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SPRING NEWSLETTER 2024

The first signs of Spring have finally arrived in the Burren National Park. The white clouds of flowers that hang from blackthorn bushes are an uplifting sign that winters icy fingers are finally loosening their grip. Every walk on the tracks and trails brings with it a chance of discovery as Spring flowers pop up and bedeck our woodland floors, meadows and limestone pavements. The air is full of birdsong and the first Brimstone butterflies are on the wing. Soon the sound of the cuckoo's call and sight of spikes of Early Purple Orchids will be among the highlights of a visit to the Burren National Park.

Perhaps you'll be lucky enough to see the brilliant bright blue of the enchanting Spring Gentian or the fleeting flash of white of a hare's tail!



Blackthorn and Hawthorn



One of the first signs of Spring in the Burren are hedgerows abundant with the white blossom of Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, followed by Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, in early summer. These two common hedgerow shrubs are quite similar but are easy to tell apart once you know how. The plentiful white five-petalled flowers of the Blackthorn appear before its leaves during March. The flowers contain both the male and female reproductive parts. This blossom is a valuable source of early nectar for emerging bees and butterflies. The leaves, when they do appear, are oval shaped with serrated edges and pointed at the tip. It has dark brown bark and blackish spiny twigs which make it a useful hedging plant. The leaves are the larval food plant of the rare Brown Hairstreak butterfly *Thecla betulae* (Stiallach Donn as Gaeilge) which is only found in the Burren and to a lesser extent in parts of counties Galway and Tipperary.



Medicinal and other uses: The flowers, bark and berries were traditionally used in tonics and as a ‘blood cleanser’. The bluish purple fruit can be used to make sloe gin, wine and jam.

Folklore: In Ireland, Blackthorn was believed to provide protection against harm, it was advised to carry a blackthorn stick at night to ward off the fairies as they held the tree in such high regard. It was also believed that the blackthorn was protected by supernatural beings known as ‘lunantishees’.



Clusters of bluish black sloes can be found ripening on Blackthorn bushes during the Autumn. These sour fruits are an important source of nutrition for birds during the leaner winter months.





The Hawthorn usually blooms slightly later than the blackthorn and after it gets its leaves. It is especially associated with the month of May and sometimes called the May tree. Hawthorn also has white flowers with five petals but they are more rounded than the Blackthorn. The leaves are also quite different with a distinctive lobed shape. The bush has spiny branches and the name 'hawthorn' is thought to be derived from the Anglo-Saxon word 'hagedorn' meaning hedge thorn as it was and still is considered a good hedging plant.

Medicinal and other uses: The red berries or haws that appear in Autumn are eaten by blackbirds, redwings and fieldfares and also by small mammals. The fruit is also high in antioxidants and has anti-inflammatory properties. It is a source of pectin which makes it particularly useful in jam making. The berries, flowers and leaves were used in traditional medicine for circulation and heart conditions.

Folklore: It was considered unlucky to bring any part of the hawthorn bush into the house and it was said to have an odour reminiscent of plague! It has been found that hawthorn blossom contains a chemical called trimethylamine which is one of the first chemicals produced by decaying animal tissue.



Haws in Autumn are a favourite food of different species of thrush including Blackbirds *Turdus merula*, Redwings *Turdus iliacus* and Fieldfares *Turdus pilaris* and are also eaten by small mammals.



March Hares



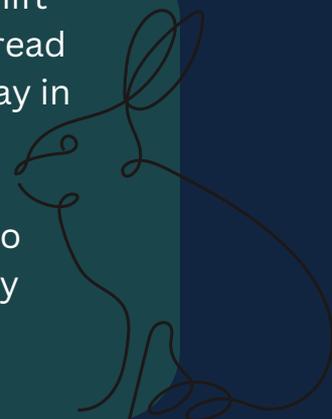
The Irish Hare *Lepus timidus hibernicus* is a subspecies of the Mountain hare *Lepus timidus* and they are only found on the island of Ireland. Hares along with rabbits and brown hares are all species of lagomorph. Hares become more active during the height of their breeding season in Spring and are often spotted in and around the Burren National Park. It is not uncommon to see hares 'boxing' at this time of year, this is often a male and a reluctant female rather than two males.

Baby hares, called leverets, are born fully furred with their eyes open. This is a useful adaptation as, unlike rabbits, hares live in flattened out areas in surface vegetation (called a form) not in the protective confines of a burrow. Hares are usually a brown colour on their back and a paler colour on their bellies and unlike their Mountain Hare cousin, the Irish Hare does not turn white in winter. They are much larger than rabbits and can reach speeds of up to 45mph with their powerful back legs.

The hare may have had ritual and ceremonial significance to some of the first farming communities in the Burren. Archaeological excavations at a Neolithic court tomb in Parknabinnia, not far from the Burren National Park, revealed a faunal assemblage dominated by hare. There was evidence that at least 38 hares were present, some buried at the same time as a number of the human remains along with other juvenile animal bones of cattle and pig. This suggests possible ritual deposition and it has been speculated given the presence of juvenile bones that there may have been an association with Spring, birth, renewal or fertility. Ritual deposition of hare has also been observed at the nearby portal tomb of Poulabrone and at Glencurran Cave.

It was believed in Ireland and in Wales that witches could shapeshift into hares, often with the intention of causing mischief. A widespread belief in Ireland told of how witches changed into hares on May Day in order to steal milk.

The speed of the hare may have given rise to the saying 'Tabhair do phóg do chois an ghiorria' (kiss the foot of the hare) meaning to say goodbye to something forever.



Nesting Season



The beginning of March heralds nesting season for our wild birds. For this reason hedge cutting is prohibited from March 1st until August 31st each year. This prevents disturbance to nesting birds and also protects important habitat and food sources for chicks and their parents. The latest *State of the World's Birds* report shows that 63% of Ireland's bird population are in various stages of decline so this prohibition is vital to the survival of some of our bird species.

During April and May birdsong also builds and reaches a crescendo as the widest range of bird species sing during the extended hours of daylight in order to define their territory and attract a mate. International Dawn chorus day falls on Sunday 5th May in 2024, but if you are willing to rise before the crack of dawn any morning during nesting season you can experience nature's stunning symphony for yourself.

The Burren National Park is host to around ninety five species of bird, fifty species of which have used the park for breeding. From Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* to Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* to Yellow Hammers *Emberiza citrinella* and Wheaters *Oenanthe oenanthe*, the park and its surroundings offer an ideal habitat for resident and migratory birds.



This Wren's nest is made from moss and leaves and lined with feathers. The wren's scientific name *Troglodytes troglodytes* means 'cave dweller'



Birds build their nests from all sorts of available material often using animal hair or wool. This bird has incorporated some strands of baling twine into its nest.

If you find a chick out of the nest Birdwatch Ireland recommend that if it is fully feathered and appears alert and healthy simply leave it alone and its parents will continue to tend to it. If the chick is blind and helpless it is best to return it to its nest if it is safe to do so. A sick or dead bird should not be handled as avian flu is still circulating in the wild bird population in Ireland, for more advice and information on this see: www.gov.ie/birdflu





Burren Habitats: Hazel Woodland



Lush hazel woodland at Slieve Carran Nature Reserve

1. Lungwort *Lobaria pulmonaria* 2. Hart's-tongue fern *Asplenium scolopendrium* 3. Pine Marten *Martes martes* 4. Glue Crust fungus *Hymenochaete corrugata* 5. Hazel Gloves *Hypocreopsis rhododendri* 6. Common Frog *Rana temporaria*

Scattered patches of vibrant lush woodland can be found throughout the Burren National Park and at locations such as Slieve Carran Nature Reserve (pictured above). These woodlands can be described as 'temperate rainforest', also referred to as Atlantic or Celtic rainforest. They are an increasingly rare habitat found in Ireland mainly in the western coastal counties. Temperate rainforests are humid and damp as they are subject to the climatic influence of the sea which causes high rainfall. They provide the perfect conditions for a host of rare and common epiphytic plants, that is plants that grow on other plants, including ferns, mosses, liverworts and lichens. These fascinating lower order plants have ancient origins and evolved before flowering plants and trees. They are also an important habitat for invertebrates, birds and animals.





WE ARE HIRING!

Visitor Guides

Western Division

National Parks and Wildlife Service

Closing Date: 11th April

The National Parks and Wildlife Service is now recruiting visitor guides in the Western Division, including the Burren National Park, Coole Park Nature Reserve and Dromore Wood Nature Reserve. All details and application forms can be found at the following link: <https://bit.ly/4cwllug>



ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPDATES



OPENING HOURS:



The Burren Information Point in Corofin is currently open seven days a week 10am - 5pm.

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



Upcoming Guided Walks

Cahercommaun - Sunday 7th April, 10.30 am

Slieve Carran - Sunday 21st April, 2.30pm

Guided walks are free but must be booked as places are limited. Please contact us at burrennationalpark@npws.gov.ie or 065 6827693 for more details and to book.



Páirceanna Náisiúnta
National Parks