LAHINCH

ECOLINKS

INTRODUCTION

Whoever referred to golf as a 'good walk ruined' was clearly neither an optimist nor a naturalist. Who doesn't admire the golfer, apparently unaffected by frustration, delighting in the meandering that comes with failure to master the game. Such a stalwart is happy to find their ball off the fairway in the flower-spangled rough: others can have the success; the circumstance of golf is enough. Most of us are less stoical, inclined to the odd expletive, but have learned in the outdoor classroom of the course to take the bitter with the sweet and thus grow with the game. Part of this is taking time 'to stop and smell the flowers'.

This booklet is not designed for the compulsively disappointed (though it might help them). It is aimed both at those who are already aware of the ecological compensations of golf and also at the uninitiated – optimistic – majority. It is a little celebration of coexistence – of human activity with nature's agenda – a microcosm of a universal relationship.

There are those, of course, who don't see it that way. On the one hand, the natural world is seen simply as a backdrop to human affairs, to be used and abused as the need arises. Thankfully, that simplistic, often destructive view is not so dominant nowadays. In another perspective man becomes the callous destroyer of innocent nature: the development of a golf course, the conversion of pristine, ecologically rich habitat into barren wasteland.

While it is difficult to empathise with the thoughtlessness of the former view, one has to have sympathy with those espousing conservation. There is no denying that pressure to satisfy the ever-increasing demand for golf has resulted in decline in wild dune systems. Legislation to protect our remaining wild places, including dunes, could not have come at a better time and the future for conservation is bright. However, the notion that golf courses are incompatible with nature conservation is clearly without foundation. Indeed golf courses often act as sanctuaries for rare and endangered species – witness the important natterjack toad habitats carefully protected at Dooks golf course in County Kerry.

Not that Lahinch has such a celebrated wild inhabitant. Lahinch's ecological importance centres on the diversity of its flora and fauna and the wild, relatively unmanaged circumstance of its existence there.

The links are replete with life. On a sunny summer's day they are a delight whether one is playing golf or not. Marram grass on the dunes sways constantly to the rhythm of the wind while skylarks and meadow pipits fill the sky with their songs against a changing backdrop of white on blue. Hares scurry timidly away while swallows and sand martins, hawking for insects, swoop brazenly around the feet of golfers. Quiet sheltered dune sides and hollows support lush carpets of wild flowers – yellow trefoil and kidney vetch, blue milkwort and violets, red orchids . . . and close at hand an equally gaudy supporting cast of bees, day-flying moths and butterflies. Its all there if one takes the time to look.

In winter golf can often be a case of 'battening down the hatches' particularly on a course as exposed as Lahinch. 'Ah but that's the real challenge', assert the devotees and who can argue. Wildlife also keeps low and there is less engaging prettiness, the dune flowers having died back until next season. Bats and some butterflies have gone into hibernation but nocturnal predators such as foxes reveal their presence by their footprints in the soft sand. The winter links take on different ecological emphasis with more birds on show. Flocks of wading birds – oystercatchers, curlews, redshanks – fly up from shore and saltmarsh to roost in more sheltered circumstances on the fairways. Crows and starlings scavenge along the high tide line. Cormorants fly low, to and fro along the river and the ever-present grey heron takes up position, stick-like, at the side of a creek.

It would be wrong to regard this booklet as a comprehensive key to the nature of the area: it is not a field guide. It would be impractical to fulfil this role given its limited requirement. Nor is it intended for the scientist or natural historian – though it may be of some use to them. It is primarily for the ordinary, open-minded golfer interested in gaining a more meaningful experience of the natural surroundings of the links at Lahinch. The format is more illustrative than wordy, highlighting on the dominant species – those likely to be encountered in the course of a round of golf. There is however, enough background information for the enthusiast to consult afterwards, perhaps in the 19th!

Keep your copy in the golf bag. You never know when it will come in handy – perhaps when you have given up on the wayward ball that disappeared into the marram grass and you are seeking consolation!

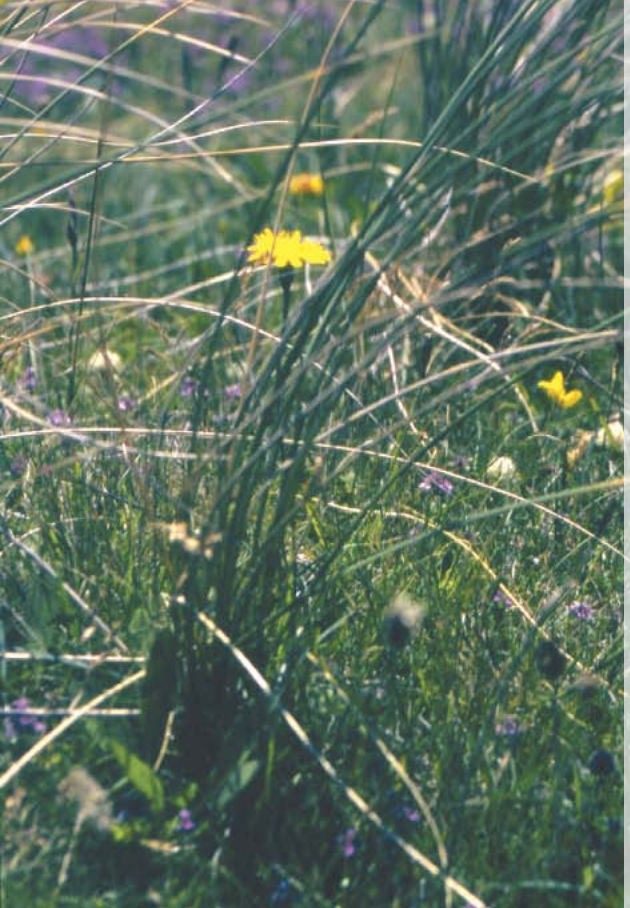
DUNE ECOLOGY

Most of our dune systems are recent in origin. They formed mainly between two and five thousand years ago when Ice Age sediments, exposed by lower sea levels, were blown inshore to accumulate behind beaches along our coasts. Often they develop at the outfall of rivers, such as the Inagh. Lahinch comes from the Irish meaning 'half-island' or peninsula, a fair description of the situation of the links.

Dune systems are not stable: their attempts to advance towards the sea, thus forming new land, are constantly being undermined by the erosional action of the sea. Human intervention, in the form of coastal defences, is thus necessary to maintain a dune system intact.

Long-term stability depends on the establishment of natural vegetation such as marram grass, which by forming an intricate root-mat, holds the sand in place enabling other dune-plants to invade. In time a diverse suite of specialised plants becomes established, adapted to life on the lime-rich, well-drained (but drought-prone) sand.

The diverse flora supports an equally diverse fauna of lime-loving 'mini-beasts' like insects and snails, open country birds such as larks and pipits and grazing animals like rabbits and hares.



HABITATS

Though predominantly sand dunes, the hundred or so hectares of the links comprises a variety of sub-habitats and is adjoined by other major habitats.

The tees, fairways, greens and bunkers of the course proper, being 'people-frequented' are in general less ecologically interesting than the wider, undisturbed areas.

Similarly, the clubhouse grounds and maintenance areas are also of less significance, though, if you are a bird watcher, not to be entirely ignored.

The 'off the fairway area' with its rough, natural humps and hollows, small wet places etc., is where most of the wildlife resides.

Though not part of the course proper, the estuary of the Inagh River and the sea and beach alongside the course, significantly complement the dune system. In the former case the tidally influenced saltmarsh provides a remarkable, ever-changing wildlife background to the Castle Course. The castle itself, once intact and occupied by humans, is now ruinous and a habitat for wildlife. The seaside, in view for much of the Old Course, flanks the western side of the links peninsula. Here roosting gulls, cormorants, waders and other seabirds can be watched from the elevated position of many of the tees and greens.

The boulder defences along the course perimeter, though artificial, act as a linear habitat for perching birds. They also provide access for wandering animals such as the fox and otter whose footprints can be seen nearby.

ROUGH MAGIC

Nowadays with so much emphasis on development and countryside control it is increasingly difficult to find ecologically interesting places to enjoy. The older generation remind us of flower-rich meadows, full of the sounds of grasshoppers and larks – places that in more innocent times were taken for granted.

Many golf courses and particularly links courses still offer such an experience. A mere shank (dare I use the word) off the fairway and one enters a magical hinterland, textured with grasses and herbs, spangled with orchids and brightly coloured insects, serenaded by songbirds.

With no artificial fertiliser being used the dune rough is an undulating natural paradise.

Assuming you have found and played your ball, take particular note of the sunny, south-facing slopes and the shaded hollows: it is here you will come across the most interesting species of flora and fauna.

If you are open to and aware of the natural magic of the dunes, it will captivate you.

GOLDENROD

HAREBELL

BIRDS-FOOT TREFOIL

CENTAURY

FLOWERS OFF THE FAIRWAY

'Oh I've seen those in the Burren', is a common and correct comment about links flowers. Despite the obvious difference of location between a sandy and a rocky place, both are lime-rich, well drained and largely unfertilised: the flora is thus similar.

Grasses such as **vernal**, **meadow grass**, **quaking grass** etc. are common to both places. Many attractive herbs like **hawkweed**, **eyebright**, **yellow rattle**, **wild pea** and **herb Robert** add colour to the connection. There are of course more robust species – **hogweed**, **plantain**, **thistle**, **wild carrot** – typical of meadowland anywhere but as important providers of seed to flocks of winter finches they should not be disdained as mere weeds. Here and there scarce plants like the little yellow **dune pansy** brighten the dune slopes.

Most captivating of all are the orchids. A succession of these 'dune jewels', spangle the links with colour throughout the summer. Spikes of the **early purple orchid**, the first to flower, are on show by late April. The pink **spotted orchid** and the ruby-coloured **pyramidal** follow in May and June. Look out for the deep crimson **marsh orchid** in the damper hollows. The orchid acme, however, is the **bee orchid**. This little plant with flower-heads resembling bees has fooled insects into mating with it, thus helping it to reproduce! June and July are the months to look out for this elusive exotic.

At least fifty species of wild flower are found in the rough – off the fairway – and there may well be others as yet undiscovered.


EYEBRIGHT


MARSH ORCHID


SPOTTED ORCHID


PYRAMIDAL ORCHID


DUNE PANSY

BUTTERFLIES

A rich and diverse flora implies a similarly rich insect life. Butterflies, the showiest of the insects are the clearest indicator of this connection. Not only do butterflies feed on the nectar of flowers but they are also a fundamental element in their reproductive cycle.

Sunshine brings butterflies to life. When the sun's rays illuminate and heat the slopes and hollows of the links butterflies like the **small**, **green-veined** and **large white** (often called the cabbage white) become active sometimes fluttering distractingly near the wayward golf ball. It is however the less obvious species such as the **common blue** and the tan-coloured **small heath**, that are most interesting. These are generally found in close proximity to their food plants, birdsfoot trefoil and meadow-grass. One to look out for, one of Ireland's scarcest butterflies, is the **small blue**. This tiny slate-coloured species is associated with its larval food plant, kidney vetch, a common species in the dunes.

Occasionally a flicker of red and black shows at the flowers. This is actually a day-flying moth – either a **burnet** or a **cinnabar**. The red and black colour is a warning – 'Don't eat me'. Toxins extracted from their food plants render these moths poisonous to predators.

The dunes support other less colourful moths and a multitude of micro-moths, too small and too numerous to mention.

COMMON BLUE

LARGE WHITE

...and BUGS

Though the name is often used to describe a variety of mini-beasts other than the showy ones – butterflies, bees and dragonflies – bugs are actually beetle relations. Typical dune bugs are **chafers**, **weevils**, and **ground beetles**. In the broad sense, however, it would be a pity to forget the **grasshoppers**, **ants** and myriad other types of mini-beasts found there.

Normally these little creatures go unnoticed. However, hot summer weather can trigger a hatch of chafers, which can be so obstructive as to actually interfere with putting. They also lay their eggs in the sward resulting in larval damage to the grass roots. Though chemicals can address the problem temporarily, an ecological solution – allowing predation by birds – may prove more effective in the long run.

A specialist dune bug is the **dor beetle**, a dumpy black insect which makes its living feeding on rabbit droppings. This enterprising beetle pushes the round nutritious droppings backwards into its underground tunnel to provide food for their larvae, on hatching.

BUMBLE BEE

CINNABAR MOTH

HAWKER DRAGONFLY

FEATHERS IN THE DUNES

MEADOW PIPIT

SKYLARK

The dominant feathered inhabitants of the dunes are the **meadow pipit** and the **skylark**. Smallish, streaky-brown birds, both are superficially alike and indeed are often mistaken one for the other. In summer, however, when the males are endlessly singing they can be easily distinguished. The meadow pipit sings its exuberant song *as it descends* like a paper aeroplane; the skylark sings *as it ascends vertically* into the sky.

Other familiar insect-eating birds of the dunes are the **stonechat** and the **wheatear**. Though both like to perch prominently, on a rock or a bush, they are quite different in appearance. The stonechat looks like a robin with a black head and white spots on the neck, wings and tail. The wheatear is larger with a black-tipped white tail. Unlike the stonechat, an all-year-round resident, the wheatear is a summer visitor from Africa. So too is the **cuckoo** which in the open dune country seeks out the nest of a pipit in which to lay its egg. Golfers are familiar with the **swallow**, another summer visitor, which hunt for insects over the greens often breathtakingly close to the ground. Less familiar is the little brown relative of the swallow – the **sand martin**. This summer visitor nests in holes in the sand banks near the maintenance depot.

The bird of prey to look out for is the **kestrel**, often seen hovering as though suspended from an invisible thread. The raptor nests in the ruins of Dough Castle on the Castle Course.

STONECHAT

WHEATEAR

FEATHERS ON THE SHORE

Whereas the dunes are best for birds throughout the summer, the birdlife of the shore is most abundant out of season when as many as thirty species can be seen in a day. Birds on the seaward side include **gulls** (up to five species), **cormorants**, **gannets** and **sea ducks**.

Flocks of wading birds including **lapwings**, **golden plover**, **curlews** and **oystercatchers** gather below the bridge at the outfall of the Inagh, while various **crows** and **starlings** scavenge along the high tide.

In the creeks and gullies of the saltmarsh above the bridge other species of waders are to be found. These include the **redshank**, **greenshank**, **snipe** and **grey heron** (often erroneously called the 'crane', another bird entirely). Look out here also for the beautiful pure white **little egret**, a recent climate change arrival from the Mediterranean. Flocks of ducks – **wigeon**, **teal** and **mallard** – also feed in the saltmarsh, mainly in winter.

HERRING GULL

One of the most spectacular birds to occasionally visit the Inagh saltmarsh, is the **hen harrier**. This large bird of prey is easily identified due to its lazy gliding, on long upturned wings and its clear white rump-patch.

WIGEON

ANIMALS (small)

With so much calcium (lime) available to make their shells, it is no surprise that the commonest small dune animal is the snail. The banded or **brown–lipped snail**, easily identified by its striped pattern, is everywhere to be seen. Its colour varies but it is always striped with black. There are many other snail species identifiable from the shape of their shell such as the **ram's horn** and the tiny **turret snail**. In very warm weather snails run the risk of expiring through drying out. At these times the large brown **helix snail** can be found chilling out inside the wooden shelters on the course. Slugs are less common but on damp mornings the large **black slug** may emerge where the ground is mossy.

Frogs are found in the damper hollows and little ponds and along the edge of the saltmarsh where they fall prey to herons. Their amphibious life cycle is marked by the appearance of globs of spawn in the ponds, in early spring.

Another little creature of the dunes is Ireland's only **lizard**. Better known from the Burren where it is quite common, it is nevertheless more widespread than is thought. Due to its dependency on the sun's heat to become active, the lizard tends to bask on the sunny side of the dune and scurry off at the first sign of danger. It is thus not often well seen.

HELIX SNAILS

LIZARD (minus tail)

FROGS MATING

...and LARGE

The **rabbit** is the mammal most likely to be seen in the dunes. Though common, it does not seem to be as damaging to the course as it has proven to be elsewhere. Clusters of its small circular droppings indicate its presence as do its warren holes in the sandy banks.

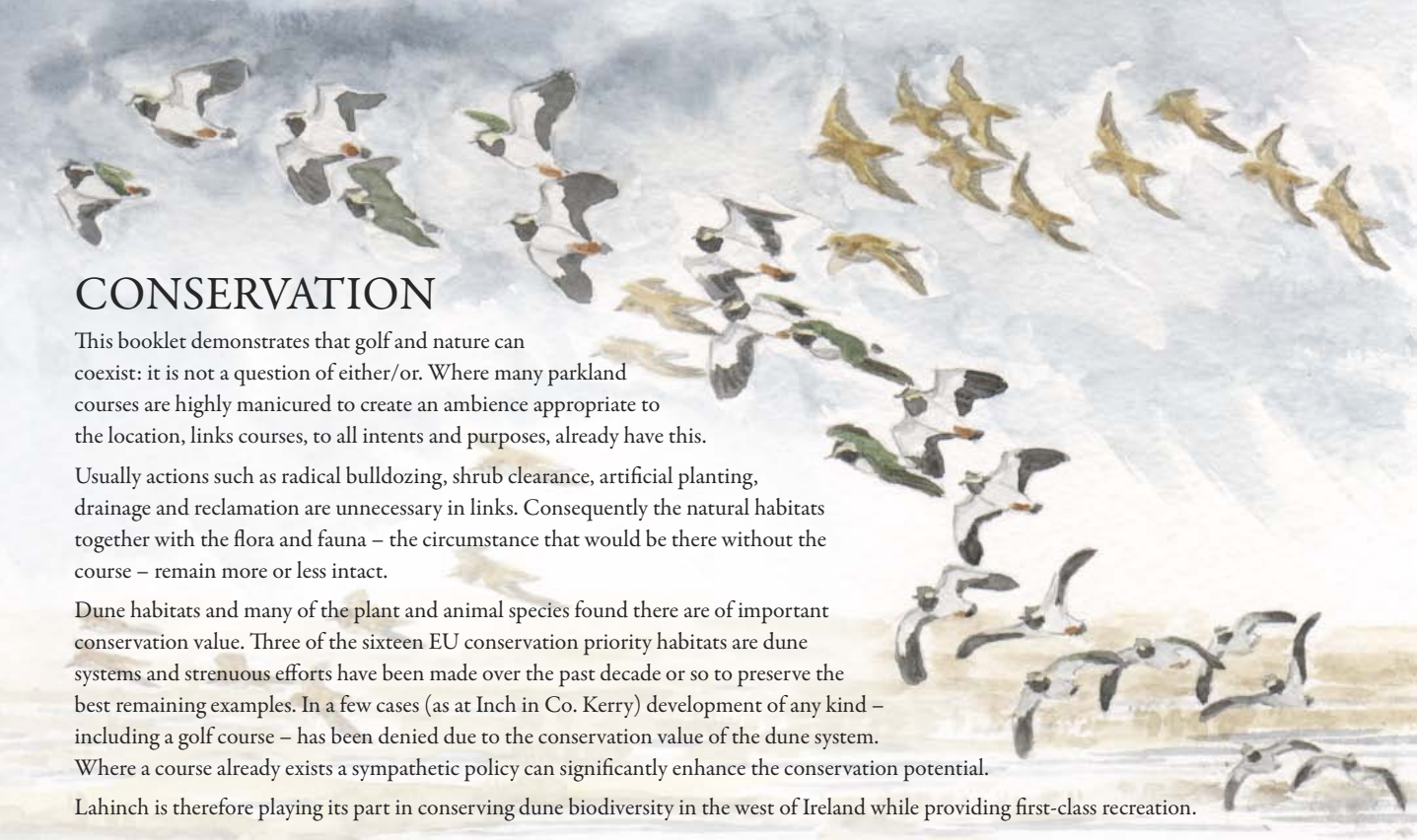
The **Irish hare** is shier, less gregarious and a lot less damaging than its smaller relative. One is most likely to encounter it in the early morning and on the castle course.

The other mammals, from the tiny **pigmy shrew** to the **fox**, are predominantly nocturnal and golfers are unlikely to see them in the course of a round. However, footprints in damp sand indicate their nocturnal meanderings. Those of the fox may turn up anywhere while **otter** prints are to be seen along the edge of the saltmarsh and behind the boulder coastal defences along the course perimeter. The **mink**, escapee from fur-farms is known from many parts of Co. Clare. It may well be an inhabitant of the Inagh estuary.

The **feral goat**, symbol of Lahinch links, is the largest mammal found in the dunes. Numbers are small and maintained thus due to the propensity for goat herds to overgraze. Their presence on the course is a reminder of the connection between animal and man, between wild habitat and cultivation, and the importance of maintaining a balance between the two.

OTTER FOOTPRINTS

YOUNG HARE



CONSERVATION

This booklet demonstrates that golf and nature can coexist: it is not a question of either/or. Where many parkland courses are highly manicured to create an ambience appropriate to the location, links courses, to all intents and purposes, already have this.

Usually actions such as radical bulldozing, shrub clearance, artificial planting, drainage and reclamation are unnecessary in links. Consequently the natural habitats together with the flora and fauna – the circumstance that would be there without the course – remain more or less intact.

Dune habitats and many of the plant and animal species found there are of important conservation value. Three of the sixteen EU conservation priority habitats are dune systems and strenuous efforts have been made over the past decade or so to preserve the best remaining examples. In a few cases (as at Inch in Co. Kerry) development of any kind – including a golf course – has been denied due to the conservation value of the dune system. Where a course already exists a sympathetic policy can significantly enhance the conservation potential.

Lahinch is therefore playing its part in conserving dune biodiversity in the west of Ireland while providing first-class recreation.

MANAGEMENT

The management of any links course is a complex, on-going endeavour. Resolute action by green staff is required to keep greens, tees and fairways in top condition for all-year-round golf. Inevitably such action will involve measured control of nature's encroachment.

On the macro-scale this involves installing and maintaining the course perimeter with coastal defences. The boundary would otherwise give way to the natural dynamic of the elements. Similarly, without the management intervention of re- planting swathes of marram grass and re-turfing where required, the dunes would simply disintegrate and reform elsewhere. Re-seeding on and around the greens can be important where salt-burn has destroyed growth or the balance between the growth of natural grasses and mosses renders the surface irregular.

Animals large and small can also cause problems. Goats are notorious for eating grass down to the roots or damaging bunkers. On the micro-scale insect larvae such as those of chafers, click-beetles, or leather-jackets can destroy the roots of grass over large areas. Birds such as starlings, aware of the food source will feed voraciously on them, often causing further damage in digging them up. However, since starlings predate a wide variety of mini-beasts considered 'pests' they certainly do more good than harm.

WILDFLOWER CHECKLIST

- ❑ Bracken
- ❑ Wall-rue
- ❑ Rustyback
- ❑ Nettle
- ❑ Dock
- ❑ Chickweed
- ❑ Marram Grass
- ❑ Scurvygrass
- ❑ Blackberry
- ❑ Tormentil
- ❑ Hawthorn
- ❑ Gorse
- ❑ Vetch
- ❑ Red Clover
- ❑ White Clover
- ❑ Bird's-foot Trefoil
- ❑ Kidney Vetch
- ❑ Herb-Robert
- ❑ Milkwort
- ❑ Dog-Violet
- ❑ Dune Pansy
- ❑ Willowherb
- ❑ Wild Carrot
- ❑ Hogweed
- ❑ Thrift
- ❑ Yellow-wort
- ❑ Centaury
- ❑ Lady's Bedstraw
- ❑ Wild Thyme
- ❑ Field Speedwell
- ❑ Eyebright
- ❑ Dandelion
- ❑ Yellow-rattle
- ❑ Goldenrod
- ❑ Daisy
- ❑ Mountain Everlasting
- ❑ Yarrow
- ❑ Oxeye Daisy
- ❑ Ragwort
- ❑ Carline Thistle
- ❑ Hawkweed
- ❑ Pyramidal Orchid
- ❑ Marsh Orchid
- ❑ Spotted Orchid
- ❑ Bee Orchid

BIRD CHECKLIST

LAND BIRDS

- ☐ Meadow Pipit
- ☐ Skylark
- ☐ Pied Wagtail
- ☐ Rock Pipit
- ☐ Stonechat
- ☐ Wheatear *s.v.*
- ☐ Starling
- ☐ Jackdaw
- ☐ Rook
- ☐ Swallow *s.v.*
- ☐ Sand Martin *s.v.*
- ☐ Kestrel
- ☐ Chaffinch
- ☐ Reed Bunting
- ☐ Hooded Crow
- ☐ Raven *w.v.*
- ☐ Hen Harrier *w.v.*
- ☐ Cuckoo *s.v.*
- ☐ Wren
- ☐ Robin
- ☐ Rook
- ☐ House Sparrow
- ☐ House Martin

WATER BIRDS

- ☐ Black-Headed Gull
- ☐ Common Gull
- ☐ Herring Gull
- ☐ Great Black-Backed Gull
- ☐ Kittiwake
- ☐ Cormorant
- ☐ Grey Heron
- ☐ Little Egret
- ☐ Snipe
- ☐ Lapwing *w.v.*
- ☐ Golden Plover *w.v.*
- ☐ Curlew
- ☐ Oystercatcher
- ☐ Redshank
- ☐ Mallard
- ☐ Teal *w.v.*
- ☐ Wigeon *w.v.*
- ☐ Sandwich Tern *s.v.*
- ☐ Ringed Plover
- ☐ Turnstone
- ☐ Common Sandpiper *s.v.*
- ☐ Mute Swan
- ☐ Dunlin *w.v.*
- ☐ Whimbrel

w.v. winter visitor
s.v. summer visitor

CREATURE CHECKLIST

MAMMALS

- ❑ Feral Goat
- ❑ Rabbit
- ❑ Hare
- ❑ Fox
- ❑ Otter
- ❑ Common Seal

MINI-BEASTS

- ❑ Large Black Slug
- ❑ Banded Snail
- ❑ Helix Snail
- ❑ Common Lizard
- ❑ Frog
- ❑ Newt

SHOWY INSECTS

- ❑ Six-spot Burnet
- ❑ Cinnabar
- ❑ Silver Y Moth
- ❑ Large White Butterfly
- ❑ Small White Butterfly
- ❑ Small Heath Butterfly
- ❑ Common Blue Butterfly
- ❑ Painted Lady (migrant)
- ❑ Blue Damselfly
- ❑ Hawker Dragonfly

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, REFERENCES & CONTACTS

Information for Lahinch Ecolinks was forthcoming from a number of people and a variety of sources including the groundstaff and Council of Lahinch Golf Club. I would most particularly like to thank Austin Slattery for commissioning the booklet and whose idea it was from its inception.

The following is a list of references for those who might like to follow up on the theme.

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The following is a list of contact organisations that might be of use to golfers with wildlife queries they would like expanded upon or perhaps not addressed in the booklet.

BirdWatch Ireland, Springmount, Newtownmountkennedy, Co. Wicklow
The Irish Wildlife Federation, Sigmund Business Centre, 93A Lagan Road, Glasnevin, Dublin
National Parks & Wildlife Service, Environment, Heritage & Local Government, Dublin
The Heritage Council, Church Lane, Kilkenny
Clare County Council, New Road, Ennis

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