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IRELAND TOUR REPORT May 19-31, 2013

Peg Abbott and Eric Dempsey were guides, with Eric with us our first three days near Wicklow and Wexford. Also with the group were Alan Mee (Killarney) and Tom Cuffe (Renvyle), as local, single day guides. Mary Jane Dockeray was present as invited speaker, with 13 participants: Don, Jan, Ralph, Regina, Jean, Marcia, Ty, Margaret, Joan, Ken, Wynn, Park, and Sharon.

Sun., May 19 Dublin / Howth Head / Wicklow

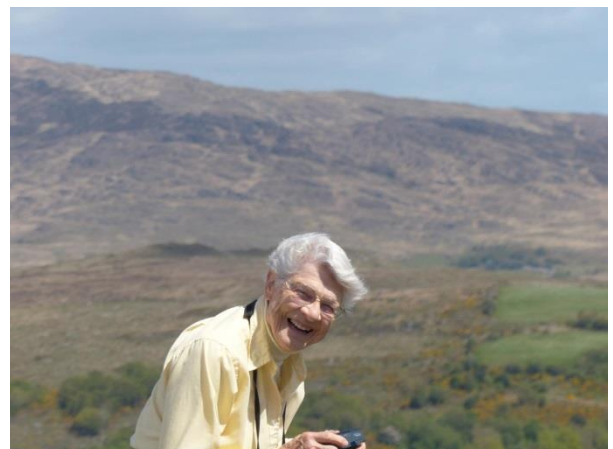


Everyone arrived from one to three days early to enjoy either Dublin or the Irish countryside. We greeted each other for an official start at the Ashling Hotel at 9:30 AM, to gather and to hear about what people had seen in their time of exploring. Public transport was available close to the hotel. So was the Phoenix Park where, after flying across the ocean, it felt good to stretch our legs on trails lined with trees.

Highlights in Dublin included the Dublin Castle and adjacent Chester Beatty Museum (free with a nice place for lunch in a glass atrium). Several went to Trinity College to see the Book of Kells, or the City Hall, which highlights the history of the city and has an impressive rotunda with glass ceiling. The Ireland Museum showed off the

country's artists. Several recommended the Kilmainham Gaol as a good heritage site to visit, with the tour guides giving an interesting take on history.

Everyone found getting around Dublin easy, as the tram was right there and the buses had a single fare covering two days, allowing one to hop on and off at ease. Peg, Ty, and Mary Jane had joined Don and Jan with their family at Hunter's Motel ahead of the tour, and they came back to Dublin to meet everyone.



Eric Dempsey of Birds Ireland joined the group to lead us to some prime birding sites on the coast north of Dublin. He was extremely knowledgeable and personable, and we enjoyed his company for three full



days in and around Wicklow and down to Wexford. We also met Bernard MacGuire, our driver, and were relieved to find we had a small bus, perfect for touring Ireland's narrow, winding roads. We were a bit cozy inside, but it was well worth it to be able to find parking spaces, and to be able to explore with ease. Bernard could turn the bus on a dime and was an obviously competent driver, always reassuring! He even played us some Irish music on the radio.

Our first stop was at Gormanstown, where we followed a small river down to the sea. The tide was out, and on this bright sunny day, the local people were arriving by the score. It was fun to watch the Irish at play on what sounded like the first really warm summer day they had had. There were dogs racing about, someone flying remote-control airplanes, and a family that showed up with a horse and trailer. We watched as mom pranced off on her steed, junior rode behind on his bike, and dad and the dog wandered out to the edge of the surf.



Between people watching we found some great birds. A surprise was finding two Brent Geese, feeding on algae at the mouth of the river alongside numerous Herring Gulls. They should have been off to their breeding grounds in the Arctic, but they had lingered here and it was great to see them. We spotted a Eurasian Curlew and two of its small cousins, Whimbrels. Dunlin were the most

numerous of the shorebirds, bright in breeding plumage with rich tones of red, and dark, black bellies. Several of the Sanderlings were also gaining rufous tones for summer, and we spied quite a few dapper Oystercatchers dressed in their tuxedos of black and white. There were a couple of Black-backed Gulls and many Ringed Plovers – all in all a nice selection of coastal species. Mary Jane started to find rocks on the beach, and she chuckled as Peg brought in a piece of “sandstone” for inspection, saying “well, you have a nice, beach-weathered old brick”! Ken found some nice colors of weathered beach glass. At a neighboring farm by the car park, we watched fuzzy donkeys, a horse lying flat to soak up the sun, and tried our hand at identifying flowers lining the river's course.

From here we drove on to a headland known as the Skerries. We parked on the far side of the harbor, and watched as locals rolled their boats down to the sea. Some were moored on floats, while several fishing vessels were tucked into more protected spots by the harbor walls, atop which were vendors and shops. We passed by several pubs, and began to admire how cleverly they were named.



We then walked on to a wide, grassy lawn, set up our scopes, and began to scan. Mary Jane was pleased to see several Galway hookers, small boats with red sails. These once transported seaweed and kelp to the Burren to fill in stony spaces, trading for limestone to return for building stone, plying Galway Bay and inspiring the song, *Red Sails in the Sunset*. With deeper waters here we found some seabirds, mainly Guillemots, with a few Black Guillemots, and two species of mammals. Ralph and Joan spotted a Gray Seal, and Peg found a Harbor Porpoise with its characteristic small, angled dorsal fin. Eric was surprised as Peg called out, "Great Northern Diver"! Here was one in bright breeding plumage, another late bird for the Irish coast at this time, as they fly north to breed.



Rocky islands, close offshore, were covered with bright orange and yellow lichen, creating artistry particularly when topped by an Oystercatcher pair. There was a picturesque lighthouse in the distance, but what really caught our eye were objects fast and pink – men in very cold water – swimming! There were about ten of them in all, and they swam out around the headland and back, an impressive feat.



From here we headed down to an estuary with a broad expanse of water near Swords. Realizing we'd been in the "relax" mode for our watching and were running behind time, we decided lunch better be here, and found a pub in town to fuel up at. Several went into the first one they encountered on the block, a dark, wood-lined cavern with a pub sign that had a toucan drinking a Guinness. Many ordered a chicken, mushroom and leak pie, which then came with mashed potatoes, roasted potatoes, carrots and parsnips – quite the carbohydrate blast but very tasty! Others chose simpler fare and had time to walk a bit of this small city. A musician played the accordion as we boarded the bus to drive to our next birding site.



This next site was at a lakeshore with a trail around it. We enjoyed the stretch of a walk, and stopped periodically to scan. There were numerous Mute Swans, a few already nesting. Everyone was jazzed to



see the Shelducks in prime plumage, many paired up and courting, and several just taking in the sun on the beach. We found a couple good flocks of Black-tailed Godwits, within them small numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits as well. The wind was blowing briskly, so birds on the wing afforded fleeting views.



We ended the day at a spectacular spot – a coastal headland known as Howth Head. This promontory into the Irish Sea allowed us great views. We made a quick pit stop at a pub, and then took off on trails, winding through head-high gorse in full bloom. We found a singing Stonechat, a couple of Whitethroats,



Goldfinches, and a full complement of coastal species, including Cormorants, Shags, and several species of gulls. Mary Jane told us that the headland is carboniferous limestone with crinoid fossils, and we found several wildflowers in bloom alongside the gorse.

We returned to Hunter's Hotel for dinner, quite a lovely affair. After dinner, in the cozy fireside room, Don Allen filled us in on the Hunter lineage and how he was connected to the family that has run this, one of the original Irish coaching houses, for several generations.



Mon., May 20 Hunter's Hotel / Kilcole / Little Tern Conservation Project / Glendalough



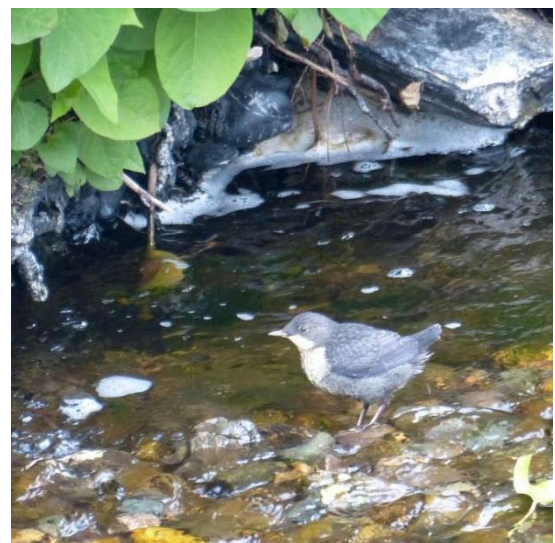
Today was a magical day, full of grand scenery, some great birds, and a sense of adventure from the start. We dined in the lovely dining room of Hunter's Hotel, watching Greenfinches, Siskins, and Robins out the window, darting between blooming azaleas and rhododendrons. We found this gem of a hotel

through family connections of Don Hunter Allen, whose heritage here is certainly in a beautiful part of Ireland. His cousin, Mary, joined us for several meals and an outing,



adding so much to our days with her local commentary.

After some time to wander in the garden, we walked over



to the bridge to check for possible sightings of the Dipper, and spotted one adult downriver – feeding a just-fledged chick! It was too fun, watching the interaction, sensing the adult's urge to stuff this proud feathered package as full as possible and the chick's hesitation to get its feet wet. Then, right below us from under the bridge out came chick number two, this one with more white in the bib and a bit more confidence. A great start to our birding day.



We then went to a beachside walk at Kilcole, where a long shingle beach held a treasure trove of pretty, polished rocks. Eric led everyone over to search out a Whitethroat, and Peg showed Mary Jane where to look for some wave-polished stones. Park came along and soon he and Mary Jane were head to head, down on hands and knees, sorting. The others joined for a brief time, but the birding was calling and off we went for a walk at Eric's urging. The path was used by many dog-walkers, and it follows a high berm with views of both the marsh and sea. In between sightings of Lapwings, Reed Buntings, a Graylag Goose, Mistle Thrushes and others,

we talked with locals and petted their dogs.

Our goal was to meet Naill, a warden and researcher with the Little Tern nesting project run by BirdWatch Ireland. He lives in a small camper van right on the site, nestled between the train track and a nice windbreak that gives a bit of shelter. The terns like this stretch of beach as it is backed by a quiet estuary, giving them lots of options to feed. Today they fed on Sand Lances, tiny silvery fish from the sea. We enjoyed the antics of males presenting females with fish, and watched as females tried out nest scrapes in the stones while males were off to feed. Nesting was just around the corner; in fact, Naill predicted that by the day's end there would be an egg, the first of the season. (Read more about the Little Tern Conservation Project at <http://littleternconservation.blogspot.ie>.)

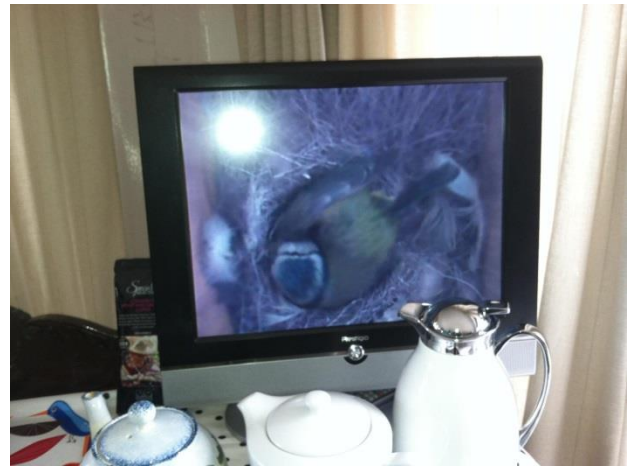


This has been an unseasonably late spring in Ireland for both flora and fauna, with oaks just leafing out, and many food-bearing plants just breaking into leaf. The terns had a bad season last year as large waves crashed over the nesting tier on the beach – we wished them well for this season. As we left to walk back to the car park and go on to other sites, a Goldfinch posed for us in the buckthorn bushes, and Swifts circled overhead.

Eric was kind enough to invite us to his home, where his partner Hazel had made some lovely brown bread, which she served with homemade jams of blackberry and



teaberry, yum! Their home has lots of glass, and we enjoyed seeing bright male Siskins at close range, along with Blue Tits and other species. We had a relaxed visit, and learned about bibs that could be put on cats to teach them not to hunt birds. Eric's demonstration was priceless. The television was on, tuned to a webcam in a nest box being used by Blue Tits. The female was incubating six eggs, which she turned with her feet, in between bouts of preening. At one point she tucked her bill under her wing and had a brief sleep, then was busy again tending her eggs. She left a couple of times but only briefly. What a treat to see an actual bird on duty at the nest! They also had activity at their feeders, including Greenfinches and Siskins.



Hazel told us about building the house, giving us insights into how Ireland retains such uncrowded rural landscapes. She was born here, on a farm her father still lives on, and she still had to wait five years to get all the needed permits! Worth the wait, Sycamore Hill was a great coffee stop.



Next on the agenda was lunch. Eric had heard that several members



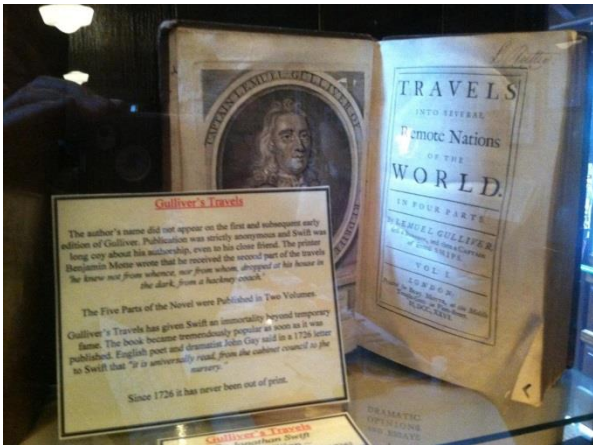
of our group were avid readers, including our two English majors. With this in mind, we drove up to Laragh, a lovely wooded village not far from Glendalough, to dine with style in the writer's room at the Wicklow Heather restaurant, prized for its historic book collection featuring first edition copies



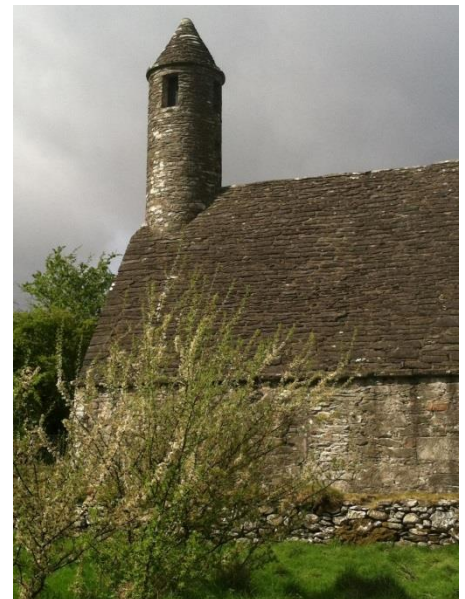
of books by Irish writers. It was rather amazing to dine in the company of original, signed copies of *Ulysses*, *Portrait of an Artist*



as a *Young Man*, *Dracula*, and other works, all displayed along the walls in soft-lit cases. Though the room was busy with diners, we were free to wander about taking it all in as we waited for the meal to arrive. And it was quite a meal! Mary, Don and Jan's cousin, was able to join us, and they all ordered the corned beef in Irish style. Jan said it was the most tender she'd ever had. Ty had a burger over an inch thick, and Wynn and Ken dined on a lovely, pan-fried fish with chips. This was not going to be a holiday to lose weight on... A few smart ones had soup and skipped up the hill to a green grocer for bananas, such discipline!



We needed a walk, and with the sun coming out in full, Glendalough with its just-leaving oaks was



the perfect place. We'd waited until Monday to beat the crowds, but this place of deep beauty rarely sees a quiet day. We got parked and started over when Eric spied a friend he admired, a professional tour guide steeped in history. This person kindly included our group with his and thus we learned a lot about the monastery buildings. We walked through the grounds into various chapels and nooks of the sixth-century ruins, and admired the impressive 30-meter tall round tower where the Monks hid when invaders came.

After the tour, we walked around to take in the scenic beauty, tall soft hills rising to frame a classic U-shaped, glacier-carved river

valley. Today it was fresh with spring and the songs of Blackcap, Willow Warblers, Blackbirds, and more. We ran into two Billy goats which we gave way for, as Mary Jane recounted a tale of being charged on a previous Ireland venture.



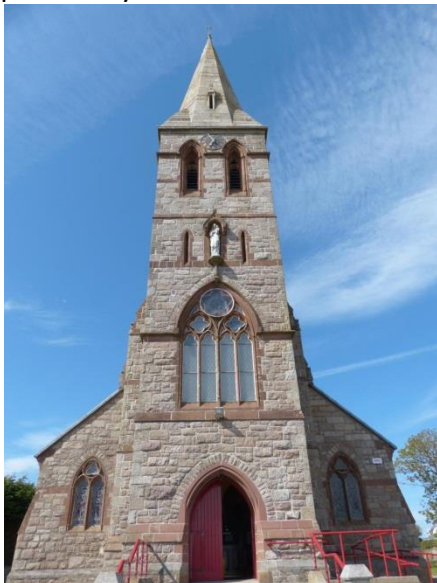
We had one more stop to make this day. Wanting to see Red Kites, we drove to Avoca, a long valley in between the ridges of rounded hills. The kites like to fly along these ridges, and with some searching from our perch in a wide car park near a cemetery, Sharon spotted one. It was circling and though distant, we could see the red color on the tail and the markings on the wing, quite a lovely raptor. We also had good

looks at a Buzzard, and House Martins above an adjacent cemetery, where Don thought his grandfather, John Hunter, was buried. How lucky we were that Don and Jan wanted to share these family ties. It was a lovely drive back and we arrived with time to visit our Dipper family, though this time they had moved downstream and were not to be found.



Tues., May 21 Wexford / Lady's Island Lake / Beach Walk / Tacumshin Marsh / Ice Cream

Jean was on the bridge this morning to check on "our" Dippers, and saw instead a couple passes of flashing bright light – the zip of a Kingfisher on a mission! Mary Jane had seen it a couple of days previously so we'd been on the alert. Likely it had hungry chicks in the nest, as it bolted by two or three



times. We left at 9:00 AM this morning, with time to pack our cases, and headed off to Wexford. Eric followed us this day as he would return home, and we would overnight and then carry on across the South Coast and onwards.

This was a day of water birds, lakes and rivers, and reed beds. We spent quite a long time with scopes on the shore of Lady's Island Lake. There was only one loo open in the public toilets, so it took a bit for us to cycle through. Alas, several were in the line when a Little Gull made an appearance just across the lake from the car park. Several got good views of this tiniest of the

gull kingdom. We also saw several Mediterranean Gulls, three or four pair of which breed here, alongside hundreds of Black-headed Gulls and four species of terns: Arctic, Common, Sandwich, and



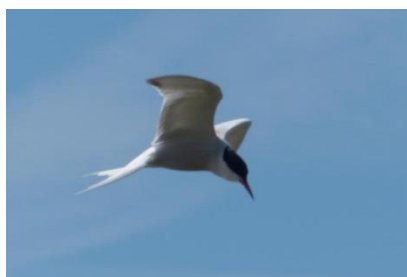
Roseate. We especially enjoyed the Roseate Terns with their long streaming tails, looking like tropicbirds as they plied across the waters. We walked from the car park around a point to get another vantage, Eric doing his best to educate us to the finer features of terns. We had good views of a Whitethroat, and for many, the Great-crested Grebes, bright in breeding plumage, stole the show. In time we spotted a pair of Tufted Ducks, several Gadwalls, and some additional species. It was a soft scene, the beauty

heightened by intermittent sun and billowing clouds.

From the lake we drove down to the sea, to walk a beach and scan for seabirds. Several walked a ways around a lovely crescent-shaped cove. A bright-plumaged Turnstone was plucking about the seaweed, according to Eric a late bird to be present here and a treat to see as they normally only see them in drabber winter plumage. Ralph found one of these that blended perfectly with the stones for us to compare. By now it was a “bright” day, and seabirds were out to sea – we found only Razorbills, Herring, and both Black-backed gulls, but no shearwaters of any type, or other species.



We walked under the huge turning tines of windmills, discussing the merits and problems of wind energy. Skylarks sang overhead, and a Whitethroat posed for inspection. The Gorse everywhere was in ample bloom, and in the distance, fields of rapeseed shone their own shade of yellow intensity. Mary Jane smiled as Eric announced it was time for 99s, Ireland’s rich soft-serve ice cream in a cone, served with a Cadbury flake. Soon 11 or 12 faces had smiles as we leaned on a rock wall, taking in the sun, atypical weather for Ireland but so far typical for our stay.





Tacumshin Lake, our last stop, is a back-barrier seepage lagoon, as is Lady's Island Lake. These two unique in Ireland. They are lakes with no outlet, separated from the Atlantic Ocean at the southern end by a sand and gravel bar 200 meters wide. The lakes are



a mix of salt and fresh water, as seepage occurs across the gravel bar from the sea, while fresh water flows into the lake from run-off from the land. Here, we walked a trail down into some reed beds. We first stood awhile by a lovely view over the valley, in hopes that harriers or other species might fly by. They did not, but we watched Mute Swans display, Northern Shovelers pass by, and in the distance, a lone Forster's Tern. This species was out of range, and Eric said it had been so for some ten years, likely the same individual that moved to another county to winter, and then returned. It fed at this particular

spot by day, and then went to roost with the other terns each night.

This was our last day with Eric, and we had enjoyed sharing his expertise very much. He had a great sense of humor, and made us laugh with quick wit, and a few long rampages against "arrogant" tomatoes, which he clearly did not like. We look forward to working with him on the next Ireland tour.



Our day was too full to see much of Wexford, where we stayed on the waterfront. They had dinner for us at the hotel, and a few of the group walked around the harbor and town in the evening. It was a Monday night and mostly quiet, with only a few places open for diners. In general it seemed too quiet for its own economy, but perhaps as a working town it was livelier during the day.

Wed., May 22 By Hook or by Crook / Copper Coast Geopark / Ballycotton / Kinsale

Our rooms faced the waterfront, and we woke to sunshine once again! Were we really in Ireland?! We had a travel day planned with several stops, and Peg and Mary Jane added some miles to our agenda with a visit to the Hook Lighthouse, the oldest intact operational lighthouse in the world. This is the hook



of “by Hook or by Crook,” an expression that comes from Oliver Cromwell, who claimed he’d take the city of Waterford by one of two headlands of its long, glacier-carved bay.

Bernard arranged for us to have a tour of the lighthouse with Elaine, one of the interpreters, and with a few of our hopeful seabird watchers abstaining, we climbed over 100 winding stairs to see several levels in detail. On the first level there were replicas of the original lenses. The next

level held living quarters for the keepers and had a large fireplace. There were small rooms off to the side for family, and we imagined what life would be like living there, especially in winter. The next level had more living quarters, as the keepers manned the light 24/7, so two families were needed. The final level contained the prism, which provided the light. Originally this was a fire, fueled by coal, which they had



to carry by hand up the narrow staircase. At this time the top was open. Later they added to the top as technology allowed for change.



To save us some driving time today, Bernard took a chance that our bus would fit on a small car-ferry, and with luck and some help from the ferry hands, we made This saved some

kilometers and put us right on the route we wanted, avoiding the traffic of



Waterford.

We had many things we wanted to see on the South Coast, one a new site run by volunteers as part of the European Union’s effort to recognize a number of Geoparks. We planned to visit the Copper Coast Geopark, newly established in Waterford County near



Bunmahon. Not knowing what to expect, we were delighted to round a corner and find the ruins of a copper mining operation with excellent interpretive signs. The geoparks are like our NPS historical parks, often tying small areas of significance together. We passed an area in the small town where they'd brought in the various rock types of the region, and had lunch at the Geopark's interpretive center. This was run by volunteers who greeted us and showed us several short films on the lifestyle of the miners, a grueling existence where men spent the days underground, some of the tunnels extending a quarter mile out under the sea. Women and

children worked to break up the ore, which was loaded on boats, then shipped to smelters in Wales. We took a lot of photos, enjoyed our interactions with the volunteers, and watched the array of films, spending more time than we originally planned.

As it was such a beautiful sunny day we took a quick vote and the group opted to go to Ballycotton for a cliff walk there that got rave reviews. We had time only for a sample of it, and the jade-green waters, gulls, and seabirds in flight, and abundant carpet of sea thrift and other wildflowers were lovely. A few went for coffee in the little town, so once Bernard got us rounded up, we then headed on to Kinsale. Being off on our timing, and not realizing the facility would close at 5:00 p.m., we had to forego a visit to Cobh, something to add in the future for sure. We also sailed right by the Jameson Distillery, which would have been fun to visit (Ty volunteering to be the official taster), but both places closed by five.



We got to our lodgings on the water at Kinsale a bit before six, happy to have time to explore. Our rooms at the Trident Hotel looked over the harbor, and the evening light on the colorful boats was lovely.



Amazingly, we still had sun in Ireland! Margaret and Joan walked out towards a local marsh after a quick dinner, while others dined at an award-winning restaurant here called Fishy Fishy, which held up to its acclaim.





Thurs., May 23

Birding at Clonikilty / Spectacular Mountain Drive / Killarney National Park



We left Kinsale after breakfast, on another beautiful, bright sunny day. Bernard told us more of the history of two forts nearby, and of the sinking of the Lusitania just offshore of Kinsale Head as we drove. He showed us the ruins of a 13th century monastery in a striking setting on the river. We got out for photographs, and then were drawn up the hill to a church that had stained glass windows by Henry Clark, a well-known artist. The church was open as they prepared for a mass, so we got to look inside. The acoustics were wonderful, and Park, who had read quite a bit about this artist, was pleased to see some of his work, and the rich cobalt blue glass that he

used so vividly.

In West Cork, we wanted to check the mudflats at Clonikilty for wading birds and did so, though the tide was way out. We did get to study several of the species we'd seen before, but at close range in the scope. Regina really enjoyed seeing the breeding plumage of Black-tailed Godwits, their russet necks just



shining in the sun. We had Curlews and Whimbrels side by side to compare, which was helpful. The



number of Oystercatchers was impressive on our walk back towards town, where some members of our group were having coffee and browsing the stores. Reunited at the supermarket, which was fun to scan for what locals could shop for, we headed up into the mountains.

How lucky we were to have a sunny day for this spectacular drive. We left the coastal scenery behind, turning towards the high mountain terrain of the West. Before ascending, we stopped for lunch in Bantry, a small city located on a stunning bay. People scattered

to pubs, a place with fresh foods named Organico, and to the Fish Kitchen, where Jean gobbled up an enormous platter of mussels fresh from Bantry Bay. Mary Jane remembered the town and the next few hours driving route well, recounting her adventures from a previous trip in which they'd wrecked their rental car as a huge lorry veered towards them and they had nowhere to go but off the road. Bernard teased her and offered to let her drive the bus. Today we made it through the series of tunnels with no problems. We pulled off at several places to take photographs.

On the road descending to Kenmare, we stopped at Mollie Gallivan's Cottage, the pioneer home of a woman who outlived her husband in the years of the famine, making her living on this small farm as a



roadside way stop that served up some local brew. The cottage is over 200 years old and still retains a thatched roof. A small trail behind the original cabin led to a stone solar alignment, woolen goods, and farm animals. Jan made friends with a donkey, while Mary Jane had quite a chat with a pig. We came back to the teahouse where the owner shared some of the "poitin". Illegal whiskey helped the enterprising Molly hold the farm and family together. Ty and Peg agreed it held a punch just right for the cold mountain air.

Our next stop was for photos at Lady's View, where a young man braved the wind to complete our experience with bagpipe music. It was inspiring to take in such a grand expanse of scenery, the view of a huge glacial-carved valley with its gem-like chain of lakes. As we continued on, dense sessile oak forest closed in over the road, and at times through gaps we could see down to the Killarney Lakes – lovely! We had time for a short walk up to Torc Falls, a falls of several levels with a rushing flow cascading through emerald green. Goldcrests sang and we watched them feeding on newly-budding oak leaves. Sharon and Joan continued up the steps and spied a Yellow Wagtail.

Our lodgings were at a country Inn called Glen Fia, just above the busy town of Killarney. A grand driveway led to the place, following a small stream lined with bluebells and Queen's Ann Lace. Some went into town to dine, but a good half of the gang was tired, and we elected to tuck up and have pizza and beer in the hotel's lovely glass conservatory. The evening's entertainment was a depressing but historically interesting movie, "The Field", which provided a poignant look at Ireland's famine and its dramatic effect on those who lived through it. The scenery in the movie was superlative, and we would pass by several of the film sites in our subsequent days. Much to think about in this movie!



Fri., May 24 Killarney National Park / White-tailed Eagles with Allan Mee / Muckross Abbey

Since we wanted a day with less driving and learned we'd be one of sixty buses in a line-up if we circled the



Ring of Kerry, we welcomed time to stay closer to "home" and just explore Killarney National Park and Ross Castle. We woke to another sun-bright day. Peg met a few for birding in the garden ahead of breakfast, and we found our first Treecreeper along with Blackbirds, Robins, Willow Warblers, and Chaffinches.



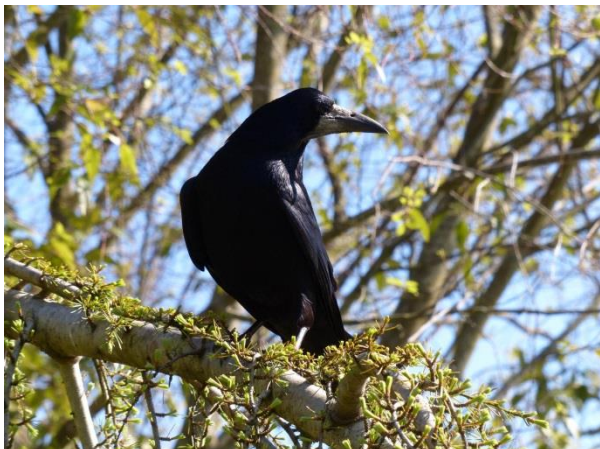
Breakfast was lovely, with window views out to the bluebells and garden. Allan Mee, a world-renowned raptor biologist, met us at 9:30 AM for a walk through oak and yew woodlands around the lake behind the historic Muckross House. We got in a mixed flock right away, and had good looks at Treecreepers, Chaffinches, Willow Warblers, and Long-tailed Tits. A bit further down the trail we had great looks at a pair of Jays, in this location fairly used to people, enough that we watched them for some time. They were feeding together on moss-clad branches of large oaks – wonderful!

Allan gave us a good deal of background on the restoration of White-tailed Eagles, which began with the release of 100 birds in 2007. He and his team had worked in Norway to collect a single chick from nests of wild pairs. This year was cause for celebration, as two nests had chicks hatch this very week, the first time in 100 years in Kerry! We met a volunteer for the project assigned to monitor one of the nests, one in a remote location, tucked away from the wind.

The trail led us around the lake, passing into mature yew forests as we walked onto limestone soils. We found orchids, wild garlic, bluebells, lovely saxifrages among the rocks, and more. We crossed a 250-year-old bridge, which afforded fine views in two directions. The wind churned up white water on both lakes. We took a detour to the main track, which by late-morning was busy with bicycles, passing by lands fenced for pasture for the park's herd of Kerry cattle, a hearty species similar to Angus with thicker coats.



We had lunch in the national park's cafeteria, which had really good food. Margaret got a good map at the Visitor Center, and several walked over to photograph Muckross House. Blue Tits called from the



brush, and Peg was surprised to see these hearty small songbirds already had fledged chicks they were feeding. Patient draft horses hitched up to carts waited patiently to take the next riders, elegant in their fancy harnesses.



We then went to Ross Castle, an impressive tower castle, incredibly scenic on the lakeshore, with mountains behind. Three stayed for the tour, braving the uneven circular stairs built to trip invading armies. These winding, angled stones were steep, but the reward, after swinging through the doorways, was again seeing several levels. The troops lived on the lower level alongside store rooms. As one worked their way up, there were servant's quarters, then dining quarters, and the living area for the clan. Only the clan leader had a bed, while everyone else slept on the floor. The highest level, with windows to view the lakes, was the dining area for the family.

Marcia, Joan, and Margaret "tried out" the three-seater toilet that hung out over the lake. Margaret shared that Joan had taught several units on castles and medieval history while teaching. Joan said her students would have loved the details of how one man's job was to shovel the dung out to sea, but he'd leave a portion so that the ammonia would travel down the hall to the laundry, where the fumes would fumigate the clothing for fleas and ticks. Toilet paper was dried moss – great news to pass on to sixth graders back home! The inside walls had reeds and a mix of cow's hair, pig's blood, and limestone as plaster. Only the lord had a chair, while everyone else had a stool.



Some of us went back for some R and R at the hotel where flowers filled the forest. Peg took time to



walk
and
watch
birds
on the
castle



grounds. A Robin posed nicely, as did a Wren, and Rooks were courting overhead. Five Mallards gathered around a lone female, their metallic-green heads gleaming in the sun. Peg got some great photos back across a bay to the castle.



Today was a “soft” day with our first rain drops of the trip landing on the window as we pulled out of Killarney. We were bound for the Cliffs of Moher, driving north and crossing the Shannon River by ferry. The ferry was quick, and we got out to observe Black-backed Gulls and Sandwich Terns, the latter hunting in the wake of a boat that churned up the waters. The towns we passed through were so clean and inviting, with colorful storefronts, lots of pubs, lace curtains, and fancy wood trim as special touches. They all had impressive churches and many had ruins interspersed with modern development.

Our luck with the weather was not with us today, and we encountered intermittent rain that came down quite heavily just as we reached the Cliffs of Moher.



None of us were prepared for the crowds that greeted us. While it is a state-of-the-art Visitor Center, on this rainy day it was just packed, with the many tour buses in the region converging there for lunch and a break inside from the rain. As it let up, Peg led the crew up to the cliffs, scope in hand to look for Puffins. Success! At first we glassed and glassed, seeing

myriad Razorbills, Guillemots, some Black Guillemots, Shags, Cormorants, and gulls, but then we found the pathway to a grassy topped islet and were able to see Puffins in flight. As we turned to go to another vantage point labeled “Puffin Colony Overlook”, Joan came



jogging down

the trail to reach us, saying, “they are just beyond where you turned around, quite close!” We set up the scope and caused quite a stir with the locals. We had plenty of time, so it was nice to share our delight at finding a ledge where, with the scope, we could see the comical faces of these delightful seabirds. Jean had this as her number one hoped-to-see bird on the trip, and had a very big smile on her face. There were also Northern Fulmars gliding by, their gray speckled backs easy to compare to



the more numerous Kittiwakes. The rain was spitting and viewing got a bit tough, so we gave up on trying for Manx Shearwaters or other species farther out at sea. Peg and Sharon continued on, checking out the colony overlook, and they were rewarded with seeing hundreds at the doors of their burrows.

We had a 3:00 PM reservation on a cruise along the cliffs, one that would bring us close looks at long lines of nesting Razorbills, Guillemots, and Kittiwakes, and across the flight paths of many Puffins. Only six of our



group members were boat-friendly so not that many got to experience it, but those who went found the cruise to be quite a thrill.

We got an impression of the cliffs being much taller than the impression from atop the rise. We also realized how extensive the seabird colonies were. We were on the water just an hour, and came back to find a very tame White-sided Dolphin in the bay, swimming with a snorkeler who patted its belly and played a chase game with it in the surf. Wow! While the six were on the cruise, the others explored the tiny town of Doolin in County



Clare, quite a center for Celtic music. We wished we could linger; this would be a fun place to stay.



We were bound for Galway. We passed extensive mud and rock flats going around the bay, but at this time of year we saw mainly Mute Swans and Mallards. In winter the shores team with ducks and geese, but today they were quiet at low tide. It was raining as we got to our hotel, so the very nice rooms were a charm. Several of the group ate right at the hotel, which hosts one of Galway's best-rated restaurants. Ralph led a crew out to explore a bit, and on Saturday night it was fun. Galway is a young people's town, with the university there, and gals were baring their legs, strutting down Shop and Quay streets looking for merriment, music, and fun. We ate at a delightful place, Blake's Corner, and needed the return walk to burn a few calories from all the delicious fare, along with the Guinness and wine that we'd consumed!



Sun., May 26 Galway / Farm Visit / Coole Park / Burren / Poul nabrone Dolmen

This morning, Bernard gave us a short tour of Galway by bus, as several had not gone out walking due to mist and rain the night before. He showed us the Spanish Arch, a beautiful cathedral, and the town square, where a sculpture of the Galway hooker sailboats stands.

Through a friendship of many years between Mary Jane



and the Nolan family that runs a B and B near Coole Park Nature Reserve, we had a chance to meet an Irish farm family, active in local farming. They were so excited to see her after an absence of seven years that they did not come out of the house for some time, forgetting the rest of us were there. The walkers of our group took off on a dirt track leading off the main road, and Peg did a little birding with the others. Then Tom Nolan came out to let us in a gate to walk down a road between their pastures. We passed

a series of rock-lined deep holes we assumed were part of their well, but later learned that this was the entrance to a vast network of underground caves. An expert caver had explored the maze in detail for over four years, staying often with the family. Sadly, he did what prudent cavers do not do. He went off solo to explore a long passage, and he did not make it. They found his body back 1.5K underground, needing experts to come in to find him. In the end it was a friend and fellow caver who made the effort to bring him out. After this event, the family decided it was too dangerous to open the caves to spelunkers, and there is no longer access.



On this day the family's concern was for a field of bawling calves, newly separated from their mothers, always a time of anxiety for the farm. The younger two children were there, and Sarah Jane demonstrated her new dancing skills prancing down the path, while Peter told us about his loyal passion to England's soccer team. Ralph and Bernard found a baby Greenfinch that had fallen out of the nest, and Peg placed it gently on the

hedgerow. Quick-eyed Sharon spotted our only Bullfinch to date as we were walking, though later in the trip we'd all have opportunity to see this handsome and colorful

species at Renvyle.



From here we

went over to Coole Park, part of the preserved area known as the Burren. This is a wooded section, and was set up well for our hikers to go off on a two-hour jaunt, while the rest of us birded and explored the gardens, grounds, and nature trail of the former estate of Lady

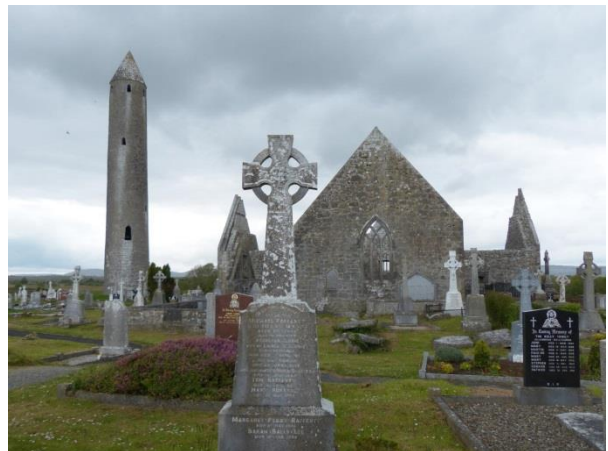




Gregory, a patron of William Yeats and other artists of the time. Prominent on the grounds is a massive Copper Beech tree, autographed by George Bernard Shaw, Yeats, and others of the day. There is also a human-shadow sundial, but we had no sun, so we could not master its craft. We had some great bird sightings here. Bold Mistle Thrushes fed on the lawn; both Gray and Pied wagtails were quite tame; and a Blackcap came out to sing and sing from two different perches, going back and forth to give us repeated views. On the trails both groups had another chance to see Jays, and the hikers encountered Long-tailed Tits and Treecreepers.

After this we had a bit of a mixed-up day, with Bernard determined to turn right when we'd lobbied for left. We made the same circuit by the day's end, but we had planned to first explore the vast open, eerie limestone terrain so characteristic of the Burren, and then divide our

remaining time to do other things like Visitor Centers and Abbey remains. Instead we did not get to the limestone section until about 4:00 PM, when people were tired and the winds were blustery.



Still we enjoyed a chance to see Poul nabrone Dolmen, a Neolithic tomb, standing above a tapestry of wildflowers taking shelter from the wind in cracks of the limestone. Don and Jan particularly liked time to wander and peer at the wildflowers growing in the protection of crevices of this 350 million-year-old limestone. The sun put on a quite a show giving us a rainbow and marvelous light as we descended the



very spectacular road with long views off to the hills.

We made several stops for photos and then continued on to home, driving around Galway Bay to our urban digs at the Park Hotel.



Dinner tonight was at our leisure, and several explored town as we now had our bearings. The city square has a sculpture of the red-sailed Galway Hookers, and several streets host a mix of shops and lively pubs. Ralph, Regina, Wynn, and Ken found one with live music, Irish musicians that started early enough for them to stay and enjoy it, just across from our hotel. Fun!

Mon., May 27 **Killary Fjord / Connemara National Park / Renvyle**





We left Galway City at 8:30 AM, bound for a catamaran boat ride on the Killary Fjord, the only true fjord in Ireland. While it is not as deep as many glacial-carved fjords, geologists have found headwalls and other features that identify it as a true fjord. Rocks on the north and south sides of this watery expanse differ greatly in age and structure. We arrived in plenty of time, Bernard making good time on the winding roads, and we found it to be a very comfortable boat. It had poured the night before, but nature must have gotten it out of its system, as we arrived to intermittent light mist and clearing. We saw several rainbows as we drove. The cruise was pleasant, and informative, though the narrative was bent towards convincing us that mussel and salmon aquaculture was good for the region, and we knew of

many environmental issues with wastes and genetic risks to wild stock associated with it. Ireland seems to be moving forward with such farming in places where natural water flow is strong, and they've tightened the laws that govern such use. There are no easy answers for many of the issues of our food production, except eating lower on the food chain.



After the cruise, we stopped in the local town to see a woolen shop. The scenery was stunning today as we drove north after the cruise. So much so that Regina said, "This scenery makes you feel like you are in a BBC documentary". The landscape of Connemara is stunning. We admired the picturesque sheep on the hillsides and the Connemara ponies in the fields.





Kylemore Abbey, a Benedictine monastery established in 1920 on the shore of a lake, at the foot of a dramatic mountain, was our next stop. The abbey, dating from 1868, is a neo-gothic wonder built by Mitchell Henry in memory of his wife Margaret.



From our group of quite varied pace and interests, there was something for everyone, from a stunning Victorian walled garden, to woodland trails, a tea room and gift shop, and the chapel associated with the working Abbey. There was a nice walk connecting the Abbey and the walled garden, with a shuttle bus to bring us home. Time passed quickly, but somehow Mary Jane even managed to have her daily ice-cream!



Bernard wanted to show us one of his favorite routes, that of Skyline Drive. He agreed it was NOT a normal route for a bus, but we were grateful he wanted to try it, and the views were just stunning. We got out several times for photos, greeting the woolly sheep that grazed in the gorse-strewn hills around us.



Then it was on to Renvyle, where we stayed in a rambling historic hotel. They had billed themselves as luxury, causing some disappointment as rooms were small and one had to wind through a maze to get to them. But the dining room was lovely, there was a cheery fire in the fireplace, and the gardens were rich with birdlife. The place is located on one of the most stunning views, encompassing a wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, which today was roaring. There was surf, and the stone beach made a huge racket as big waves crashed ashore. We were not disappointed in the local dining. Oh my, a four-course meal makes one retire quite full!





What a fantastic place to wake up to! Many of us could see the ocean view from our rooms, and this morning with continued blustery winds there was huge pounding surf over the rock reefs that jutted out between islands. One island held the remains of what was once an Abbey or some sort of large structure. Sheep grazed on them, even the small ones where it seemed a big wave could wash them away. Peg met four of the group who wanted to do some early birding.



We glassed the ocean and golf course pond, but due to the winds, spent most of our time in the sheltered garden. Here we had great looks at Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Robins, Dunnocks, Wrens, Willow Warblers, Eurasian Collared Doves, Great Tits, and other garden species. Oystercatchers were still grouped up as they were the night before, standing on the fairway and greens of the golf course. At 9:00

AM we left for Connemara National Park. We were so impressed with this park, and the set up could not have been more perfect for our group, which by this time we were calling the “gimpers” and the gazelles. There was an easy, moderate, and more difficult trail all looping back to the Visitor Center, where there were really good exhibits on the post-glacial vegetation change of the park. They also had a room devoted to understanding



bogs that was excellent. Many of us enjoyed tea and sweets, and some took in the film, while Peg, Jean, and Ken did some



birding. The birders found Treecreepers, baby Robins begging and being fed by adults, Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs, Chaffinches, Coal and Great tits, and very



active little



Goldcrests. Our gazelles scaled one of the “Bens”, this one known as Diamond Hill, a great loop of 4.4 kilometers climbing up to marvelous views back to Kylemore Abby and its lake, and in the other direction, out to the sea and the maze of islands off the Renvyle Peninsula. They found some great alpine flowers, a pair of Ravens courting overhead, and Stonechats. Margaret said the wind was so strong up top that she almost blew right over!

We went on to Clifden for lunch and a chance to see this small city, the service center for the area. Many of us ate at King’s Pub, a fun place with great atmosphere. Don caught a good photo of two very Irish characters outside the restaurant. They were rolling their cigarettes and drinking their Guinness, as they enjoyed some conversation. We wondered if they had been stationed there for the tourists. Sharon and Park



found a bookstore, and then enjoyed a chat with a local artist at our rendezvous point.



En route home we stopped at Cottage Crafts, a nice place to look for woolen goods. They carried sweaters of innovative design and some nice handspun wool for purchase. Here, Peg discovered the loss of her beloved baseball cap decorated with beads by the Massai. Left behind at the pub, Bernard our driver offered to retrieve it after dropping us off,

very sweet of him after such long driving days!

We were on schedule to meet a local Galway birding guide that our hosts of Lynchpin Tours had set for us. We met Tom Cuffe, and he gave us a good survey of seabirds, including Razorbills, and further practice identifying gulls, the latter of which were loafing around the golf course pond. Due to winds and



being cold, we turned our attention to the far more sheltered gardens. As we waited for a Wren to show itself, Marcia was distracted by another bird, one with a blackhead and orange breast – Bullfinch, one of our missing species! We were all happy to get very good looks at this beautiful species. Sharon had seen it earlier in the week, but the rest of us had missed that one and enjoyed this ‘tick’ thoroughly. Tonight we had a second multi-course dinner included, but some members of the group were slowing down on food consumption, just no room! The stalwart ones dove right in, enjoying absolutely lovely fresh fish dishes, tender steaks, rack of

lamb, and really well-crafted soups, salads, and sweets. Though the hotel itself is old and a bit odd-sorted for quality in its rooms, the public areas were delightful and the food divine. The views from the back of the hotel were superlative, with roaring surf, offshore islands, seabirds on the wing, and an unrivaled feeling of wild County Mayo.



Wed., May 29 Aasleagh Falls / Doolough Pass / Westport / Museum of Country Life / Sligo

This morning we had extra time to pack, sort, or take a walk by the sea before leaving the Connemara region. Sharon went out to find the Common Sandpiper, and she and Peg tallied a good list of the seabirds, including another Great Northern Diver, just offshore.

Bernard came for us at 9:30 AM, and we had a very scenic drive back around the fjord we had cruised on a few days previously, then up the coast to Westport. We stopped at Aasleagh Falls, not a high one but very scenic. A fly fisherman seemed to blend in with the scenery, tall mountains rising above. Peg searched for a Dipper with no luck, but we did see Coal Tits, and heard a chorus of Chaffinches, Blackcaps, and Blackbirds. Ewes and lambs were feeding alongside the road as we worked our way up Doolough Pass.



On this amazing, sun-bright day it was difficult to imagine the desperation of starving residents turning



toward their landlord to keep from dying, only to be turned away. We stopped to read the text of two monuments left to honor the hundred or more persons who died walking back, destitute, weak, broken in heart and spirit. Ireland lost half its population during the years of the potato famine. We had learned that in this region, one of the most-hard hit, this tragedy also coincided with the disappearance of the herring in the region, once so abundant that people could even fish by scooping them up from shore. On this day the mountains and lake were inspiring. At the monuments, Mary Jane gave us statistics about how people lived, gleaned from talks with colleagues from County Mayo.

We had an extra stop caused by the need for a rest stop, and Marcia discovered that the library had both bathrooms and an interesting exhibit on Grace O'Malley, the pirate queen, who commanded the seas



around Clew Bay. We took a quick peek at the exhibit, learning that she had petitioned the Queen of England for the right to keep up her pirate trade, and won favor. The meeting is described as one of mutual respect, two women as leaders of men in a time when it was very much a man's world. We learned that she lived 71 years, and at 67 was still leading her fighting fleets in battle. Quite a story!



Our planned stop was time for a leg-stretch and some retail therapy (or an Irish coffee for Jean). Right out of the bus, along a picturesque canal that runs through the city, Peg spotted a Mediterranean Gull posing for us. Everyone could see it with ease as they disembarked; after all our work to find it at Lady's Island Lake we marveled at this unexpected sighting. People found some good seafood chowder. Ralph found a replacement for his lost pocketknife, and he bought some lovely white cheddar to use it on. The chocolate was starting to run out.

We traveled about another 45 minutes to the Museum of Country Life outside Castlebar, a division of the National Museum of Ireland and very well done. Park pointed out we could have used double or triple the amount of time we had there, and many agreed. There was so much to take in and it was so well presented, through old photographs, interviews, letters, artifacts, maps, and commentary. Joan was amazed to learn how they made the pack saddles and horse collars for their horses out of woven sea grasses. The exhibit really brought home how few resources the people had to make life work, and how much an element of their lives poverty was, while right next door were people who lived in a multi-storied mansion, drinking fine wines imported from France and Spain. It was still a picture-perfect day, and one wanted to just lie in the grass under the large trees that rimmed the lakeshore.

From here it was an hour and a half or so to our hotel. We rode quietly, taking in all we'd done over the last few days. Bernard had another tour to pick up, so our final day would be with a new driver. Bernard had taken good care of us and survived the demands of birdwatchers, something quite new to his touring in Ireland.



Peg met five of the group before dinner for an hour's walk. We made a loop, starting by checking out the golf course that dated to 1894, where Rooks and Mistle Thrushes were feeding on the lawn. We then walked to a view of the beach, a great crescent of sand with a view of the mountain Benbulbin behind. On this sunny summer night, there was a lot of activity. At least a dozen people were in swimming, others wading in shallow pools the waves had left behind. Some flew kites, others played ball – in every way it resembled a night at the beach in any part of the world. Save that we had on sweaters, windbreakers, and scarves, and a local woman had just described the wind as one that “would split your skin”! We took in the full scene, then walked back toward the Sligo Harbor, where the Iron Man statue guards the entrance, and atop a bluff a lovely sculpture of a woman with outstretched arms reminds one of all the women who waited for their men to come back from the sea.



Meadow Pipits
and Skylarks

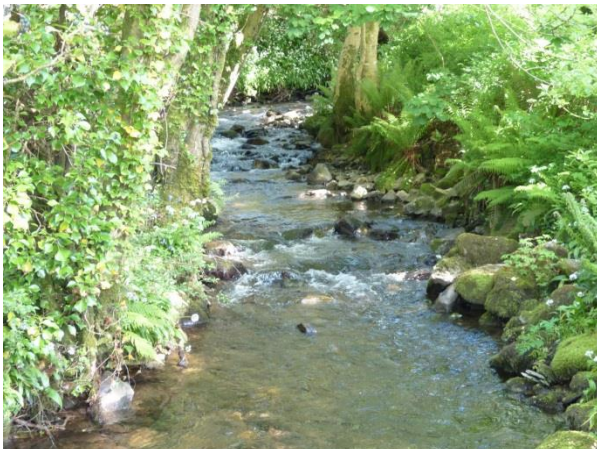
flew overhead; a Razorbill and a Black Guillemot fed in the harbor; and in the shelter of hedgerows a pair of Greenfinches fed hungry, begging young. We spotted a Linnet that gave us quick views as we returned to the hotel. As dinner was expensive and a big tour group filled the dining room, we opted to eat in the pub, where a new waiter was learning his trade, smiling warmly at Ralph as he received “my first tip”! The atmosphere in this historic hotel was better than the food, but we had a casual evening and time to chat.



Thurs., May 30

**Yeats's Country / Glencar Lake and Falls
/ Sligo / Dooney Rock / Strokestown / Dublin**

This morning we explored a bit of the country that so inspired W.B. Yeats, who spent his boyhood summers at Sligo. We met our new driver, Hugh, at 9:00 AM and were soon on our way out to Glencar Lake and Glencar Falls, a bit northwest of Sligo. Peg had chosen this route to give us all a good view of Benbulbin and on yet another sun-bright Irish day we had a view full on. We could see it as a source of inspiration, with its many layered limestone cliffs rising above shale skirts below. A mosaic of rock walls and farms lies below the mountain, and the lowest point of the valley is filled with Glencar Lake, today shining a rich cobalt blue. Two kinds of heather were in bloom in a small garden as we entered the path to the falls, and a Gray Wagtail pair entertained us. Mary Jane found mosses, ferns, and liverworts in abundance, and here the Rowan (Mountain Ash) was in full bloom. The falls is over 50 feet high, and while we found no Dipper today, the habitat seemed ideal. Kid lambs scampered about rich fields – a pretty idyllic place.



From here we went back to Sligo Town, hoping to see some of Jack Yeats's paintings, (brother of William B. Yeats), as he is known for some iconic landscape paintings of the region. Alas, the exhibit featured a series of his

images not appreciated by most of the group, disturbing paintings inspired by themes of the circus, clowns, and their connection to the human spirit. Ty and Regina enjoyed them very much, and with



luck our bus driver made a pass back by the place, so we left early, pausing for photos by the Sligo Abbey and a statue of Yeats standing with his cloak flying in the wind, both in Sligo Town.



We wanted to appreciate Lough Gill and Yeats's treasured spot, the Isle of Inishmore. On such a bright day we chose to do so by walking for a view from Dooney Rock, a park with trails along the lakeshore. Peg was on a quest to find Little Grebe, a common bird we just had missed, and with luck, we found one on the far lakeshore. On an adjacent cove, there was a pair of Great-crested Grebes for comparison. In the woods we found Goldcrest, Great Tits, and numerous Chaffinches. Near the car park we heard, but did not find a Garden Warbler, but its resonant tones were distinct. The wooded trails were enchanting, with a carpet of oxalis so green.... The park

had an interesting system of interpretive signs that one would pull out from a post to read, giving information about local trees and Red Squirrels. We had views of the lake, of the island, and of a pair of Mallards in the cover near the start and end of the trail.

From here we headed to Strokestown Park, to learn more about the famine of the 1840s. After lunch in the café, we met a guide named Caiden, who took us to the landlord's house, a Georgian mansion preserved with its original furnishings. He seemed so young, we all wondered how it would be, and he



was marvelous. He had a great style of presentation and knew so many details about the rooms. He encouraged questions and was patient as we took photos, asked questions, and together tried to envision how people could live so well in a manor house while just outside people lived like farm animals crowded into stables. The Famine Museum handles this well, as it preserves both the manor house and then depicts the potato famine in detail, showing the progress of the blight, the limited options of the residents, and the desperation that existed through those years. Time passed quickly here. We met at 4:00 PM for the trip

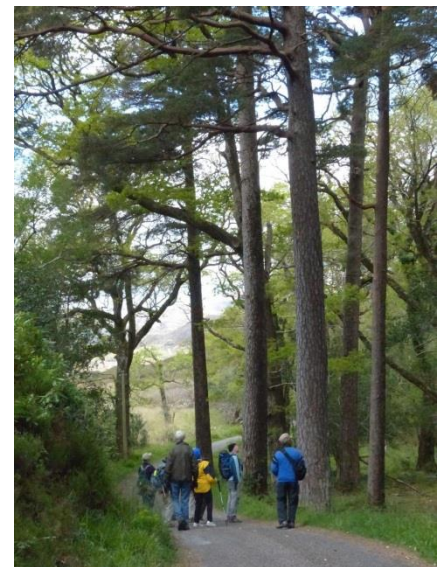
into Dublin, back from the vivid green countryside to the city.



We had time to clean up and pack ahead of our farewell dinner, which was at the hotel. Ken, Ty, and Peg closed out the tour with one last tipple of Jameson in the bar.

Fri., May 31 Return to USA / Some stay on to explore Dublin...

Our tour came to an end today, and we grouped up by departure times to take taxis to the airport. Marcia, Regina, and Ralph stayed on to see more of Dublin and from what we hear, had a great time. Many thanks to Lynchpin Tours for superb ground operations for our group in Ireland!



Photos by Peg Abbott, Ty Wims, and Ralph and Regina Anavy.

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