

2.3 Habitats and wildlife

Birds and mammals are most active in the early morning and evening, so you're more likely to see them if you start very early or go for a wander in the evening. Midges also follow this pattern, so, between May and September, cover up and apply a repellent.

The Kerry Way passes through five distinct habitats:

- upland
- woodland
- coastal
- heath, field and hedgerow
- wetland

Upland

Most of the moors are carpeted with grasses and sedges rather than heathers and associated plants. Purple moor-grass is widespread, forming dense tussocks on damp moorland; it turns brown in late autumn and comes to life again during spring. Bog cotton with downy white flower-heads flourishes en masse in watery places. Here you'll also see insect-eating plants such as sundews, and an Irish rarity – purple-flowering greater butterwort.

Skylarks and meadow pipits soar overhead, filling the air with their melodious song, whilst the calls of black ravens and hooded crows are more raucous. Look out for kestrels hovering overhead, or the fast dive of the darker, peregrine falcons. You might even see a white-tailed eagle soaring in the skies. They have prospered since being reintroduced in 2007.

Hares are quite common, easily distinguished from rabbits by their long legs and ears and bounding gait. Ireland's sole surviving herd of about 850 red deer roam the slopes of Torc Mountain in Killarney National Park (see panel overleaf).



Greater butterwort



Skylark



Red deer stag



Torc waterfall

Woodland

Killarney National Park protects Ireland's largest areas of native woodland; the most prominent species are sessile oak, holly and silver birch. The trees, festooned with mosses and lichens, shelter ferns and small flowering plants including white wood anemone and bluebell. Unfortunately purple-flowering rhododendron has invaded large areas; it excludes native plants and is extremely difficult to eradicate.

On limestone soils along the shores of Lough Leane and Muckross Lake, the woodlands are diverse, with alder and hazel prominent. When disturbed, woodpigeons take flight with a noisy clattering of wings and broken twigs. Look out also for the quieter robins and chaffinches: see the photo on page 22.

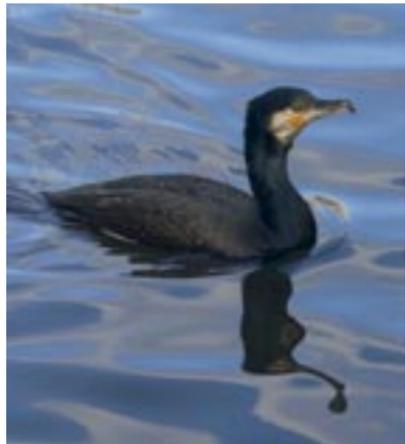
Coastal

Grey-backed herring gulls and the much larger great black-backed gulls are common, not only on the coast but almost anywhere they can scavenge food. Along the coastal stretches of the Way you may see the black, fish-eating cormorant, distinguished from its slimmer cousin, the shag, by its white cheeks and chin and more powerful bill.

Cormorant

Killarney National Park

Ireland's oldest National Park, Killarney was set aside in 1932 after the Muckross Estate was given to the state by its American owners (Mr and Mrs W Bowers Bourn and their son-in-law). It has since been enlarged to its present size (over 10,000 hectares) and extends from the northern shores of Lough Leane to the mountains south of Upper Lake, and from Purple Mountain in the west to Killarney in the east. It includes mountains, moorland, woodlands, lakes and Muckross House and Gardens. Several publications about the park are available from the small visitor centre in Muckross House, see page 23. For more information, visit www.killarneynationalpark.ie





Fuchsia

Heath, field and hedgerow

In spring and summer, hedgerows marking ancient field boundaries and lining roadsides, display a wealth of wildflowers. Dense blackthorn (which flowers in March) and hawthorn (blossoming white from May) are most prominent, entwined with clematis and honeysuckle. They in turn shelter yellow primroses, pink and white wild dog rose, yellow-flowering cowslip, foxgloves with pinkish-purple, tubular flowers, and creeping thistle.

Vivid scarlet and purple fuchsia has spread vigorously since being introduced from New Zealand in the 19th century. You may be lucky enough to spot black medick, similar to clover and the source of Ireland's famous emblem, the shamrock. Growing in damp, sheltered places, its yellow flowers turn into black pods in late summer.



Wood anemone



Shamrock



Male chaffinch feeding on rowan berries

Large areas of open ground, formerly cultivated or grazed fields, now support spreading clumps of yellow-flowering gorse, bracken, and heather. Several small birds make their homes in hedgerows. Look out for the tiny, energetic russet-brown wren, robins with their red chests, blue tits and coal tits, blackbirds and song thrushes. Long-tailed, noisy black magpies are easily spotted in fields and gardens. During spring and early summer, the repetitive call of the cuckoo is often heard, but the bird itself – darkish grey, magpie-sized – is elusive.

Wetland

Yellow flag iris is prolific around lake margins. Purple loose-strife, with long, dark pink flowers, thrives in marshlands. Ragged robin thrives in wetland, and early purple orchids, with long spotted leaves, are commonly found in ditches and poorly drained ground.

The mallard is the commonest species of duck, the drake distinguished by his glossy dark green head. Grey herons stand stock still for long periods in sheltered reaches, whilst orange-billed mute swans glide slowly and smoothly. Near streams, look out for the small dipper, with dark brown back and white chest, darting about and fishing in fast-moving water.



Yellow flag iris



Ragged robin