



**NPWS**

An tSeirbhís Páirceanna  
Náisiúnta agus Fiadhúlra  
National Parks and Wildlife  
Service

# 2023-2024 in Review

National Parks and  
Wildlife Service



Prepared by the National Parks & Wildlife Service  
[NPWS.ie](http://NPWS.ie)





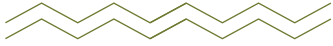


# Contents



Foreword from Minister Darragh O'Brien	02
Foreword from Minister Malcolm Noonan	03
Introduction from our Director General	04
Our Mission and Values	06
About the National Parks & Wildlife Service	08
Our Work	13
Highlights 2023-2024	31
Financial Overview 2023-2024	38
Looking Ahead	40

# Foreword from Minister Darragh O'Brien



It gives me great pleasure, together with my colleague Minister of State Malcolm Noonan, to present this review of the National Parks and Wildlife Service for 2023-2024.



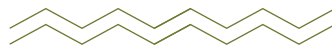
**THIS REVIEW** covers the past 18 months of the Executive Agency's operations and what an incredible 18 months it was.

NPWS welcomed over 100 new colleagues, added two new National Parks, progressed the designation of the largest Special Area of Conservation in the history of the State and increased the amount of marine designations to protect our seabirds almost fivefold.

We welcomed over 5 million visitors to our National Parks and Nature Reserves and invested over €50m in nature protection and restoration projects.

At the same time, we cannot be complacent about the task at hand. The urgency of the action required is emphasised in many ways. We remain in nature deficit and must turn these deficits to advantage. We cannot do that without engagement, partnership, cooperation and investment. These are the hallmarks of NPWS achievements over the past 18 months.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all the partners and landowners who work with NPWS. The landowners are nature's first responders. Their insights,



**The landowners are nature's first responders. Their insights, cooperation, commitment and willingness to collaborate are crucial to the success of the work**

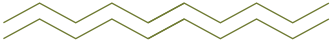
cooperation, commitment and willingness to collaborate are crucial to the success of the work.

I would also like to acknowledge the National Parks and Wildlife Service team across the country. You are unstinting and untiring in your work to protect nature and present our National Parks and Reserves. You epitomise all the great values of public service.

It has been an honour and privilege to work with Minister of State Noonan and the NPWS and I look forward to continuing to do so in the year ahead.

**Darragh O'Brien TD**  
Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

# Foreword from Minister Malcolm Noonan



This Review, which covers January 2023 to June 2024 comes at a critical time for the National Parks and Wildlife Service, two years on from publishing the Strategic Action Plan for renewal of the NPWS, and a year following the Executive Agency's first Strategic Plan.

**IT IS WIDELY** recognised that the scale of the biodiversity crisis needs an agency with a strong identity and voice, equipped with the resources and people to fully embrace its mandate to protect nature. This period saw the completion of important groundwork for change, which reached into all parts of the agency and gathered real momentum.

Significant achievements included the establishment of a new management structure to provide the strategic and joined up leadership that the organisation needs to bring about change. The number of staff increased, adding to the diversity of skills and expertise and enabling NPWS to deliver on its strategic priorities. Additional investment from the

Department in 2023/2024 allowed NPWS to acquire new land for nature conservation, strengthen its engagement with farming communities and landowners and to expand the supports available for their conservation efforts. The Agency's core message to protect nature resonated with partners, stakeholders and the general public and became a call to action.

Just like conservation and restoration, organisational transformation takes time and attention. It is a challenging undertaking on top of the busy day-to-day work, and the outcomes of our efforts may be difficult to see initially. As nature lovers, this narrative should feel familiar to us. Seeds need to be planted at the right time and in the right conditions if they're



going to thrive. At first, much of the effort is happening under the ground, germinating and establishing roots, before sprouting through the soil. Likewise, the renewal of the NPWS has been taking place largely within the organisation itself, often out of sight of the public. Over the coming year though, I expect the signs of that change to begin to unfurl. Inevitably there will be setbacks, but the knowledge, determination to succeed and spirit of collaboration that I've seen from the NPWS will ensure that it can weather those storms.

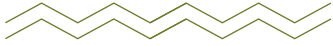
As Minister for Nature, I'm deeply committed to walking this journey with the NPWS. I've travelled the length and breadth of this country meeting NPWS staff working to protect our most precious habitats and species and reverse their decline. I've seen first-hand the dedication and commitment across all regions and directorates within the NPWS acting together for nature and for our communities. The NPWS is on a positive trajectory and this Review is testament to that.

**Malcolm Noonan TD**  
Minister for Nature, Heritage  
and Electoral Reform



**It is widely recognised that the scale of the biodiversity crisis needs an agency with a strong identity and voice, equipped with the resources and people to fully embrace its mandate to protect nature**

# Introduction from our Director General



The National Parks and Wildlife Service, as part of the Programme for Government commitment to review the remit, status and funding of the NPWS, undertook to improve communication and engagement with stakeholders.

**THIS REVIEW**, which covers the period January 2023 to June 2024 is a key part of our delivery of this commitment.

This Review provides a snapshot of what was a very busy and productive period for NPWS, during which we continued to deliver on our mission to protect nature, while making great progress to drive forward renewal of the NPWS. Protecting our natural heritage, facilitating public access and engagement, and building foundations for a strong, healthy organisation remained our top priorities.

2024 marks the third year of delivery of our Strategic Action Plan 2022-2024. I am pleased to say we have made excellent progress in delivering the Action Plan and the plan has been substantially completed by June 2024.

Throughout the period, our core message to protect nature clearly resonated with our partners and the public. Our National Parks and Nature Reserves continued to be an inspiration, growing their education offering and facilities so that the public can access, appreciate and enjoy nature. We also saw some major triumphs for nature through the efforts of our wildlife enforcement staff. These included a series of successful prosecutions

taken by NPWS, issuing of Ministerial directions, expert management of legal cases and CITES, regulation of peatland schemes along with other activities.

We demonstrated our commitment to protecting nature in action, through the rollout of the conservation measures programme across 50 of our protected sites. There were so many examples of excellent partnership and collaboration at home and further afield, demonstrated by LIFE teams, and other conservation projects with stakeholders and communities. We cannot do this work by ourselves.

As an Executive Agency, we have made huge strides to improve how we deliver our services. Our work in delivering elicencing, legislation and guidance helped to modernise legislation and how we apply it, improving and streamlining systems in a collaborative way. How we work must be informed by science and research, and we continued to enhance our knowledge base to inform decision making on nature and biodiversity both internally and more widely.

Significant progress was made in this period on structural reform within NPWS, with the reconstitution of the Management Committee and



establishment of a new Directorate – Engagement, Corporate and Specialist Supports (ECSS), which includes the International and EU Engagement Unit. ECSS published the first NPWS Strategic Plan in June 2023, setting out our core mission, values and key strategic priorities for 2023-2025, and helped to support the renewal of NPWS through a wide range of activities throughout the period. The International and EU Engagement Unit co-ordinated Ireland's input into the Nature Restoration Regulation, and is now expanding to take on European and international aspects of our work, including preparation for Ireland's presidency of the EU in 2026.

Fundamental to our achievements, has been a significant increase in funding, from €28.7m in 2020 to €61m in 2024, excluding payroll. Combined with funding from EU LIFE Programmes and other biodiversity resourcing, this gives us an effective budget of approximately €100m in 2024. At the same time, NPWS has seen an increase in personnel from 349 in 2020 to 548 in June 2024.

I would like to acknowledge and thank our public stakeholders, including Government Departments, State Agencies and members of the public for their continued support for the work we do.



Of course, our continued success and development would not have been possible without the hard work, dedication and commitment of our Management Committee and colleagues across the country. This work is rewarding, but it is also challenging and I would like to thank them for their unstinting efforts and work to protect nature. I would also like to acknowledge and thank those staff who retired in the past year, many of whom dedicated 40 or more years of service to nature and the NPWS.

Finally, the political leadership of Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien, TD and of Minister for Nature, Heritage and Electoral Reform, Malcolm Noonan TD, has taken the agency to new terrain. The resources secured by their efforts has allowed the NPWS to grow its ambition to deliver for nature. Our ability to enhance our protection of nature and wildlife, the presentation of our much loved natural treasures and promotion of nature to the public has been placed on a different plane through their shared vision for a nature agency and the nature imperatives we face.

I am confident that in 2024 we are in a stronger position, as we continue to pursue the ambitious agenda set out in our Strategic Plan, delivering greater impact across the natural heritage sector and most importantly, producing better outcomes for society.

Le gach dea-ghuí.

**Niall Ó Donnchú**  
Director General



Protecting our natural heritage, facilitating public access and engagement, and building foundations for a strong, healthy organisation remained our top priorities



## Our Mission



The mission of the NPWS is to

# PROTECT NATURE



# Our Values



A deep love of nature, and a commitment to its care and safeguarding.

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Partnership, teamwork and excellence, and a well-grounded pride in our professionalism and scientific integrity.

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A strong identity and a trusted voice for nature.

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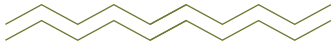
Transparency and accountability in our decision-making.

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Excellence in the service we deliver to the public.

# About the National Parks & Wildlife Service



The NPWS is an Executive Agency within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with primary responsibility for nature conservation, wildlife protection and the presentation and preservation of our National Parks and Nature Reserves.

## The NPWS has a diverse range of responsibilities:

- Significant policy advisory and policy-making functions in relation to nature and biodiversity;
- A wide range of operational responsibilities including the management of 8 National Parks, 74 Nature Reserves, and a variety of other State lands accessible to the public;
- Management of a range of EU programmes, alongside thousands of conservation measures across the designated area network and National Parks;
- A broad scientific remit, including the monitoring of habitats, species and designated sites, and undertaking scientific research;
- Principal coordinator of the National Biodiversity Action Plan;
- Statutory consultee in relation to planning matters, including county and regional development plans;
- Regulatory and licencing functions;
- Administering grant schemes to support farm-plans, conservation measures, actions for biodiversity, as well as invasive species control measures;
- Prevention, investigation and enforcement of wildlife crime.



**8** National Parks



**74** Nature Reserves





## NPWS Core Areas of Focus

- 1 Support nature-related decision-making and investment** at all levels of Irish society through enhanced and user-friendly guidance, sharing of best practice, advice, support and enforcement.

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- 2 Foster community and societal engagement** with nature and biodiversity, through effective communication, engagement and volunteerism.

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- 3 Enhance NPWS leadership, workforce excellence and build capacity.**

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- 4 Expand and develop NPWS infrastructure and facilities.**

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- 5 Deliver organisational transformation** as set out in the NPWS Strategic Action Plan 2022-2024.



## Our Management Committee

In 2023, the NPWS established a new executive management structure aimed at supporting the organisation's continued growth and developing increased capacity to deliver organisational transformation as set out in our Strategic Action Plan 2022-2024.

This new structure was implemented following an independent review of the organisation, which recommended the establishment of six Directorates,

clustered around functional responsibilities.

Each Directorate is overseen by a Director (with a further Director in Engagement, Corporate and Specialist Supports, with responsibility for EU and International Engagement), reporting to the Director General. Collectively, the Director General and the seven Directors form the NPWS Management Committee.

The Management Committee is responsible for ensuring good governance of the organisation and perform this task by setting strategic objectives and targets, and making strategic decisions on all key business issues. The regular day-to-day management, oversight and direction of the NPWS is the responsibility of the Management Committee. They met weekly throughout 2023 and to-date in 2024.



### NPWS Organisational Structure







## Our Staff

The structure of NPWS is geographically diverse (over 43 offices across all 9 NPWS Regions), and given the breadth of its functions, draws on a wide range of specialised and professional competencies. There are 26 different grades in NPWS encompassing professional, industrial and administration grades, as well as expert managerial and policy-making skills.

In conjunction with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), NPWS use targeted recruitment to ensure that we build and retain internal capacity, talent, leadership and



NPWS use targeted recruitment to ensure that we build and retain internal capacity, talent, leadership and have the right people and skills

have the right people and skills. During 2023, we appointed 58 staff across various grades from open and interdepartmental recruitment.

At the end of June 2024, there were 548 permanent staff working in NPWS, an increase of 57% from 349 in 2020. The collective capabilities of our staff

constitute an exceptional resource in the service of the State and in custodianship of our precious national resources, and remain central to our continued achievements.



**43+** Offices across 9 regions



**548** Permanent staff

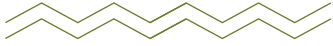




We are custodians of  
our natural heritage,  
managing and protecting  
nature and wildlife for  
future generations



# Our Work



The NPWS published its first Strategic Plan in 2023, setting out our core mission, values and key strategic priorities for 2023-2025. This new plan builds on the NPWS' work since its establishment, and presents a new framework for delivering on our objectives.

The NPWS took a range of actions over the last 18 months to deliver on each of these priorities, summarised in the following pages.

## Strategic Priorities

- 1 **Provide excellent scientific advice**, to the NPWS, the Minister and the Government to support the protection of nature.
- 2 Drive, support and manage **excellence in nature conservation** in Ireland.
- 3 **Safeguard nature and help prevent wildlife crime** through enhanced supports, operations, policies, education and awareness.
- 4 **Manage our national parks and nature reserves** for nature conservation as well as for education and public access for the enjoyment of nature.
- 5 Deliver a strong, effective **legislative basis for nature protection**.
- 6 **Develop and deliver excellent internal and external engagement** and strong corporate governance and business supports.
- 7 **Support nature protection** through excellent EU and international engagement.





## Strategic Priority 1

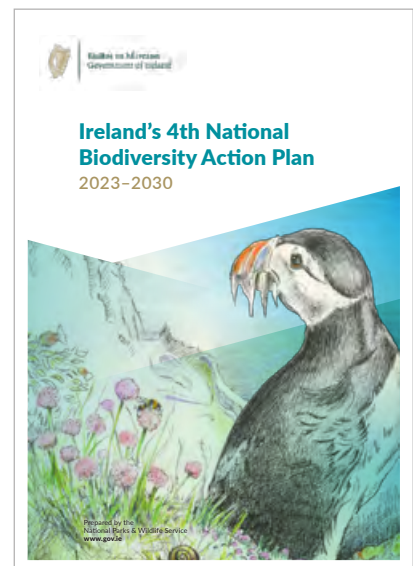
Provide excellent scientific advice, to the NPWS, the Minister and the Government to support the protection of nature.

NPWS continued to undertake essential scientific work to underpin reporting obligations and conservation management of habitats and species. Over the last 18 months:

- The NPWS secured funding for a new €33.9m EU LIFE project, LIFE Strategic Nature Project (SNaP) Ireland.
- The launch of a dedicated call for a Breeding Waders European Innovation Partnership (EIP), co-funded with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). This will see significant investment (€25m) and a dedicated, full-time programme focussed on all Breeding Waders, including the Curlew.
- Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP) 2023-2030 was

published in January 2024 and sets out Ireland's vision for biodiversity, namely that by 2050 "Biodiversity in Ireland is valued, conserved, restored and sustainably used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people".

Development of the Plan has been the subject of significant effort over the last two years, through engagement with stakeholders and with the support, advice and input of the interdepartmental Biodiversity Working Group and the Biodiversity Forum. This is the first National





Biodiversity Action Plan, backed by legislation, with legal requirements for public bodies to consider biodiversity in the performance of their functions and to report on actions in support of the objectives of the Plan.

- Scientific work to inform the identification of new large marine Natura 2000 sites for a number of bird species and for reef-forming cold-water coral species.
- The Local Biodiversity Action Fund provided support to all 31 local authorities in 2023 to deliver



## The Local Biodiversity Action Fund provided support to all 31 local authorities in 2023 to deliver projects in support of the National Biodiversity Action Plan

projects in support of the National Biodiversity Action Plan. Over €2m in funding was awarded for 182 projects across the country in a

range of areas, including invasive alien species, habitat surveys and biodiversity awareness and education.

- The Hen Harrier Threat Response Plan is being brought to Cabinet for approval on July 9th 2024. The plan outlines the main threats and pressures affecting Hen Harrier in Ireland, and proposes a series of cross-cutting sectoral actions to address and prevent its further decline. There is significant stakeholder interest in the Plan, and through its delivery, Ireland is signalling its commitment to meeting obligations under the Birds Directive to protect and conserve Hen Harrier.



Denise Charlton, Chief Executive, Community Foundation Ireland; Andy Bleasdale, NPWS; Minister of State, Malcolm Noonan TD; Dr Deirdre Lynn, NPWS; Jason Coulter, Social Impact Executive, Community Foundation Ireland at the launch of Community Biodiversity Grants – a partnership between NPWS and Community Foundation Ireland.



# €25m

investment in a Breeding Waders European Innovation Partnership (EIP)



## Strategic Priority 2

Drive, support and manage excellence in nature conservation in Ireland.

Over the last 18 months, we demonstrated our commitment to protecting nature in action, through a number of key programmes including:

- Protection of two large marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Porcupine Shelf SAC and Southern Canyons SAC, with a combined area of approximately 30,000 km<sup>2</sup>, increasing reef habitat protection from 10% to 24%.
- Protection of Ireland's two largest Special Protection Areas (SPAs), the North West Irish Sea and Seas off Wexford, covering an area in excess of 4,600 km<sup>2</sup> and utilised by 24 important bird species.
- Increased protection of marine waters in Ireland from 2% to 9%, contributing to the EU Biodiversity Strategy.
- Creation of Ireland's newest and first marine National Park – Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara, Ciarraí.
- Hosted the EU 3rd Biogeographic Seminar for the Atlantic and Macaronesian Marine biogeographic regions.
- Increased the formal designation of Natura 2000 sites to over 95% with Statutory Instruments delivered for an additional 33 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).



# 33

SACs designated by Statutory Instrument



# €340k

in grant funding awarded to 25 groups under the Peatlands Community Engagement Scheme





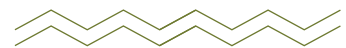


Minister for Nature, Heritage and Electoral Reform, Malcolm Noonan TD and Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien, TD, at Inch Spit, Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara, Ciarraí.

- Developed an agreed Pilot Plan in collaboration with the EU Commission, to respond to the June 2023 European Court of Justice Ruling in Case C444/21, for the collation and delivery of Conservation Measures data for Ireland's network of 400+ SAC sites.
- Total grant funding of €340k was awarded to 25 groups under the Peatlands Community Engagement Scheme (PCES) in 2023. The Scheme aims to encourage communities, local organisations and other interested parties to become involved in the enhancement of their natural surrounding areas and to raise awareness of peatland habitats.
- The development of the Conservation Measures Programme saw the implementation of conservation measures across more than 50 Natura 2000 sites in Ireland.

In collaboration with Wild Atlantic Nature IP, the Natura Communities programme was expanded in the West and Northwest of Ireland developing and training local communities in the implementation of conservation measures such as invasive species control within specific SACs along the Atlantic seaboard.

- In partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE IP made payments of €3m to 820 farmers participating in the project footprint. The payments were made to participating farmers for delivery of ecosystem services including biodiversity, water quality and climate regulation.



Ireland's two largest Special Protection Areas (SPAs), the North West Irish Sea and Seas off Wexford, covering an area in excess of 4,600 km<sup>2</sup> and utilised by 24 important bird species



### Strategic Priority 3

Safeguard nature and help prevent wildlife crime through enhanced supports, operations, policies, education and awareness.

Wildlife protection is fundamental to the work of NPWS, and the organisation has never been more focussed or more effective in tackling it. A Wildlife Enforcement and Nature Protection Directorate has been established and staff are working across all regions of the country to address wildlife crime and protect nature. Key achievements for 2023 to end June 2024 include:

- Increased collaboration with An Garda Síochána to combat wildlife crime.
- 53 prosecution cases for alleged breaches of wildlife legislation were forwarded to the Chief State Solicitor's Office (CSSO) by NPWS.
- 31 successful prosecution cases closed under wildlife legislation, bringing the total number of prosecution cases closed from 2020 to 2024 to 137.
- Designated Areas Protection Unit (DAPU) supports the management of protected sites which are sites that have been designated under European Law as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Areas (SPA) or under

National Law as National Heritage Areas (NHA).

In 2023, DAPU issued 2 Ministerial Directions to restore damage to protected sites and continue to manage the State response in on-going legal cases.

- CITES is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. The aim of the Convention is to

regulate and monitor the international trade in certain species of animals and plants, and to ensure that trade does not threaten their survival in the wild. The Irish CITES Management Authority rests in NPWS and it has granted circa 3,850 CITES documents from January 2023 to June 2024, including Article 10 Certificates, Import/Re-Export Permits, Import notifications and



# 53

prosecution cases for alleged breaches of wildlife legislation



Import/Export licences for species listed in the CITES appendices.

CITES Unit continues to work closely with other government departments, most notably Customs (under the aegis of the Revenue Commissioners) and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in ensuring adherence to CITES and ancillary legislation and also in the prevention of Wildlife Crime.

- NPWS is the Regulator of the Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation, and Restoration Scheme (EDRRS), which commits to carrying out enhanced peatland decommissioning, rehabilitation and restoration measures on circa 33,000 hectares in over 80 Bord na Móna bogs.

The Scheme is operated by Bord na Móna, administered by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), and receives funding of €108m from the European Union by way of the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

As of June 2024, in its role as regulator, NPWS has approved:

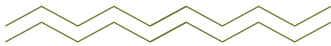
- 60 Enhanced Rehabilitation Bog Plans
- Rehabilitation work on 23,000 hectares of peatland at a forecast cost of over €36.5m

As of June 2024, the Scheme has carried out rehabilitation works on 17,500 hectares of peatland.

- NPWS North East Division:
  - A new head guide and guide

were recruited for Clara Bog Visitor Centre in Co. Offaly which will allow for the reopening of the centre in 2024.

- Works were undertaken at Boora Grey Partridge project at Boora, Co. Offaly for Grey Partridge and Breeding Wader management.
- Ongoing community engagement, patrols and collaboration with An Garda Síochána and other agencies to combat wildlife crime and protect nature in Dublin, Louth, Meath, Kildare and Offaly.
- Successful reintroduction of a conservation grazing management regime to protect and enhance Pollardstown Fen SAC and Nature Reserve in Co. Kildare.



31 successful prosecution cases closed under wildlife legislation, bringing the total number of prosecution cases closed from 2020 to 2024 to 137



Some of the attendees at a Garda Síochána/NPWS workshop on Wildlife Crime held in the Garda Training College in Templemore in April 2024.



## Strategic Priority 4

Manage our National Parks and Nature Reserves for nature conservation as well as for education and public access for the enjoyment of nature.

Throughout the past 18 months, our National Parks and Nature Reserves continued to be an inspiration, growing their education offering and facilities so that the public can access, appreciate and enjoy nature. Key achievements include:

Significant capital works and upgrades, primarily related to public health and safety at our National Parks and Nature Reserves, including:

- Trails: Maintenance and upgrades of approximately 500km of trails and walkways.
- Land acquisitions: The NPWS continues to make strategic land purchases where possible, securing sites for the conservation of nature. This includes land in the globally important Burren area and lands intended for the creation of the new Brú na Boinne National Park at Dowth in County Meath and Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara, Ciarraí.
- Invasive Species: 750 hectares of Rhododendron clearance work in Connemara, Wild Nephin, Glenveagh and Killarney National Parks.
- Visitors: Management of 5.5 million visitors annually at our National Parks and Nature Reserves.
- Education: The continued development of Education Programmes within our National Parks to ensure the protection of nature is highlighted and shared with our visitors. Ongoing collaboration with stakeholders to promote education and environmental knowledge-sharing within communities.
- Aerial Fire Monitoring and Control: 2023 saw the introduction of a fire-monitoring and control programme. The purpose of this project was to provide helicopter support to monitor the risk of any potential fire incidents in the National Parks System and to provide priority aerial firefighting support where needed.
- Community Engagement: Wicklow Mountains National Park – Peatland restoration projects were completed at a number of locations including Barnacullian, Carrigshouk, Carrigeenduff and Granamore bogs. This resulted in







NPWS continues to invest heavily this year in tackling the spread of invasive species across our network of National Parks. In particular, the control of *Rhododendron ponticum*

the building of approximately 400 timber dams, fencing 3 hectares to keep grazing animals off the bare peat, manually re-profiling some small peat hags, spreading 100 bags of heather brash and covering it in grass seed. This involved collaboration with Mountaineering Ireland, ReWild Wicklow, Cool Planet, An Taisce, the Munster Technological University and Technological University of the Shannon. Benefits from these projects include carbon sequestration, improvements in downstream water quality, supporting native biodiversity and the reduction in flooding.

- Glasshouse Restoration: Restoration of the Edwardian glasshouses at Muckross House, extension of the car park and installation of EV charging points.
- Tackling *Rhododendron ponticum* 2024: The NPWS continues to invest heavily this year in tackling the spread of invasive species across our network of National Parks. In particular, the control of *Rhododendron ponticum* is difficult, costly, and labour intensive, but is seen as a vital priority. The NPWS carries out an annual targeted programme of works across a

number of sites to manage the spread and the multi-faceted programme includes, monitoring, surveillance, clearance, investigation, review, volunteer and contractor work groups and programmes.



**5.5**

million visitors annually at our National Parks and Nature Reserves



**750**

hectares of invasive species clearance



## Strategic Priority 5

Deliver a strong, effective legislative basis for nature protection.

NPWS continued in its work to review and update relevant legislation, to ensure Ireland's laws better protect nature, comply with EU law and are easier and clearer in terms of compliance and enforcement.

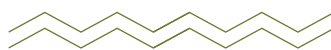
- 2023 saw the delivery of a range of Statutory Instruments underpinning the work of NPWS, and most notably, the completion and commencement of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2023.

This Act requires certain public bodies, including government departments, agencies and local authorities, to consider biodiversity in their plans, policies, decisions and actions. It also provides for review of bog habitats, making, amendment and revocation of natural heritage area orders, and arrangements concerning biodiversity.

- NPWS administers a licensing system to regulate and control activities that impact on habitats or species in Ireland. A new elicensing pilot project under the Heritage Modernisation Programme began

mid-2023 and the first licence application type went live online to the public on 4th June 2024.

The first licence type chosen was the deer hunting licence under S29 of the Wildlife Acts. This was a



A new elicensing pilot project under the Heritage Modernisation Programme began mid-2023 and the first licence application type went live online to the public on 4th June 2024



collaborative project between the Wildlife Licensing Unit of the NPWS, the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) of the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage and a third party developer. 12,904 licences of various types were issued from January 2023 to June 2024.

- Ecologists in the Ecological Guidance and Advisory Unit provided expert advice and responses to over 800 requests for statutory consultations.
- Online training was provided on a range of topics to NPWS staff

on the fundamental differences between Appropriate Assessment (AA), Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), and Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) and commenced a series of online sessions on AA screening.

- 59 zoos are licenced by NPWS, and a suite of annual zoo inspections are completed throughout the year.



Ecologists in the Ecological Guidance and Advisory Unit provided expert advice and responses to over 800 requests for statutory consultations



**12,904**

licenses were issued from  
January 2023 to June 2024



**59**

zoos are licenced  
by NPWS



## Strategic Priority 6

Develop and deliver excellent internal and external engagement and strong corporate governance and business supports.

Following internal restructuring of NPWS, 2023 saw the establishment of a new Directorate (Engagement, Corporate & Specialist Supports (ECSS)) to help expand our reach and support organisational sustainability. A number of key deliverables have been achieved to-date:

- Continued implementation of the NPWS Strategic Action Plan 2022-2024.
- Publication of the first NPWS Strategic Plan 2023-2025.
- 25 Strategic High Nature value land acquisitions, totalling 1,192 hectares, including the acquisition of Brú na Bóinne National Park and Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara, Ciarraí.
- Establishment of a Communications Office. The office issued 60 press releases, which generated significant media coverage throughout the period on many aspects of our work – from reintroduction of endangered species, to wildlife crime, new research and our schemes to protect nature. In addition, we responded to a wide range of media queries from local and national media. Our staff took part in radio and television programmes to share



# 1,192

hectares purchased in  
25 land acquisitions



# 13,827

planning referrals received  
and processed







NPWS received and processed 13,827 planning referrals in this period for observations on the implications of proposed developments which may have an impact on the built or natural heritage

their knowledge and expertise about nature, and provided timely and accurate data and quotes to local and national newspapers.

- NPWS received and processed 13,827 planning referrals in this period, which were referred to the Minister in his role as a statutory consultee under the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended) for observations on the implications of proposed developments which may have an impact on the built or natural heritage.

In addition, the Minister in his role as a 'consultation body' under various other statutes received 2,677 other referral types for observations on the implications of the activities the consent authorities are regulating, which may have an impact on the built or natural heritage.

- Completed a comprehensive Heritage GIS and Remote Sensing Review and commenced implementation of its recommendations.

- Launch of NPWS branded work-wear for staff nationwide to promote the professionalism and brand recognition of the NPWS.
- Co-ordination of the NPWS participation at the National Ploughing Championships.
- Organisation of the Annual staff conference.
- Continued progression of the Heritage ICT Modernisation Programme.





## Strategic Priority 7

Support nature protection through excellent EU and international engagement.

In its capacity as the competent authority for a range of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), NPWS participated in several important international meetings throughout the last 18 months. These included:

- Conference on Biodiversity Working Groups on Resource Mobilisation and on Digital Sequence Information of Genetic Resources;
- The 77th Standing Committee of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES); and
- The Standing Committee of the Council of Europe's Bern Convention on the protection of wild species and their habitats.
- As part of the EU and Member States group, Ireland contributes to nature positive and pro-conservation positions across the MEAs and is active in maintaining the push for high ambition in the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
- The Nature Restoration Law, which sets out a framework for Member

States to restore nature, with binding targets for a wide range of ecosystems including rivers, forests, oceans, urban areas and agricultural ecosystems, as well as protected habitats and species throughout the State, was approved by the EU Environment Council on 17th June 2024.

Ireland has always supported the Nature Restoration Law, while acknowledging that the challenge involved in meeting the ambition is significant.

- The Government announced the creation of a €3.15bn Climate and Nature Fund in Budget 2024, which will support a range of biodiversity, water and climate action measures. The National Parks and Wildlife Service will lead on the biodiversity measures by preparing a programme of projects, plans and schemes to deliver long-term conservation and restoration of biodiversity.



# €3.15bn

Climate and Nature Fund announced by Government in Budget 2024



We support nature  
protection through  
EU and international  
engagement



# 2023-2024 in Review



## National Parks and Nature Reserves



**5.5m**  
visitors welcomed

**500km**  
of trails and walkways  
maintained and upgraded

## Land Acquisition for Nature



**25** Strategic High Nature value land acquisitions, totalling 1,192 hectares, including the acquisition of Brú na Bóinne National Park and Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara

## Wildlife Crime



**Increased collaboration**  
with An Garda Síochána  
to combat wildlife crime

**53** prosecution cases  
initiated for alleged breaches  
of wildlife legislation

**31** prosecution cases  
under wildlife legislation  
successfully closed

## Schemes for Nature



**400** NPWS Farm  
Plans operational (€3.5m budget)

**2,254** applicants  
paid under the Cessation of Turf  
Cutting Compensation Scheme

**182** Local Biodiversity  
Action Plan projects funded  
across 31 Local Authorities  
(€2m in funding)



## Licensing & Legislation



**38 SIs**

produced

**9,284**

wildlife licences issued, 6,400  
Deer Hunting Licences

**59**

zoos licenced by NPWS

**12**

legal cases closed

Commencement of the  
**Wildlife (Amendment)  
Act 2023**

## Designations



**491**

detailed Site Specific  
Conservation Objectives  
published

**50+**

Natura sites implemented  
conservation measures under  
the Conservation Measures  
Programme

**3.5 million**

hectares designated in new marine Natura sites

## European Funding/ Projects



**Continued support**

for LIFE programmes, 7  
Projects, including Wild  
Atlantic Nature, Corncrake  
LIFE, and LIFE on Machair

**€33.9m**

funding secured for new LIFE  
Strategic Nature Project (SNaP)  
Ireland

## Organisational Renewal



**ECSS Directorate  
established**

**Increased media  
coverage** and public  
engagement

**1st**

NPWS Strategic Plan published





Landowners are nature's first responders. Their insights, cooperation, commitment and willingness to collaborate are crucial





# Highlights 2023-2024



## Successful Breeding Projects

A successful 2023 at our intensively managed bird, seabird and wader breeding sites in the South East, including:

- **Coldross Breeding Wader Project Co. Wicklow.** From a base line in 2017 of 5 nests/breeding loci of 3 water bird species of conservation concern, in 2023 the project supported at least 76 nests /breeding loci of 10 waterbird species of conservation concern.
- **Kilcoole Little Tern Project Co. Wicklow** had an estimated 306 chicks fledged. Two 19-year-old birds, both originally fledged from Kilcoole, were re-sighted in 2023 and are now the two oldest Irish Little Terns on record.
- **Cahore Little Tern Project Co. Wexford**, a new initiative, had an estimated 15 young successfully fledged. With very positive engagement from the local community, we hope to build on that in years ahead.



## Peatland Restoration

In 2023, peatland restoration works were undertaken within 11 protected raised bog sites under the NPWS Raised Bog Restoration programme which is funded through the carbon fund. This included the installation of 4,100 peat dams, 463 Weirs and over 48km of bunding. Since 2018, restoration measures have been

completed on 5,000 hectares of designated raised bogs, with 950 hectares (2,350 acres) having been completed in 2023 alone.

Peatland restoration measures have now been undertaken within 22 raised bog Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's), while

preparatory actions have been undertaken across 40 of the 53 raised bog SAC's.

2023 saw the expansion of conservation measures projects including the Barnacullian restoration project in the Wicklow Mountains SAC. This project aims to reduce erosion of important blanket bog and heath habitats and reduce silt run off by slowing down the water on eroded slopes. This includes installing stone, timber and coir dams.



# 22

raised bog Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) have undergone peatland restoration measures

## Shelter Project

Innovative restoration project in Wild Nephin National Park which aims to bring derelict former cottages into use as botháin (bothies or shelters) for park users while also acting as a way to pay respect to the cultural heritage and past inhabitants of the landscapes that now form part of our National Parks System.



## Launch of Glenasmole Catchment Project

The Glenasmole Project, the first catchment based project in Wicklow Mountains National Park was launched by Ministers Eamonn Ryan and Malcolm Noonan in May 2023. Through a suite of active management techniques, the NPWS proposes to address the specific conservation objectives for this entire sub-site of the Wicklow Uplands SAC. This will lead to habitat restoration, improvement in vegetation management leading to greater ecological diversity and structure. Improvements in diversity will increase biodiversity on site and offer improved grazing and shade for grazing animals, thereby delivering benefits for wildlife and livestock. This project will also work to stabilise and revegetate bare peat, prevent further loss of peat and prevent land slips.

There will be measurable benefits in terms of carbon storage, reduction in erosion and improved water quality. While the works are targeted at the SAC they will also provide important ecosystem services to the wider catchment, specifically in terms of flood risk alleviation and improvements in water quality in relation to the River Dodder and the Dublin water supply at Bohernabreena.

It is our hope that this broad catchment based approach to management can act as an exemplar to the wide ranging benefits of habitat restoration and ecological engineering.

## LIFE Programme

There were a number of highlights for the NPWS LIFE Programme in 2023-2024. In May 2023, the €7.4m LIFE on Machair was launched to protect and restore Ireland's network of machair systems and associated breeding wader and pollinator communities.

Corncrake LIFE had a successful 2023 with data showing an increase in the population of the Corncrake in the west and north of Ireland.

In August 2023, an NPWS survey showed an increase of 35% in the corncrake population in the past five years. and the first corncrake in twenty years was sighted on the Aran Islands.



# 35%

increase in the corncrake population in the past five years





## Planting of Scots Pine in Glenveagh

Minister Noonan was in Glenveagh National Park in May 2023 to oversee the planting of native Scots Pine Woodland. This native woodland is the first step in a wider native woodland conservation programme in Glenveagh National Park that will focus on the long-term vision of creating favourable conditions for natural woodland habitat within the park. Ongoing measures to curb invasive species, deer management and the creation of a tree nursery in the park are also part of this conservation effort.



## European Peatlands Initiative Event, Dublin

In May 2023, NPWS hosted an event attended by several European countries on the development of a European Peatlands Initiative aimed at strengthening existing ties between countries on peatlands conservation and restoration.



## White-tailed Eagle chicks spread their wings further into Irish skies

24 White-tailed Eagle chicks were released in August 2023 in locations around Lough Derg, the Shannon Estuary and the West of Ireland, as part of an ongoing reintroduction programme of this once extinct species. A total of 171 White-tailed Eagles have now been released through the programme in recent years and a small, established population of Eagles are now fledging chicks around the country.



## Biodiversity pilot training programme

A new biodiversity pilot training programme for contractors working in environmentally sensitive areas was launched in May. The aim of the course was to provide an opportunity for staff and contractors for the OPW, Local Authorities and other public sector bodies to learn how to protect and conserve nature in their day to day work. It included practical ecological training on a range of different habitats, such as rivers, woodlands, lakes, hedgerows, peatlands and grasslands, as well as buildings and bridges, and offer guidance on key elements of environmental and wildlife law, risk mitigation and best practice.

## Establishment of Ireland's 7th National Park

Of major significance to the NPWS in September 2023 and a “once in-a-generation opportunity” as noted by Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O’Brien, TD, was the State’s acquisition of the World Heritage lands of Dowth Hall and demesne, which includes Netterville, in Co. Meath and the establishment of a new National Park – the Brú na Bóinne National Park.

The property, spanning 552 acres, is the largest single landholding within the World Heritage Property and is a cultural and natural heritage site of national and international importance.

The acquisition of Dowth means the State will now care directly for approximately one third of the World Heritage Property, which will enable the State to considerably expand its ability to conserve, protect, and

promote access to this World Heritage Property.

The Brú na Bóinne National Park will be an extraordinary addition to the chain of National Parks in Ireland. This is a very significant acquisition which contains valuable elements of natural, archaeological and architectural heritage, incorporating research and demonstration elements to promote nature-positive farming.



## Ploughing Championships

The 92nd National Ploughing Championships took place in Ratheniska, Co Laois, in September. This event provided a fantastic opportunity to showcase our work to protect nature by actively engaging the public in NPWS nature conservation projects, including our EU projects (LIFE); outlining supports and schemes available to the farming community (including Farm Plans and Peatland Conservation) and through a series of visual, interactive stands which bring NPWS work in nature conservation to life.







## Black Islands Acquisition

The acquisition of the Black Islands on Lough Ree in October 2023 brought a unique 23 hectares (58 acres) of both Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA) into public ownership and under the stewardship of NPWS. This will support conservation management and contribute to achieving the Conservation Objectives for both the SAC and SPA, and help restore these important habitats and species to favourable condition.

## Glendalough Visitor Experience Masterplan launched

In December the NPWS along with the National Monuments Service (NMS) launched the Glendalough and Wicklow Mountains National Park Visitor Experience and Management

Masterplan in collaboration with Fáilte Ireland, Coillte, Wicklow County Council and colleagues in OPW. This is a long term plan designed to provide a phased roadmap to protect

and enhance the setting of Glendalough and the Wicklow Mountains National Park and to establish key sustainability objectives against which future projects will be assessed.





## Establishment of Ireland's first Marine National Park

Páirc Náisiúnta na Mara, Ciarraí, Ireland's eighth and newest National Park and our first marine National Park, with more than 70,000 acres of lands and seas in public ownership, was established in April 2024.

The Páirc will be dedicated to the protection and restoration of its internationally-significant biodiversity and archaeological heritage. It brings together new acquisitions by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, such as the Conor Pass, the Owenmore River catchment, lands at Mount Brandon and the sand dune system at Inch Peninsula, along with sites already under State ownership, such as the limestone reefs of Kerry Head Shoals and the waters around the Blasket Islands.



# 70,000

acres of lands and seas in public ownership in Ireland's first marine park

## Expansion of conservation measures in the Wicklow Mountains SAC

2023 saw the expansion of conservation measures projects including the Barnacullian restoration project in the Wicklow Mountains SAC.

This project aims to reduce erosion of important blanket bog and heath habitats and reduce silt run off by slowing down the water on eroded

slopes. This includes installing stone, timber and coir dams.







## 2024 Natura 2000 Award

In May 2024, Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE IP won the 2024 Natura 2000 Award in the category 'Working together for nature'. The Natura 2000 Award highlights projects that demonstrate excellence in nature conservation and sustainable land use. Wild Atlantic Nature is the first Irish project to win such an award.

## Twinning of National Parks

In May 2024, Wild Nephin National Park in Mayo signed a twinning agreement with Yosemite National Park in California which will see the National Parks and Wildlife Service share knowledge across the Atlantic and in turn learn from a sister park to help conservation and improve biodiversity in Wild Nephin. The parks will also collaborate in areas including visitor, forestry and wilderness management.



Connemara National Park also renewed its own twinning arrangement with Terra Nova National Park in Canada, for a further five years. Both parks protect similar ecosystems of bogs, wetlands and woodlands, and protect many common species including the pine marten. There is also a strong historical and cultural connection between the east coast of Newfoundland and Ireland.

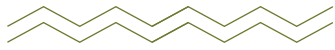


## Muckross 60

2024 saw Muckross House and the NPWS celebrate the 60th anniversary of the House opening its doors to visitors on June 14th 1964. The celebrations included the NPWS and the Board of Trustees of Muckross House hosting several exhibitions, walks and guided tours with free admission to Muckross House and Muckross Traditional Farms throughout the anniversary weekend (14-16 June).



# Financial Overview 2023-2024



NPWS has seen a significant increase in funding from €28.7m in 2020 to €69.1m in 2024, excluding payroll. This represents continued commitment to addressing significant historic under-funding of nature and biodiversity and to return investment to 2008 levels.

**TOTAL EXPENDITURE** in respect of NPWS strategic programmes reached €73 million in 2023. NPWS expenditure was supplemented by

capital carryover from 2022 of €4.2 million. A further €21 million was provided as supplementary to meet the cost of Strategic High Nature Value

land purchases and necessary health and safety works at our National Parks and Nature Reserves.

	Estimate Provision 2023 €000	Outturn 2023 €000	2024 REV Allocation (€000)
F.5 National Heritage (National Parks and Wildlife Service)			
- Original	42,582		
- Supplementary	21,000		
	<u>63,582</u>	62,924	54,400
F.8 Peatlands Conservation and Restoration			
- Estimate provision	10,280		
- Deferred surrender	4,200		
	<u>14,480</u>	10,030	14,750
	<b>78,062</b>	<b>72,954</b>	<b>69,150</b>



Total expenditure in respect of NPWS strategic programmes reached €73 million in 2023. NPWS expenditure was supplemented by capital carryover from 2022 of €4.2 million



The allocation of €69 million in 2024 will allow NPWS to:

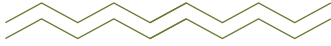
- Continue the transformation and renewal of the NPWS, as set out in the Government's Strategic Action Plan, with particular emphasis on conservation measures at our 600 Natura sites and on protected species, investment in our National Parks and Nature Reserves for nature and public amenity, and nature programmes in the wider countryside, and addressing wildlife crime.
- Progress an expanded programme of biodiversity investment and the restoration and conservation of protected peatlands, including peatland compensation and restoration incentives in line with national biodiversity and climate action objectives and Just Transition policy.

- Invest in and support visitor services at Ireland's National Parks and Nature Reserves, as outlined in the Strategic Action Plan.
- Monitor habitats and species as required under the Birds and Habitats Directives and advance the delivery of conservation projects under LIFE and other funding instruments, including the conservation and restoration of protected designated sites, and expand the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme and measures for Breeding Waders.



The allocation of €69 million in 2024 will allow NPWS to continue the transformation and renewal of the NPWS, as set out in the Government's Strategic Action Plan

# Looking Ahead



The period under review marks what was a pivotal period for NPWS and for nature.

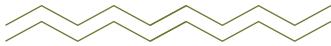
**THE PROCESS OF CHANGE** continues at pace. The challenges ahead will see the NPWS continue to improve the condition of our 600 designated sites, the management of our National Parks and Nature Reserves and our compliance with the Birds and Habitats directives.

NPWS will take a leading role in nature restoration, both nationally and within the EU. Ireland's fourth National Biodiversity Action Plan will inform

a wide range of activities to protect and restore our biodiversity. 2024 will also see the beginning of Ireland's National Restoration Plan stemming from the far-reaching EU Nature Restoration Regulation. This will impact every sector of Irish society and involve extensive public engagement to inform a National Restoration Plan unique to Ireland.


NPWS will need to continue with work to combat wildlife crime,

address invasive species elimination and manage over five million annual visitors to our National Parks and Nature Reserves. We will have a crucial role in the regulatory oversight of national offshore renewable energy targets.



The challenges ahead will see the NPWS continue to improve the condition of our 600 designated habitats, the management of our National Parks and Nature Reserves and our compliance with the Birds and Habitats directives



A scenic sunset over a large body of water. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds in shades of blue, orange, and yellow. In the foreground, two people are silhouetted as they stand on a rocky outcrop. Several ducks are swimming in the water near the shore. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

The NPWS is at the forefront of our country's response to our nature crisis and biodiversity imperatives. We cannot work alone.

In championing a better engagement with nature, our dedicated team will work in partnership with citizens, landowners, communities, NGOs, businesses, agencies, researchers and all our stakeholders.

Organisations including the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, the Environmental Protection Agency, Uisce Éireann, the Marine Institute, Waterways Ireland, Inland Fisheries Ireland, Coillte, Bord Na Móna, the Heritage Council, An Garda Síochána, the National Biodiversity Data Centre, the Office of Public Works, Universities and Local Authorities and Government Departments, all play a part in restoring and protecting nature.

By working together, we will deliver better outcomes for nature in 2024 and beyond.

NPWS.ie

National Parks & Wildlife Service



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland