

Shelduck Ducklings Rescued in Lordship

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Owen Mc Cann releasing ducklings

At this time of the year ducklings turn up in all kinds of unlikely places. Shelduck ducklings are particularly vulnerable to getting lost. This is because Shelducks nest in small burrows under gorse or bramble, often up to a mile from the shore. Once the ducklings hatch, they immediately leave the nest and make their way to the sea, guided by their anxious parents. It was en route to the sea that a clutch of ducklings got trapped in a weir at Lordship. Locals observed a pair of adult Shelduck hanging around the area but it was not until Owen McCann from Lordship went to investigate that it turned out that the cause was the trapped ducklings. One of the problems with some recent developments in the area is that some of the piping under the road and developments is not suitable for the ducklings to get to the sea, for Shelduck are primarily a species of shore and estuary. The parents had departed so Owen fished them out and brought them home for protection.

Once Shelduck have brought their ducklings to the sea they quickly abandon them; fortunately these orphans are not left to fend for themselves but form huge crèches of up to 60 or 70 ducklings. The nurseries are protected by a few non-breeding Shelduck adults while their parents fly off to moult, for Shelduck have to moult their flight and tail feathers every year and during this period they are flightless and vulnerable. Many Irish Shelduck are thought to migrate to Bridgewater Bay mudflats in England to moult, where up to 4000 birds gather every year in the summer.



Anyway to cut a long story short, Owen's ducklings were brought down to the salt marsh at Rockmarshal and released into one of the narrow channels where there is good cover. Other Shelduck ducklings were in that area and there is a very good chance that these wee birds managed to join another nursery and will successfully grow and fledge later in the year. Indeed when the ducklings were released, we heard the distinctive cackle call of an adult in the vicinity, apparently responding to the twittering of the youngsters.



Male and female Shelducks

Shelduck are easy to identify and can be seen most of the year around Dundalk Bay. They are a handsome, gooselike duck with white, black and brown plumage and a distinctive red bill. Males and females are roughly the same (the male has a large knob on its bill). This is because eggs are incubated under cover of gorse or bramble and therefore no camouflage is necessary, unlike other species such as Mallard. Shelduck populations are globally healthy and not under any particular threat. If you come across Shelduck ducklings bring them to the nearest part of the shore, where there is good cover and other Shelducks, and release them into the water, taking care to not let gulls or crows from seeing what you are doing.

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