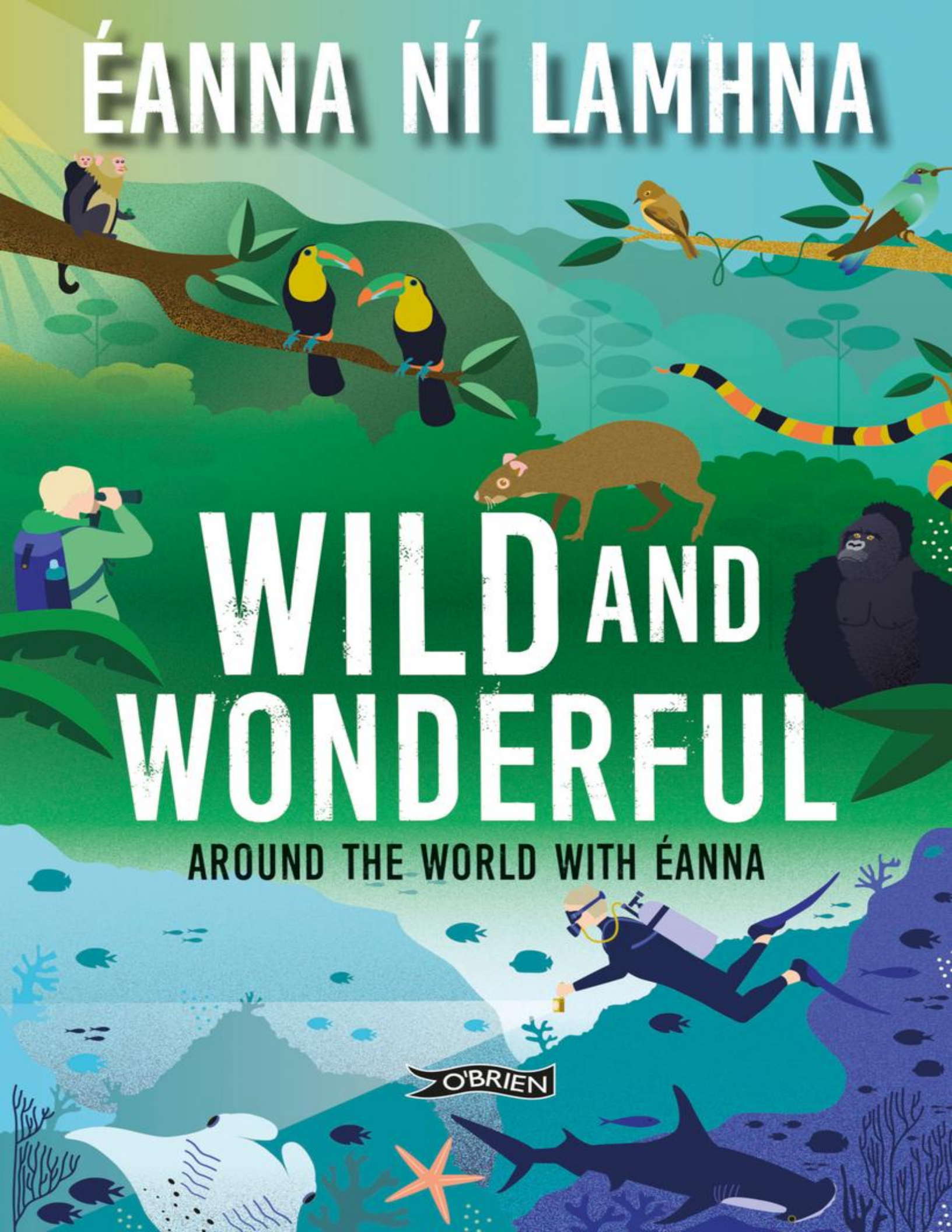


ÉANNA NÍ LAMHNA



WILD AND WONDERFUL

AROUND THE WORLD WITH ÉANNA

O'BRIEN

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**WILD AND
WONDERFUL**

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Praise for *Our Wild World*

‘Splendid ... wonderful book ... written both with imagination and feeling ... it’s practical at one end, a blueprint for living, and at the other end it is a theory of the world.’

RTÉ Radio’s *Mooney Goes Wild*

‘I loved this book ... It should be required reading in schools and colleges. [Éanna] has done a fascinating and excellent job of encapsulating and explaining very complex situations and processes and cycles in a very accessible way ... a manual to how the world runs.’

Niall Hatch, Birdwatch Ireland

‘An appealing and insightful take on the natural world ... a combination of scientific acumen and robust communication skills are what have made Ní Lamhna one of the most loved educators in the country. *Our Wild World* lays out some of the basic ecological and environmental principles that might have passed us by, while clearing up a raft of myths, everything from migration and bacteria to global warming and biodiversity. What makes *Our Wild World* particularly special is that she strikes a tone that speaks to anyone aged nine to ninety.’

Sunday Independent

‘[Éanna] talks as fast as she does straight and can convey a lot in short time ... It’s science made simple ... for anyone from about 12 upwards who has even a passing interest in the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate

breakdown but is beaten back by jargon. Experts would also benefit from a read ... Ní Lamhna doesn't do jargon.

She whittles down Darwin's theory of evolution to the following explanation: "Nature doesn't tolerate eejits."

Irish Independent

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**THE O'BRIEN PRESS
DUBLIN**

For my children: Maebh, Christopher and James.

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Introduction



I first wrote *Wild and Wonderful* in 2004 to describe the wild and wonderful world, both here in Ireland and indeed overseas, that I was familiar with. Since then, the world has changed and in many ways not for the better – although there are still lots of wild and wonderful places. In this new edition, while I have kept some of my favourite descriptions of the places I had seen – mostly in the last century – I have explored many new places both at home and abroad since and I am including lots of new tales about these. I realise how fortunate I am to have seen those faraway places. Such travelling cannot be undertaken lightly now, since we have become aware of the impact long-distance air travel has on the greenhouse gases in our atmosphere.

Lockdown due to the pandemic, which began in 2020, forced us all to spend much more time within a very small radius of our homes. This had the interesting effect of making people much more aware of the wild and wonderful world that was all around them if they would but choose to notice and observe. So, interspersed with tales of the distant places I visited in the last twenty years is an account of the wonderful place where I spent the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 and of what I noticed there. The impact for the better that people can have on

their surroundings is apparent in the increased awareness of places for nature, wildflower meadows, the plight of pollinators, etc. It is within our power to keep and improve this wild and wonderful world of ours.

Putting it out there - *Caoga Bliain ag Caint*



Do the plain people of Ireland know more about wildlife than they did in 1974? Just wondering.

I have been writing and teaching and talking about wildlife all my life – for more years than I care to remember – but for, I suppose, almost fifty years. Most of the time it is to an audience of Irish people, and by this stage I must have left the mark of my teeth on three generations – as the schoolteacher and writer Bryan MacMahon once described the work of a lifelong primary schoolteacher. But has it had any effect? Surely Irish people now must know more about wildlife, its importance and the effect humans are having on it than they did when I was starting out in the 1970s? I wonder.

Learning about wildlife and the environment was not considered important at all before the 1970s. It wasn't taught in primary schools. There was no subject called Biology on the secondary school syllabus. There were no wonderful wildlife documentaries on television. In fact, televisions themselves – especially coloured ones – were

few and far between. What wildlife species occurred in Ireland anyway and what was their distribution and abundance?

Data on the wildlife species that occurred in Ireland and where in the country each had been recorded were officially kept in the Biological Records Centre in Huntingdon in England, where all such records for the British Isles were stored. While the British Isles was the geographical description of the two main islands off the northwest coast of Europe, it certainly wasn't a term generally accepted by Irish people. Publications such as *Atlas of the British Flora*, which appeared in 1962 and in a second edition in 1976 and which naturally included Ireland as a matter of course, attracted Irish records from only a small group of academics and specialists.

Another major deterrent to the sending in of Irish records was the grid referencing required to pinpoint where the record was taken. If you look at any Ordnance Survey map of either Great Britain or Ireland today, you will see that each is covered by a grid based on kilometre squares. This was devised for Great Britain in the 1940s and was used for those early plant records that appeared finally in the 1962 *Atlas* – the culmination of ten years of recording where all these plants occurred. Such a grid was not on Irish maps in the 1950s so in 1955 David Webb, Professor of Botany in Trinity College Dublin, took it upon himself to extend this British grid across the Irish Sea and rule a set of large-scale Irish maps with a continuation of the grid. The account he wrote in the *Proceedings of the Botanical Society of the British Isles* of how he did this, was described in that 1962 *Atlas* in the following terms: 'Professor Webb solved [the problem] elegantly and published the skeleton of his agony in the Proceedings of the BSBI.'

His 'solution' was no such thing. There was in existence at that time, although not yet on the maps, an

Irish grid system of kilometre squares. He could have drawn that one on the maps instead. The British grid was at a different angle to the Irish one and there was no correlation at all between the grid reference of a place using these extended British co-ordinates and the Irish ones that appeared on maps from the early 1960s. So even if you could identify an Irish plant and even if you were willing to send your good Irish record to a records centre in England (which would refer to it as a British record), using this made-up grid at the wrong angle and only available on maps given out to those in the know was really a step too far for many.

The bird people managed things a lot better. Birds were always recorded by the British Trust for Ornithology in Britain and the Irish Wildbird Conservancy in Ireland. The publication of the *Flora Atlas* in 1962 encouraged them to work towards a bird atlas and the project began in 1966. They had enough wit to use the correct grid for both jurisdictions and sensibly called the atlas – which was finally published in 1976 – *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*.

The Irish Biological Records Centre was set up in 1973 in An Foras Forbartha – a semi-state body established in 1964 to advise the Department of Local Government on planning issues, water resources, roads and buildings. Today, some, but not all, of these areas are part of the remit of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Irish Biological Records Centre was established to produce distribution maps of plants and animals in Ireland so that these could be taken into consideration in the planning process. Wishful thinking as things turned out! The British Records Centre sent over all its Irish records and Mary Crichton was given the job of getting it going. I replaced her in 1974 and worked there as sole researcher until An Foras Forbartha was abolished in 1988. It was my first job, straight out of college, and I

was full of enthusiasm. Mammals were the first group worked on and Mary had produced a preliminary Irish atlas that first year, based mainly on the records she had received from the British Records Centre.

A second edition of the *Atlas of the British Flora* (complete with all the Irish maps on the old bockety grid drawn up by Professor Webb in 1955) was published in 1976 and I was appalled. I wrote in the newsletter of the Irish Biological Records Centre that a chance to correct the drawbacks of the first edition had been squandered and essentially that calling it an 'Atlas of the British Flora' and ignoring the proper Irish grid was inexcusable. For my pains, I was called a neurotic Irish nationalist by the good Professor Webb. But I was right. The vast number of Irish plant records for more than a thousand species, recorded and published on an ad hoc grid, were of no practical use to the Irish Biological Records Centre.

The birds were doing fine – they were being recorded properly – so I turned my attention to producing distribution maps of Irish mammals and Irish butterflies. How hard could it be to get people to send in records, even with just the address, as it were, of where the creature was spotted? I could add the grid reference myself.

But it turned out, in fact, to be very hard. In those pre-social media days of the 1970s, people had hardly heard of An Foras Forbartha, never mind the Irish Biological Records Centre. People generally knew very little about our mammals and even less about our butterflies. Well, everyone could identify a hedgehog or a badger and indeed roadkill records of these species formed a major part of the information I received. Who could identify a flying bat? Impossible still today without sophisticated bat detectors that can separate our nine resident species on the basis of the frequencies and pitch of their calls. Although one doughty recorder was not deterred from

trying and actually sent in a live bat in a small Anadin tablet box to the absolute horror of the secretarial staff, who in those dim, distant days opened the official mail we all received.

We have stoats here but not weasels, two species of mice but only one species of vole with a limited distribution, no moles, no dormice. Water rats don't exist,* lizards and newts belong to two completely different groups and grey squirrels were spreading down along the eastern half of Ireland displacing the red. I needed to be sure which squirrel was being recorded. There was scope for confusion between rabbits and hares, mink and otter, and grey seals and common seals.

I took to educating would-be recorders myself. Every year from 1974 until 1988 when the whole place was abolished (because, as Taoiseach Charles Haughey said, we were all living beyond our means and had to tighten our belts), I organised and ran summer courses for primary school teachers, who subsequently sent in records with their school pupils from around the country. Provisional atlases of butterflies, dragonflies and woodlice appeared too, but in truth they were distribution atlases of where the recorders lived and worked, rather than publications with meaningful ecological information.

And in 1988, when the whole place sank without trace, I brought all the cards and computer printouts of the fourteen years of records to the offices of the then Forest and Wildlife Service in Bray. They were part of nobody's brief there and so they were left to languish, untouched. No one was interested in Irish Biological Records and it was to be almost twenty years until the National Biodiversity Centre was established in 2007 by the Heritage Council.

I took to more formal teaching after that.

Teaching can be wonderful. I should know. I come from a line of teachers on both sides so I know what a life-absorbing vocation it is. Full time, all day every day, it must be one of the most demanding occupations ever. You are totally committed when you stand up in front of that class. You have to initiate proceedings, keep the show going. If your attention flags or you show boredom even for a minute the whole thing collapses. Because the truth is that, in the main, pupils don't want to be taught. They might like being at school all right, but they'd rather occupy themselves any other way in class than listening to a lesson. The feedback is instant. If the lesson is not hitting the spot they are bored and they show it. It is very hard to hit the spot for five hours a day with a class of up to thirty individuals of varying motivation and interest. In an office job you could have a break, a cup of coffee or take a phone call - not in class you can't. Teachers deserve a high spot in heaven.

My teaching experiences are different because at school level I come as a one-off to the class - a novelty, someone that was invited. The teacher is present. The pupils are allegedly on their best behaviour. I may be talking to primary or post-primary pupils and my only requirement is to be interesting enough to hold their attention. If not, mind you, feedback is swift and merciless. Unlike grown-up audiences, which, if bored, switch off and look out the window, pupils who are not enjoying their lessons make it known. They lean back on their chairs and sometimes fall off them, which livens up proceedings considerably. They plait the hair of the girl in front of them. They reflect the sunlight onto your face with the front of their watches. They speak to each other - what they have to say is considerably more relevant than what they have to listen to - and indeed, if they are a particularly obnoxious group, they join together to mock the accent of the teacher and find double meanings