

Birds of the Hamilton Wetland, Blackrock, County Louth



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Blackrock Tidy Towns**

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Context

The Hamilton wetland is a small area of wetland on the periphery of Blackrock, County Louth. It is surrounded on all sides by residential housing, though the area opens into fields, hedgerows and a golf course to the north. The rectangular wetland is approximately 50 metres by 200 metres and may be artificial in origin, but given the vegetation in the fields to the north, is probably a vestige of a previous wetland now in-filled and developed.

Blackrock Tidy Towns Committee requested a survey of birds using the area, particularly breeding birds. Therefore a survey was carried out through May and June 2010 involving three visits to the area (morning, evening and afternoon).



Hamilton wetland is shown in red

Habitat

The wetland is a large sedge swamp per Fossett (2000). It is dominated by bulrush¹ (*Typha latifolia*) and water horsetail with duckweed, watercress, various herbaceous plants, sedges, rushes and grasses as well as a few small trees, mainly ash. The wetland is surrounded on three sides by hedgerow type vegetation (including a stand of dogwood to the south). A stand of crack willow is to be found on the open edge where there is a gravel path and grassy verge. Water would appear to be entering via a ditch or channel at the southern (wetter) end. The northern part is drier and may be starting to scrub up. The immediate vicinity has several mature gardens.

¹ “This one was once almost always called reedmace but became known as bulrush (or sometimes bull-rush) after a painting by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. His *Moses in the Bulrushes* showed the baby in a basket among plants which are clearly of the genus *Typha*. After that, the name bulrush, formerly applied exclusively to *Scirpus* (or *Schoenoplectus*) *lacustris* attached itself to *Typha latifolia* (and lesser bulrush to *T. angustifolia*) and many botanists have now given up the argument that these are incorrect.” Source: Natural England, 2010.



Crack willow with bulrush, flag iris and hedgerows in background

Birds

The area is of interest to birds for several reasons. Firstly wetlands are a rich source of biodiversity and as such are particularly ecologically productive in terms of invertebrates; these in turn attract larger animals including birds that feed on them. They also provide water for washing and drinking. Secondly wetlands provide a refuge from various predators, in this instance probably primarily cats. Thirdly wetlands provide natural habitat types that provide nesting opportunities. In winter wetlands provide refuge for over-wintering migrants Therefore birds using the area fall into four main categories:

- Breeding
- Foraging
- Roosting
- Over-wintering



Blackbird collecting worms at Hamilton wetland

Breeding Birds

Only one species is nesting within the area, a pair of Reed Buntings. Reed Buntings make a nest of grass, sticks and moss close to the ground in marshy wet places. Two male robins and two male wrens were singing competitively in early May. The following species are probably nesting in the immediate periphery of the wetland or in adjacent gardens:

Species	Behavior	Number
Reed Bunting	Singing, visiting probable nest	2
Wren	Singing, carrying food	2
Robin	Singing, carrying food	2
Blackbird	Singing, carrying food	1
House Sparrow	Singing, feeding young	1
Blue tit	Carrying food	2
Pied Wagtail	Carrying food	1
Dunnock	Singing	
Great tit	Singing	1
Willow Warbler	Singing	1
Wood Pigeon	Singing	2
Chaffinch	Singing	1
Goldfinch	Singing	2
Song Thrush	Singing	1
Collared Dove	Pair present	2
Moorhen	Single bird present	1

Table 1: Breeding Birds

Foraging and Feeding

Wetlands typically support a large number of insects, worms, gastropods and the like, as well as frogs, newts, eels, and small mammals. Many of the insect species go through immature stages in the water to then emerge and fly over the water, creating a cloud of flies in the air and the trees and shrubs around the site. Many insects hide in the folded leaves of the bulrush. The area also produces materials suitable for nest-building, in particular the fluffy bulrush seeds. House martins were also observed to collect mud for nest building. The area is also attractive to raptors that hunt the birds and mammals who use the area. In addition to the species mentioned in table 1 the following species were observed feeding in the area:

Species	Behavior	Number
Grey Heron	Hunting eels or frogs	1
Swallow	Hawking insects in the air	12
House Martin	Hawking insects in the air	3
Sparrowhawk	Flew across site	1
Greenfinch	Feeding in sycamore	1
Mistle Thrush	Feeding on berries	1
Jackdaw	Collecting twigs	2

Table 2: Foraging birds

Over-wintering and Roosting

The area was not visited during winter due to time constraints but consultation with those familiar with the area confirms the regular presence of grey heron and the occasional presence of snipe, mallard and moorhen during winter.



Hamilton wetland from the northern drier end.

Conclusion

The Hamilton wetland, though small, is an important oasis for wildlife in the area, particularly birds. The area is starting to scrub up (small trees bramble and the like growing in it) which may be the result of the northern section drying out. To limit this it may be worthwhile to ring-strip the scrub (though leaving the dead scrub as useful perching for birds). It may also be worth investigating the source of water with a view to maintaining a sufficient level to cover the whole area. A stand of dogwood to the south may need to be controlled if it starts spreading. There was some evidence of dumping small amounts of rubble and garden waste on the margins. This should be strongly discouraged both because it may lead to colonization by an invasive exotic, and the rotting vegetation (eg from grass or leaf cuttings) may contaminate the water.

References

- 2000, Fossett, Guide to Irish Habitats, Heritage Council.
- 2006, Merne, Roe, Ecology of Blackrock, Blackrock Tidy Towns Committee.