingers of one hand. This is alarming, and might sound like a complaint, but it simply shows that we are walking a tightrope: our wildlife is complex and we don't have sufficient interest or resources to be competent enough to understand that complexity. Sometimes, we are left with 'opinions': an identification depends on who you decide to follow or believe.

So why the worry? Putting it simply, we are constantly making decisions about whether to build houses and businesses on green-field sites, brown-field sites, woodland, sites of special scientific interest, bog and so on and we are basing these decisions on incomplete information. We don't know enough about our wildlife, and we are certainly not competent enough to know that we are making the correct decisions. Pressure from industry, agriculture, building development and lack of understanding (or even basic interest) by politicians is putting us in a place that fills me with dread.

The simple fact is that our wildlife species interact with each other in complex, critical and fascinating ways. In turn, our wildlife interacts with us in complex and vital ways: we are just one species in the web. Until we fully understand our dependency on wildlife, we will continue to blunder down a badly-lit path towards something that frightens me.

So what can we do?

I intend to continue my research into the relationships between organisms: this is the area that interests me most. So I will continue to look at parasitica, fungi, leaf-miners and galls in particular. These are all good examples of species interactions, and are all areas which need further study.

I have very much enjoyed participating in the Heritage Council's Heritage in Schools program, which brings heritage experts into schools, exposing pupils to a wider range of information and, hopefully, stimulating long-term interest and involvement.

My intention is to share as much of my work as possible (budget and equipment permitting) and I aim to participate in as many field trips as I can squeeze into the workable part of the year. The winter months will be used for research and 'back-

office' work whilst our wildlife is hiding away.

I had no idea where I was going when I started to write this piece. But it seems this is where I ended up. Please keep looking in.

STUART DUNLOP

"So what's the image?" I hear you ask.



It's a moth which has been killed by the parasitic fungus *Cordyceps tuberculata*, which is an extremely rare species, on the RDB list as Vulnerable D2. This specimen was found in Co. Cork and is the first Irish record. There are only 23 other records in the Fungal Records database and they are mostly from the east of England. I rather suspect this is a continental species, since most records are coastal, and it's possible that the victims were migrants. This is, however, pure speculation on my part.

The Irish Red Data Book is a list of plant and animal species that are under threat and are legally protected. The lists of these protected species are available in PDF format on the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) website.

Creating the Red Data Book was inspired by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) global Red List of Threatened Species.