

## Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*

(Linnaeus, 1758). Breeds across southern Canada from southern British Columbia east through to Nova Scotia and south to Central America and locally in the Caribbean islands east to Puerto Rico and in Revillagigedo (Clarion) and Tres Marias I. off Pacific Coast of Mexico.

Polytypic, five subspecies recognised. Amongst these wing length increases from south to north, plumage tone varies from dark in east to pale in west and toe length decreases from east to west. The racial identity of vagrants is undetermined, but probably involves *carolinensis* (Linnaeus, 1766), the dark, long-winged, long-toed and short-billed population of the eastern United States and Canada and of Bermuda and Bahamas (Aldrich 1993).

**Status:** Four records, including two almost simultaneous arrivals in 2007.

**1989 Isle of Man:** Calf of Man, first-winter trapped 31st October, found dead 1st November.

**1999 Outer Hebrides:** Carinish, N. Uist - first-winter, 13th-15th November.

**2007 Outer Hebrides:** Carnach, N. Uist - first-winter, 1st-7th November.

**2007 Galway:** Inishbofin, 2nd-15th November.

Both 2007 individuals proved to be popular attractions, the excitement of the first for Ireland described in detail.

*A story always goes with the finding of a rare bird. Sometimes published accounts skip the turn of events surrounding the bird's discovery and concentrate on tedious descriptive details. For something as distinctive as a Mourning Dove there was never going to a prize for identification perception, although it was important to try and establish the bird's age. I had been on Inishbofin for part of October and got into the habit of keeping a diary, mainly to link weather conditions to migration. Little did I know what lay ahead in the final chapter. Only through a convulsion of luck did I happen to be on hand when the bird appeared. The following excerpt was written as events unfolded, its conclusion worryingly unclear until the very end.*

**Friday 2 November.** Low cloud and grey, dreary light. SE wind. Lying under a duvet and waiting for signs of daylight, it took just three calls to get me outdoors. A Robin ticked, Siskins twittered and then a Yellow-browed Warbler hit high notes just outside the bedroom window. As ever with this magical island, there was hardly time to wonder if there might be something fresh in, when a male Blackcap flitted past.

A Willow Warbler (rare in November) was nearby and by dusk the warbler totals stood at seven Chiffchaffs and five Blackcaps. That made 15 individuals of four species. The day went well, despite not rising above an enjoyable mix of common migrants. When, about 1700hrs, I flushed a dapper male Brambling from a crop patch which perched and gave perfect views, I named it Bird of the Day. I hurried on, walking briskly along the road above Lough Teampaill, keen to squeeze birding time from the embers of daylight. I was trying to reach Regina's garden before dark, thinking that there might be just enough time to glimpse warblers making final insect sorties before going to roost. Coming fast towards me but dropping low and out of sight, I saw what I speculated might be a Rock Dove. Its

fast erratic flight said pigeon but I sensed that, if I saw it again, it could prove to be something else; maybe nothing more than a kamikaze Blackbird zooming off to bed. I was, nonetheless, curious. I got to the top of a rise and there it was – standing in the middle of the road about 30 metres ahead. Before raising binoculars I hoped that its small size was going to materialise into a Turtle Dove – new for Inishbofin – but as soon as I looked I knew what I beheld. The pointed tail, short red legs and especially the big black ‘fingerprints’ on the rear of its folded wings screamed MODO! That second was a long one. In the space of it, I switched from Turtle Dove to Mourning Dove and experienced a pulse-rate rise from average to imminent coronary. I had a new bird for Ireland parked on the road in front of me. I suppose a kind of panic set in. I desperately wanted to get a picture – but in semi-darkness? I needed to reconfigure the ISO setting on the camera in order to boost shutter speed. I heard voices. People were on the road ahead of me and any moment now would walk around a bend and almost step on the dove. I shouted but it was too late; it sprang into flight with the speed of a clay pigeon. I fired the camera in what I knew was a vain, futile attempt to immortalise an epic rarity. As the group filed past me – virtually the only human beings I had seen all afternoon – I was in meltdown. I should have been in seventh heaven but it felt more like purgatory. The prize had been snatched away. It had flown off in the direction I was walking, so I continued. Incredibly, it had settled beyond the bend. Proving that cruelty can be limitless, this time a cat was stalking it. In a flash, the cat saw me and bolted. That action panicked the dove and it was off again, hanging right and dropping out of sight towards the hostel. I didn’t pursue it, preferring instead to leave it in peace and pray that I might relocate it tomorrow.

Writing these words hours later, I don’t know why I am not in a celebratory mood. I saw it briefly but well enough to identify it. Surprisingly, the hopelessly blurred photographs – handheld at one eighth of a second – show enough information to confirm the identification. I guess that I am less than ecstatic because, when you wait 40 years for such moments to arrive, you want them to consist of something better than 40 seconds of blind panic.

**Saturday 3 November.** Totally overcast and perfectly calm. It was a night of one long post-mortem. Sometime in the wee small hours I became completely satisfied with the ability of my three photographs to resolve the indisputable image of a Mourning Dove. I started remembering Photoshop settings to boost shadows and bring up contrast. In my mind’s eye I could visualise the bird’s outline popping into a recognizable figure with short sandgrouse legs and a spiked appendage for a tail. There would be sufficient detail to upgrade it from smoke to substance. Job done, I began to pore over tactics for daybreak. Should I position myself on a height and hope to see it fly from roost and return roughly to where I last saw it? What, exactly, was it up to on the road? If it were digesting grit, then maybe it would not return to a particular spot. Was the best policy to walk and walk and hope that our paths crossed once more?

At 0730hrs the calls of two Yellow-browed Warblers were almost ignored. Regina’s trees would have to wait. It felt like heresy, but nothing mattered until there was a conclusion to the hunt for Al-Zenaida. I walked slower than the pace of American tourists and made long sweeping scans over roads, telegraph wires, stone walls and fence posts. It was a rare morning of perfect calm. Calls could be heard at long range. One call that will forever transport me back to childhood drifted from afar. An unseen Great Northern

*Diver was wailing from somewhere on the sea between Inishbofin and Inishlyon. I have heard the sound just twice before in Ireland, each time on flat calm November mornings. The eerie yet beautiful call formed a backdrop in Tales from the Riverbank, the TV of my toddlerhood. What a time to hear it again. Redwings, Fieldfares, a pair of Bramblings, and two apiece of Chiffchaff and Blackcap were the pick of migrants making their way through East Quarter.*

*Now events overtook solo birdwatching. The Island Discovery had been chartered and was due at 0945hrs. At 1000hrs a 50-strong column of birders filled the road at Regina's garden gate. Thus far, my searching had been in vain. Could reinforcements find it? Like a cell-dividing bacterium the posse split and headed in more and more directions at successive road junctions. With troops deployed and six hours at our disposal, surely somebody would bump into it? That depending on it still being alive. Well, it was. At the Clossy road junction I was with a splinter group that had turned right. Scouts among those that had turned left contained Michael O'Keefe who struck off on an unknown bearing. From an invisible location in West Quarter he phoned Seamus Enright who passed on the happy news that lit up my world.*

*What followed was a gravitational surge in the direction of others who had line of sight of Michael. It took ten minutes of speed walking to reach him along the track leading to the construction site of the new airstrip. And there it was, a phantom no more, the first transatlantic arrival at Inishbofin's Mourning Dove International Airport. What a moment.*

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**Discussion:** A nest and two eggs, one containing a half developed embryo, was found on a steel structure imported from Texas, USA via Rotterdam on board the Euroclipper that docked at Monstrore, Angus & Dundee, on 21st-22nd September 1983 (Forrester et al. 2007). Another, rather bizarre, record involved an adult found at London Heathrow airport on 9th February 1998 which had arrived in the hold of a plane that had arrived from Chicago, USA the same day.

One from Sweden (3rd-11th June 2001) was accepted onto category D. The only other category A Western Palearctic records are from Iceland (19th October 1995), and the Azores (2nd November 2005). In spring 2008 singles were seen in Germany (4th May) and Denmark (19th May); based on plumage details both were considered to be the same as the individual from Co. Galway in November 2007.

This attractive dove is one of the most abundant and widespread terrestrial birds of North America with a population estimated to be approximately 350 million, of which some 20 million are shot annually (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2007). Two principal subspecies occupy most of the range with the larger, greyish brown, *carolinensis* in the east presumably responsible for all British and Irish records. Eastern birds generally migrate south and southwest to wintering areas at lower latitudes within the breeding range.

Migration is mostly diurnal, primarily over land. Birds have been observed in trans-Gulf migration, sometimes landing on boats, so it is perhaps curious that it took until 1989 for one to reach the Western Palearctic.

Mourning Dove was one of the most frequent North American landbirds recorded on transatlantic voyages made by Durand (1972) from 1961-1965 who recorded 14 individuals on four occasions including a parry of 10 six hours from New York on 1st October 1963. The tired condition of the first two British records points at a direct transatlantic crossing as does the timing of the two in 2007, following a strong westerly air stream.