

NATURE

Activity N05

Theme

Class activity (CA). Pupils observe birds in their school grounds and note how different birds have different beaks that suit the type of food they eat.

Objectives

Classifying birds by observing their beaks, exploring the relationship between birds'

beaks, where they live, what they eat and why they behave the way they do.

Curricular Strands

SESE, Science–Plant and animal life; Sort and group living things into sets according to observable features

Skills

Questioning, observing, predicting, sorting, identifying

Time

30 minutes

Links to Green Schools

Observing nature in the school grounds

Watch the Birdie!

OBSERVING AND DESCRIBING BIRDS

WHAT YOU NEED

- Activity sheet
- Sets of binoculars (if possible)
- Bird hide or bird table
- Bird identification key from this activity sheet

WHAT YOU DO

- 1 This activity is a good follow-on from the construction of a bird table or bird hide. Alternatively the pupils could find a secluded area of the school grounds where they can watch birds.
- 2 Each student gets a copy of the activity sheet below.
- 3 Discuss with the class if they have ever noticed that birds have different shaped beaks. What kinds of beaks have they seen?
- 4 Different types of birds have beaks especially suited to the food they eat. The beak of a bird is one of the characteristics used to identify birds.

Not only can a beak tell you what a bird might eat, it also gives you a clue as to where a bird might live. A robin, for example has a thin, slender pointed beak for catching and eating insects. It therefore needs to live in gardens, woodlands, urban and rural areas where it can pick insects off leaves, twigs and bark. It could not live on the seashore. A heron has a long dagger-like beak for catching fish and long legs so it can stand in water.

- 5 Look at the table below, which tells you how the beaks of the top ten garden birds in Ireland are adapted to what they eat.
- 6 Following this exercise go out into the school grounds (with binoculars if possible) and see if you can see any beaks in action. This ties in with other observing and classifying exercises.



NATURE

Activity N05

Continued →

Questions

- 1 Did you see any of the most common garden birds in your school grounds?
- 2 Were there more insect-eaters or seed-eaters among the birds you saw?
- 3 Why do you think it is important that different birds that live in the same place eat different foods?

Go further

- 1 See the Primary Curriculum Support Programmes' bird song activity in the science resources section of www.pcsp.ie
- 2 Make a bar chart and pin it up on your classroom wall. Fill in the chart every time you see a bird. Which birds occur most in your school grounds?

Bird**Beak Type and Food**

Robin Wren	Thin, slender, pointed beak. Used for picking insects and spiders off twigs, bark and undergrowth
Blackbird	Longer pointed beak for pulling worms from the ground and picking berries
Song thrush	Long, thin beak, used to get snails out of their shells and to pick berries
Blue tit Great tit Coal tit	Short, pointed beak, used for gathering insects and small seeds and nuts. These birds are good at hanging from bird feeders.
Chaffinch Greenfinch	Short, pointed beak, used for gathering seeds and insects
Magpie	Large strong beak that can break the eggs of other birds and even eat chicks

NATURE

Activity N05

Continued →

The illustrations and a lot of the information in this key are from the Sherkin Island Marine Station 'Birds Colouring & Guide Book', reproduced by kind permission.

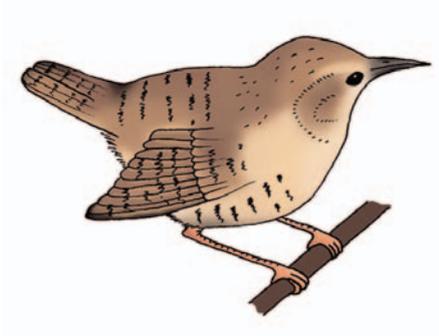
Available from sherkinmarine@eircom.net

Here are some of the most common Irish birds. You may think that a lot of them are very alike and find it confusing at the start. Don't give up! As you observe them you will notice differences in the way they look and behave, and where they live and feed. This will help you to tell them apart, and in no time you'll be naming them.

Sizes are from tip of bill to tip of tail

SMALL BIRDS

Wren–Dreoilín



The wren is one of our smallest birds (9.5cm). The wren is a warm shade of brown and has a small tail that sticks up in the air. It can be seen gardens, hedges and woods and is usually seen alone.

Diet: insects, spiders, larvae and seeds

Eggs: 5-8 eggs in a dome-shaped nest

Blue tit–Meantán gorm



The blue tit is a small bird (10-12cm) with distinctive blue and yellow feathers and a black stripe across the eyes. Blue tits can be seen in gardens, parks and hedgerows, and they are often seen in small groups around bird feeders.

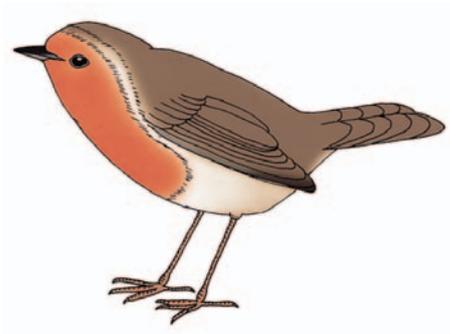
Diet: insects, berries, caterpillars, seeds, spiders and nuts from bird feeders and tables

Eggs: 8-15

NATURE

Activity N05

Continued →

**Robin-Spideog**

Robins are easily identified by their red breast. These small birds (12-14cm) have a brown back and wings and can be seen in gardens, woods, parks and hedges all over the country. They are usually alone and quite cheeky. If you sit still they will come very close.

Diet: worms, insects, snails and fruit

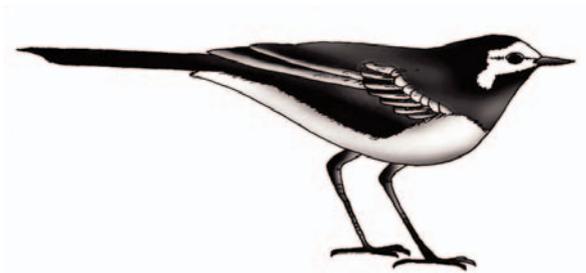
Eggs: 3-6

**Swallow-Fáinleog**

The swallow spends the winter in Africa and makes the long trip to the same nest in Ireland each year in April. The nests are made from mud and are often in the rafters of barns or under the eaves of buildings. The swallow has a red face, black head, body and wings and a white breast. This bird can be seen flying low over the ground or water or perched on overhead wires. It has a very long tail for its size, which brings its length to 17-21cm.

Diet: flying insects

Eggs: 3-6

**Pied wagtail-Glasóg shráide**

Pied wagtails are black and white. Their very long tail, which bobs up and down as they walk, gives them their name. They are about 16-19cm long and can be seen on city streets, in towns and in the countryside.

Diet: flies and moths

Eggs: 5-6

NATURE

Activity N05

Continued →

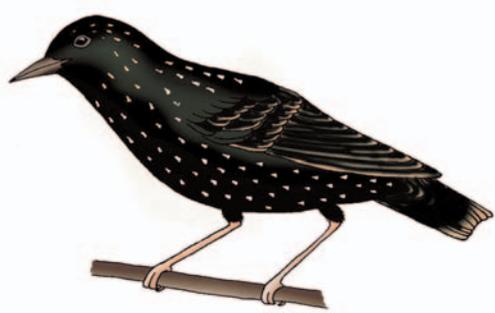
MEDIUM-SIZED BIRDS

Blackbird—Lon dubh

The blackbird grows to 25-29cm in length and has a beautiful song. The male is black with a bright orange bill, while the female has dark brown plumage (feathers) and a dark bill. Blackbirds can be seen in gardens, parks and woodlands, hopping from place to place and pulling worms from the ground. They are seen alone or sometimes in pairs.

Diet: insects, fruit, seeds, berries and earthworms

Eggs: 3-5 eggs

Starling—Druid

Starlings are very common and can be seen in flocks everywhere. They have very shiny dark-brown and black feathers and pale speckles. Their yellow bill gets a little darker in winter. Starlings are about 20cm long and can be told apart from blackbirds by their speckles and shorter tail, and their habit of staying in large flocks.

Diet: worms, insects, spiders, snails and berries

Eggs: 5-7

Jackdaw—Cág

Jackdaws are black with a greyish head and blue eyes. They are 30-34cm long, smaller than a crow but bigger than a blackbird. They have a much smaller bill than a crow and nest in groups in the tops of tall trees. They can be seen in towns, cities and the countryside.

Diet: insects, grain, fruit, seeds and eggs of other birds

Eggs: 3-6

Song thrush—Smólach ceoil

Song thrushes have a lovely call and can be seen in gardens, parks and woodlands. They are brown with a paler belly with black speckles on the breast. They can be seen banging snails off rocks to get the snails out of their shells.

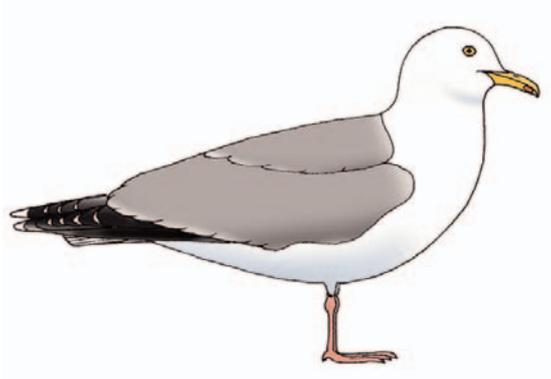
Diet: snails and berries

Eggs: 3-6

NATURE

Activity N05

Continued →



LARGE BIRDS

Herring gull–Faileán scadán

The herring gull, the most common gull in Ireland, measures 54-60cm. Herring gulls nest on cliffs, islands and even roofs. Gulls are seabirds but can also be seen inland in flocks. Gulls can often be seen scavenging on rubbish dumps.

Diet: fish, crabs, eggs of other birds, food scraps and worms

Eggs: 3

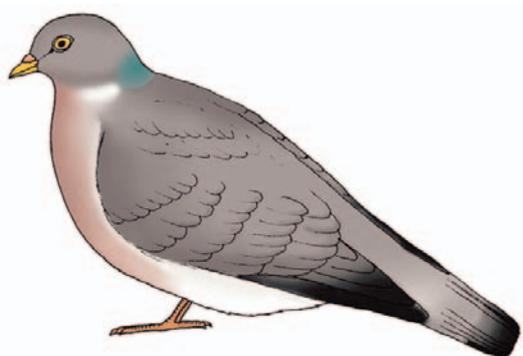
**Magpie–Snag breac**

Magpies are cheeky and are easy to identify because of their black and white feathers. These birds are about 40-50cm long and can be seen in groups in town and country areas. They build large dome-shaped nests from twigs and mud. There is an old rhyme about the Magpie that says:

One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret never to be told. Eight for a wish, nine for a kiss, ten is a bird you must not miss.

Diet: worms, slugs, pet food, eggs and chicks of smaller birds

Eggs: 4-7

**Woodpigeon–Colm coille**

The woodpigeon is the largest member of the pigeon or dove family, at 38-43cm. Their plumage is mainly light grey with a purple tinged breast and white, green and purple patches on the side of the neck. Woodpigeons can be seen in groups in fields or gardens, feeding in the grass or sitting in trees or hedges.

Diet: seeds, cereals, leaves and berries

Eggs: 2