



BURREN NATIONAL PARK

WINTER 2022
NEWSLETTER

As weather turns colder and wetter there are still plenty of winter wonders to be experienced throughout the Burren National Park. Vibrant greens can be seen on those most festive of plants, Holly and Ivy, which serve as a vital winter larder for a whole host of wildlife from birds to mammals to insects. Plenty of our feathered friends can be spotted at this time from our native Robins, Wrens, Thrushes, Finches and Chats to Whooper Swans and Golden Plovers who have made the long winter journey to feed on the vegetation and insects around the turloughs of the Park. The Turloughs themselves have been in flood though their waters have iced over and receded a little with the freezing cold spell of the first weeks of December this year. We hope many of you will enjoy a winter walk in the Burren National Park and we would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a most Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

This issue:

The Holly and the Ivy!

PAGE 2

Robins and Wrens

PAGE 4

Turloughs

PAGE 6

Mammals in Winter

PAGE 7

Announcements and
Updates

PAGE 9



Páirceanna Náisiúnta
National Parks

'The Holly and The Ivy'

BURREN
NATIONAL
PARK



The deep and shining lush greens of Holly *Ilex aquifolium* and Ivy *Hedera hibernica/Hedera helix* can be seen throughout the Burren at this time of year as the surrounding hazel bushes lose their leaves and the ferns turn shades of russet and brown. The importance of these two plants to the mammals, birds and insects during the long winter months cannot be overstated. As can be seen in the picture above these two plants often coexist with ivy using the holly bush as a handy climbing frame.



Holly berries begin to appear during September turning to a bright red during the winter months. Various member of the Thrush family use the berries as a nutritious winter food source, Fieldfares *Turdus pilaris* and Redwings *Turdus iliacus* can be seen amongst its branches in late winter. It is also a favourite of the Blackbird *Turdus merula*, who uses the protection of its dense

prickly leaves to build its nest in the Spring, and of the Song Thrush *Turdus philomelus*.

When the leaves of this waxy evergreen tree do fall to the ground they are slow to break down and provide hibernation cover to one of the Burren's most elusive creatures the Slow Worm *Anguis fragilis*. It is also the larval food plant of the Holly Blue butterfly which lays its eggs near the base of an unopened flower bud in spring, during the summer months this butterfly more typically lays its eggs on our other featured plant, ivy. The Romans believed holly has protective powers and if planted near a house it repelled poison and protected it from lightning, in England holly was said to repel witches. It has a strong association with Christmas and Christian symbolism with the ever green leaves representing life everlasting, the berries Christ's blood and the prickly leaves the crown of thorns.



Páirceanna Náisiúnta
National Parks

'The Holly and The Ivy'

BURREN
NATIONAL
PARK



Ivy *Hedera helix* is one of the most noticeable plants at this time of year and this evergreen woody plant can be seen climbing to the top of the tallest trees, carpeting the floor or woodland and blanketing some of the distinctive dry stone walls of the Burren. It does this using specialised hair like aerial roots which allow it to cling and climb on surfaces. Ivy's climbing roots do not cause any harm to the tree on which it is growing as it takes its nutrition from roots in the ground. The most common ivy found in Ireland is



the subspecies *Hedera helix hibernica* though the subspecies *Hedera helix helix* also occurs. Ivy has two growth stages, a juvenile stage when the leaves may have three to five lobes and a mature stage when the leaves take on a more oval or heart shaped appearance, only the mature ivy can produce flowers and fruit. Ivy nectar, pollen and berries are hugely important to many different types of wildlife. It is one of the most important foodplants of the Holly Blue butterfly *Celastrina agriolus* in the late summer and it also serves as an overwintering site for the Brimstone butterfly *Gonepteryx rhamni* who shelter under its evergreen leaves. The berries provide a high calorie and nutritious food source for a number of birds including Robins *Erithacus rubecula*, Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*, Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* and various types of thrush as well as for mammals such as Pine Marten *Martes martes* and the feral Goats *Capra hircus* which are common in the Burren. The plant and woody stems also provide shelter to insects and small mammals and a roosting site for bats and birds. In different parts of Ireland ivy was reputed to be a cure for ringworm, corns, sore eyes in sheep and was also said to be good for washing clothes. It was also a very popular decoration at Christmas time and was said to have powers of protection. It was regarded as one of the 'bushes of the wood' in Brehon law due to its value as a source of winter fodder.



Páirceanna Náisiúnta
National Parks



Robins and Wrens



As the festive period approaches it is apt to look at two birds with strong associations with Christmas and the winter period, the Robin *Erithacus rubecula* and the Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*.

Robins *Erithacus rubecula* can be seen throughout the Burren National Park, though a little wary they are not shy around people and one may often seem to become a companion for a spell on some of the shorter trails near the Gortlecka crossroads! This feature of robin behavior is thought to be because robins do not associate the way humans move and walk with predatory behaviour. Robins are also known to follow larger animals who may disturb the ground in the hope of finding insects, worms or snails, a large component of their diet though they also eat seeds and berries. Robins are easily identifiable from their bright orange breast, whitish belly and brown upper parts. They are very territorial birds who will aggressively defend their patch especially during the summer mating season. Traditionally considered a member of the Chat or wider Thrush family, the robin has been reclassified as belonging to the Old World Flycatchers,



that is small insectivores that can take their prey on the wing.

According to legend the robin's red colour is a result of pulling a thorn from the crown of Christ staining the robin's feathers with a drop of blood in the process. Another story tells that a robin put itself between a fire and the infant Jesus when the baby was becoming too warm scorching its feathers an orange colour! The robin is referred to as Robin redbreast

when in fact its feathers are actually orange is probably because up until the sixteenth century there appears to be no word in the English language to describe the colour orange, many things that we see as orange today were described as red for example red hair or red deer, with what we now call orange eventually taking its name from the fruit!

The robin's strong associations with the festive period and as a Christmas motif is partly down to the Victorian fashion for Christmas greeting cards which often featured images of robins, and royal mail postmen who delivered the cards were called robins because of the red in their uniforms.





Robins and Wrens



The Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* is Ireland's second smallest bird. It is feisty for its size and can be found in almost all habitats including the Burren National park. It is identifiable by its rounded body, short sometimes vertically cocked tail and a white stripe above its eye. Its upper body parts are reddish brown with paler sometimes greyish underparts. They have a slightly curved beak which they use to peck invertebrates from the ground, they eat spiders, caterpillars and beetles but will also eat peanuts, suet and meal wormers if on offer at garden feeders.

It is often easier to hear a wren than it is to see them and for such a small bird they have an impressively loud song comprising trills, whistles, churrs and rattles. Wrens build spherical nests of moss with a side entrance which they usually hide in dense vegetation such as ivy. This type of nest building behaviour gives rise to the wrens scientific name *Troglodytes troglodytes* as troglodyte means 'cave dweller', whilst the name Wren comes from an old Germanic word meaning 'short tailed'.

Like the robin, the wren has particular associations with this time of year. In many parts of Ireland including many parishes in the Burren, the custom of going on the 'wren' or 'wran' on St. Stephens Day has a long tradition right up to the present day. This practice could be found in many places in Ireland often with specific local traditions and there are also some accounts of similar celebrations in parts of England, Wales and France though they have long since died out. In Ireland it usually involved going from house to house often wearing some type of disguise or fancy dress chanting some version of the following rhyme:

The wren, The wren the king of all birds
On Stephen's Day was caught in the furze
So up with the kettle and down with the pan
And give us a penny to bury the wren

In times past this tradition involved hunting down and killing an unfortunate wren which was attached to a stick or bush, sometimes of holy and parading it about during the procession from house to house, thankfully this is no longer an accepted practice in those places where the tradition survives.

The origin of the custom may be linked to stories in Irish folklore which sees the wren being linked to both the betrayal of Christ and St. Stephen by drawing attention to their whereabouts as well as specific events in Irish history, when the wrens actions alerted Viking, Jacobite or Cromwellian forces to their unsuspecting quarry!

The Irish word for Wren is dreoilín which means 'trickster' and this may relate to the manner in which the wren assumed the title 'King of the Birds'. According to legend a meeting was held to decide who was king of birds, it was deemed that the bird that could fly the highest would be king. The eagle naturally soared higher than any other bird not realising that the tiny wren had hidden on its back. When the eagle had flown to its highest point the wren popped out and flew a little higher still with ease and so became 'The King of the Birds.'

TURLOUGHS

BURREN
NATIONAL
PARK



High level of water at part of the Knockaunroe turlough basin at Mullaghmore, notice the partially inundated limestone pavement and vegetation which deposits and gathers as the waters rise and recede.

With the increasing rainfall of winter, the turloughs and lakes of the Burren National Park are quite flooded. The word turlough comes from the Irish *tuar* meaning dry and *loch* meaning lake to describe a transient lake that rises and falls and are especially associated with the karst wetland ecosystem of the limestone regions of Clare, Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. Water in the Burren often disappears underground meaning the water table can be quite close to the surface, it also dissolves the limestone beneath flowing through various types of underground channels. During periods of prolonged or heavy rainfall the water table breaks the surface through swallow holes, joints and cracks in the limestone sometimes causing the turlough to fill very quickly. Around the turlough it is possible to see distinct zones of vegetation as certain plants have adapted to growing in varying degrees of damp and wetness. Water Mint *Mentha aquatica*, Purple-loosestrife *Lythrum salicaria* and Water Forget-me-not *Myosotis scorpioides* can be found on wet or soggy ground, a little further out on damp ground Silverweed *Potentilla anserina* and Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* can be seen. From May to August it is also possible to see a Burren specialty, Shrubby Cinquefoil *Dasiphora fruticosa*, growing on limestone pavement close to the semi permanent lake Lough Gaeláin This plant and the rare Fen Violet *Viola persicifolia* favour this type of karst wetland. It is also typical to see a growth of blackish moss called *Cinclidotus fontinaloides* on the trees and rocks around a turlough basin which may give a rough indication of the high water mark in winter.

Some of our feathered friends frequent the turloughs and lakes in the park and it is possible to see the Common Gull *Larus canus*, the Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* and Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* all year round. At this time of year we would also hope to see Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus* and Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* overwintering here from Iceland.



Páirceanna Náisiúnta
National Parks

Mammals in Winter

BURREN
NATIONAL
PARK



Many species of Ireland's native mammals inhabit the park though as many are shy and their movements are mainly nocturnal they are not often encountered. However the Irish Hare *Lepus timidus hibernicus* can be seen fairly regularly during the spring and summer months and on occasion it is possible to spot a stoat weaving its way in and out of the stone walls, feral goats are also often visible on the terraces of Mullaghmor. The colder weather of winter with its more limited food supply presents its own challenges and our wildlife has adapted their own coping strategies for this time of year as will be explored in a little more detail below.



Seven of the nine species of bat *chiroptera* found in Ireland can be found in the Burren National Park and it is one of only two mammals in this country that truly hibernates. Bat's hibernation roosts are called hibernacula and they usually begin to hibernate from October/November. At this time air temperatures are dropping and there are less insects to feed upon. Bats find a cool place to roost that avoids extremes of temperature and drop their own body temperature to 8-9 degrees Celsius in order to conserve energy. The Lesser Horseshoe bat *Rhinolophus hipposideros* likes to hibernate in caves.

Hedgehogs *Erinaceus europaeus* are the other mammal in Ireland that have adapted to winter by hibernating. In Ireland this medium sized insectivore usually hibernates from November to March in a carefully constructed nest made up of dead leaves under logpiles, thickets of bush or bramble or even in garden sheds or under compost bins. Some will remain dormant all through hibernation whilst others may wake and move to a new hibernaculum. Hedgehogs in Ireland are known to lose up to 17% of their body weight during this period and need to weigh at least 450g if they are to survive the winter.



Our native Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* does not hibernate during the winter months but it can spend up to a week or more at a time curled up in one of its nests or dreys especially during spells of bad weather. They build their dreys high up in tree branches out of interwoven twigs lined with moss, grass and dry leaves. Squirrels collect nuts and seeds during the Autumn which they hoard in a number of shallow pits they dig into the soft ground, quick trips to these hoards can sustain a squirrel for as long as three months. They locate these hoards using their excellent sense of smell and can sniff out a stash of nuts even under a metre of snow. Hazelnuts which have been split in half and which are often found in the Burren National Park are a feeding sign of squirrels. In woodlands, stripped and chewed pinecones are another indicator that a hungry squirrel may be nearby!



Páirceanna Náisiúnta
National Parks



The Badger *Meles meles* does not hibernate either but becomes much less active during the winter and slows down its breathing and heart rate in a process known as dormancy. Throughout September and October they feed heavily and it is possible to see 'snuffle holes' or disturbed patches of earth in fields or gardens as hungry badgers intensify digging in search of earthworms and beetles on which to fatten up. They rely on these fat reserves to sustain themselves and by December much time is spent underground in setts awaiting spring when the sows will give birth to new badger cubs.

The winter months do not have a huge impact on the general behaviour of the Fox *Vulpes vulpes* and the thick coat they develop throughout the Autumn means they can cope well with colder winter weather. They can even curl up and sleep under a bush or in the open by wrapping themselves in their large bushy tail to keep warm. When it comes to feeding foxes are adaptable and have a broad diet, foxes have small stomachs but need to eat regularly so they will cache surplus food by burying small amounts in a number of locations thus ensuring an ongoing supply which can prove useful when food becomes scarce.



The Pine Marten begins to moult in October replacing its summer coat with a thicker fluffier winter one. Their feet are also covered in fur which means they can endure both frost and snow quite well. They become less active as the winter progresses spending more and more time in their dens which they make in the hollows of trees, rabbit burrows, squirrel dreys and rock crevices. They will eat what is locally available be it ivy berries, small mammals, insects, frogs or carrion which they will hunt or forage for at night. A secure warm den is important as Pine Marten kits are born blind and hairless and will be entirely dependent on their mothers for about 40 days.



ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATES

UPDATED OPENING HOURS:

Please note that the Information Point in Corofin is currently open on Saturdays and Sundays only during December, January and February.

Christmas Opening Hours:

Closed the weekend of the 24th and 25th December

Closed the weekend of the 31st December and 1st January

Reopening the weekend of the 7th and 8th January

Burren National Park:

Information Point: Clare Heritage Centre, 2
Church Street, Corofin, Co. Clare V95 T9V6

Website: <https://www.burrennationalpark.ie>

Email: burrennationalpark@npws.gov.ie

Phone: 065 6827693

