

Ground Nesting Birds

In Wicklow Mountains National Park

by Eleanor Sutherland, Education Guide, WMNP

As the Covid-19 restrictions are relaxing, we are entering a time of increasing activity on the hills. The lockdown was a period of relative peace for wildlife. I have noticed that many species of all varieties have become accustomed to diminished human activity and we have all been delighted by the unusual sightings we come across on our walks and in our gardens. As the level of human traffic on the hills increases over the early summer period, it will be important to pay heed to the possible presence of nest sites that may be closer to areas that are frequented by human recreation use than in previous years.

There are many species of ground nesting birds in Ireland. The fact that they build their nest sites directly on the ground makes them very vulnerable to predation and other threats such as wildfires and large walking groups. Some species are quite rare now and we do not often come across them, such as the Curlew, Corncrake, Grey partridge and Red Grouse. These are all on the Red List – species of the highest conservation concern.

Birds that are in danger of decline are listed with a traffic light system. Those that are listed Red are at high risk, and are considered endangered. In Ireland, the main reason for their decline is habitat loss. Ground nesting birds that are on the Amber List such as Hen harrier, Skylark, Snipe and Meadow pipit can be found in upland regions. Little tern, Ringed plover and Oystercatcher nest on the ground by the coast. You may come across these species while out for a walk.

What can we do to help ground nesting birds?

Keeping dogs leashed of course, goes without saying. You can also pay closer attention to where you are walking. Please take note of any bird activity and if you see a bird acting in an unusual manner, retreat quietly. If you hunt around for a nest site, or that perfect photo opportunity you may disturb the birds to the extent that they will abandon their nests. Staying mindful of the species that call the hillsides their home will benefit us all with increased sightings of our Irish wildlife in the years to come.

If you do happen to spot a rare species, we would love to hear from you.

You can also report your sightings to: <https://www.biodiversityireland.ie/record-biodiversity/>

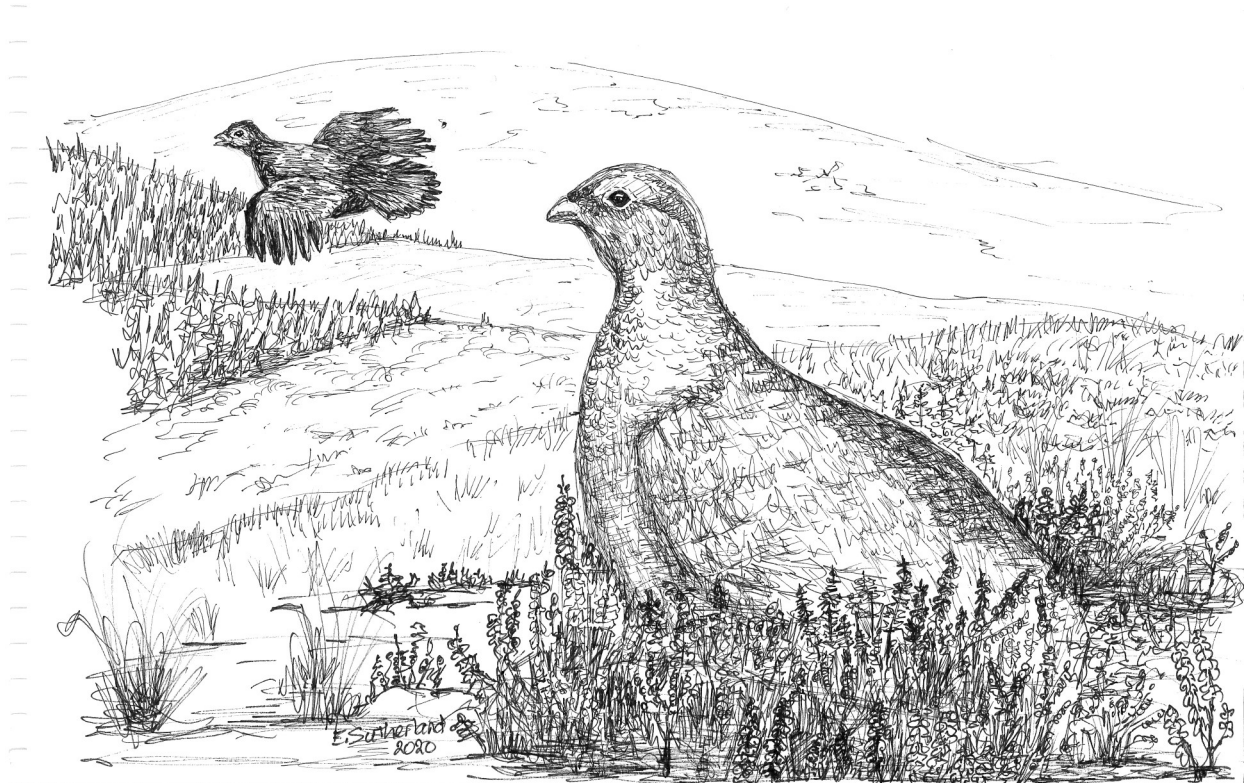
Red Grouse

Cearc fhraoigh

Lagopus lagopus

Conservation
Status:

Red List



This once common, larger sized, plump mountain bird requires a mixture of short and long heather to thrive. Its main food source is young heather tips. It also requires some open ground with short grass.

In the days of the shooting parties on the grouse moors, the gamekeepers used to manage the hill habitat to suit the birds' specific requirements. They also used to 'control' the Grouse's main predator species such as Hooded crows, Harriers and Peregrine falcons. This led to concentrated numbers in parts of Wicklow such as near Powerscourt Paddock in the north of WMNP and the Garryknock and Knocknadrui areas of west Wicklow.

Grouse are the subject of high conservation status and nearly became extinct due to changes in hill management. Luckily, they are making a comeback and you might hear their distinct call of 'go back, go back' uttered by the male with his striking russet colouration and red crest over the eye. The females are less colourful. They sit tight to the ground and only fly if you almost step on them. Then they will burst up with fast wingbeats and quickly glide over the contours of the hill, out of sight.



Páirc Náisiúnta Shléibhte Chill Mhantáin

Wicklow Mountains National Park

Skylark

Fuiseóg

Alauda arvensis

Conservation
Status:

Amber List



The Skylark is a beautiful small brown and black streaked bird with a little crest of feathers on its head. They nest on upland heaths and rough pastures. It is most easily recognised by its habit of rising straight up high into the air with a beautiful warbling song and closing its wings to drop back into the vegetation. They fly from 50 to 100 metres high when they are singing.

The sound of the skylark is a reminder of the past when they used to be plentiful and the summer tasks of haymaking and saving turf would be graced by their continuous presence. If you disturb this bird near its nest, it may fly away close to the ground. Sometimes it will run along on the ground fluttering to distract you. It is trying to lead you away from its young.

So take care where you step!



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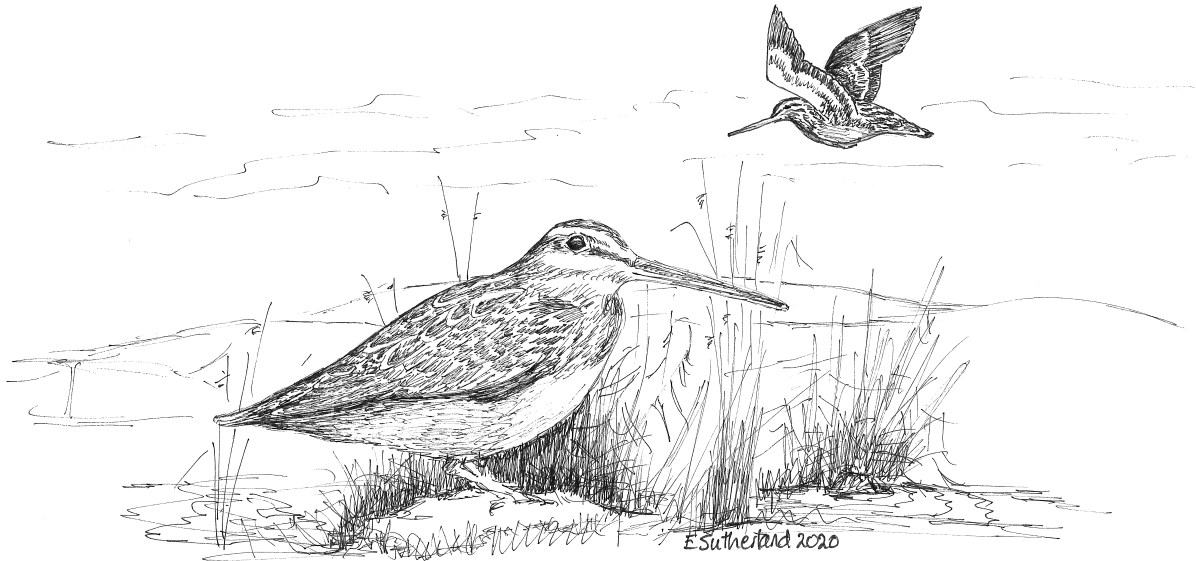
Snipe

Mionnán aeir

Gallinago gallinago

Conservation
Status:

Amber List



The Snipe is a very distinctive bogland bird. It has a smallish, thrush sized body and a long straight downward bill which it uses to probe the soft ground for insects. It has distinct zig-zagging flight pattern, and bursts out of the undergrowth, taking off at speed, quite low to the ground with a distinctive call.

In the early summer you can hear its 'drumming' flights late into the evening, when it is quite hard to see the birds even though they may be quite nearby. Their mottled brown plumage is perfect camouflage and the colour patterns break up their outline.

They nest in grassy tussocks in marshy areas and are fairly widespread, albeit declining.



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