

A robin by any other name...

by Doug Newbould

My wife being at least half-Irish by blood and by virtue of surviving a quarter-century of marriage to me is probably eligible for sainthood or her own reality show, but was willing to settle for a trip to Ireland to commemorate our 25th anniversary. Luckily, she saw fit to drag me along.

We planned our trip for the last two weeks of September, reasoning that most of the tourists would be long gone and we could enjoy the emerald isle in relative peace and quietude. As with many assumptions, this one turned out to be full of blarney. We were soon to discover that solitude, even in a rural and in some places a rugged land, is a precious commodity.

According to our gracious and friendly hosts, Ireland's economy and its tourism are booming, despite the high cost of transportation fuel. We were told this new-found prosperity is either due to the success of the European Union, or because of former President Bill Clinton, or because of the virtues of Guinness Stout (or some combination thereof). Don't ask me to explain.

Now before I get too far into this tale, I must say that I am planning to relate this story back to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, or at least to Alaska. So, please bear with me. And since there are said to be more than 40 million Americans with Irish blood in their veins, I am assuming there is someone still reading this. And no, I did not kiss the Blarney Stone.

So, we began our journey together in Seattle, having each spent several days away from Alaska on separate business trips. We flew to Shannon, the southwestern-most international jetport in Ireland, via JFK and Heathrow. Having spoken to numerous friends about Ireland prior to our trip and studying various tourist information sources, we decided to spend as much time as we wanted visiting the south and western counties of Cork, Kerry, Clare, Galway and Mayo.

We went purposely without an itinerary so we could take a leisurely pace and optimize rather than maximize our experience. Traveling by rental car through these rural counties, we thought we could get off the "beaten path" to view the countryside, witness the wildlife, find the wild places and meet the real peo-

ple.

Now I have to say my intent is not to narrate our journey ad nauseam, but to share a few observations about the land we traveled and about the flora and fauna. If you want ad nauseam, you'll have to talk to me or my lovely Irish wife. Either of us could go on and on—about Irish history, our ancestry, the weather, the roads, the prices, the B&B's, and O' the music! Consider yourself forewarned.

If you go to Ireland with the intent to find the wild places and observe the life there, you'll need detailed maps and a good guidebook. One book we found useful was, *Complete Irish Wildlife*, by Paul Sterry [Harper Collins Publishers, Ltd. 2004]. This book is a comprehensive identification guide to the fauna and flora of Ireland, and we used it every day.

Since we did not have the time or the inclination to visit Ireland in its entirety, I will not try to describe the whole. But there are a few factoids about the land I would like to share. Ireland is an island encompassing about 32,500 square miles or just under 21 million acres. To make a comparison with Alaska—two of the sixteen National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska (Arctic and Yukon Delta), are each nearly equal in size to Ireland. Lands within the Kenai Peninsula Borough cover about 15,700 square miles, roughly half the landmass of Ireland.

Ireland's natural history shares some similarities with that of the Kenai Peninsula. As the last great northern polar ice cap began to recede and sea levels rose about 15,000 years ago, Ireland was a sub-arctic tundra landscape, surrounded by mountain glaciers. Grasslands dominated the island about 13,000 years ago and the land-bridge between Ireland and Britain disappeared about a thousand years later.

The first people arrived about 9,000 years ago when Ireland was dominated by forests. Farming began about 6,000 years ago. As the human population increased, the demand for wood products and the need to grow food resulted in the nearly complete deforestation of the island. Today there are only a few remnant old-growth forests of sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*), and scattered forest reserve plantations dominated by Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), Norway spruce, European

larch and introduced North American conifers such as Douglas fir, Sitka spruce and western hemlock.

Other familiar trees we saw in mixed hardwood-conifer forests included aspen, poplar, birch alder and willow. Perhaps the most unusual and culturally significant tree we encountered was the yew (*Taxus baccata*). Yews are common throughout Ireland as single ornamentals, and can be found growing still in the inner courtyards of many of the ruined abbeys and friaries, where the trees held a place of honor. The unique fruit of the yew is a single seed surrounded by a crimson fleshy, drupe-like aril. The yew has worldwide importance as a source of the compound—taxol, which is used to treat ovarian cancer.

The western side of Ireland is mountainous with summits reaching 1,000 meters above sea level. While the glaciers have all disappeared, the rugged landscape bears witness to their passing. The jagged coastline of western Ireland is dominated by fjord-like bays and rocky landscapes. The mountains, while not that tall are impressively steep and difficult to traverse.

Atlantic storms frequently lash the western coastline, bringing rain and strong winds to the mountains, especially in the autumn, as we were so fortunate to experience firsthand. The cool, moist coastal climate sustains the moors, fens and bogs that dominate the uncultivated parts of western Ireland.

As for the fauna, Ireland has about 425 bird species, 50 marine and land mammals, three amphibians and one land reptile (viviparous lizard). There are 27 freshwater fish species in Ireland and a rich marine ecosystem that produces abundant seafood, which we sampled frequently.

Of the 22 land mammals, 13 were introduced by man. We saw fallow deer (*Dama dama*), fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) and the Irish mountain hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*). We also saw a stoat (*Mustela erminea*). When I spotted the critter, we were driving across the Burren, an 800 square-kilometer exposed limestone plateau in counties Clare and Galway. I exclaimed to Denise, “There’s a weasel!”

When she referred to the guidebook, she said I was mistaken. She read the following description to me: “Confusingly, often referred to as a ‘Weasel.’ Note the long, sinuous body and the distinctive black tip to tail. Coat colour orange-brown above with clear demarcation from white underparts. Some N (northern) indi-

viduals turn white in winter, retaining black tip to tail. Sometimes located by pinpointing anguished squeals of rabbit prey, a favourite food. Found throughout Ireland.” In my book, if it looks like a weasel, walks like a weasel and smells like a weasel, it’s a weasel!

As for the numerous bird species on the island, we saw many songbirds and shorebirds we had not seen before. There were grey herons (*Ardea cinerea*), oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*), mute swans (*Cygnus olor*), pied wagtails (*Motacilla alba ssp. yarellii*) and hooded crows (*Corvus corone ssp. cornix*). We saw many familiar birds as well, including dunlins, plovers, sandpipers and curlews.

One little songbird in particular, stood out from the rest. About 14 centimeters long, it had a bittersweet orange face and breast, grey shoulders and crown, and brownish streaked back and wings. When we looked up this striking little bird we were surprised to learn it was a robin (*Erithacus rubecula*). “No,” I said, “That’s not a robin. Robins are thrushes and at least twice as large as this little guy.” Again, I was mistaken.

After thinking about it for a minute, I realized the error in my ways. This little songbird had likely been christened, ‘Robin’ long before the American robin was discovered. What was more likely was that the American bird had been named by someone familiar with the European bird’s orange breast. I began to lose my American pride and prejudice somewhat. Who am I to say a stoat is not a stoat! The confusion caused by the use of common names is why scientists use Latin nomenclature to differentiate between species.

Our trip to Ireland was wonderful. We truly enjoyed the landscapes, the wildlife, the culture and the people. We want to go back again. But, as always, we were happy to get back home to Alaska and the Kenai. Reading about and seeing firsthand how the wild places, the flora and fauna of Ireland had been changed by its inhabitants over the centuries, makes me appreciate the wild places of Alaska: the parks, the forests and the wildlife refuges. Perhaps we can avoid some of the environmental mistakes made by other cultures and nurture those remaining wild places and the diversity of life they contain.

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