

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **WILDLIFE HABITATS THREATENED BY NON-NATIVE TREES AND CLIMATIC CHANGES SAYS LEADING ORNITHOLOGIST**

**IRELAND, Monday, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2007** - Afforestation and climatic changes are threatening marginal wildlife habitats, according to a leading Irish Ornithologist. John Murphy, who is Clare Biodiversity Officer and the Chairperson of the Clare Branch of Birdwatch Ireland, said that certain species are undergoing a population decline due to the planting of non-native and commercial tree species while the early arrival of Spring is having an adverse effect on biodiversity lifecycles.

*“Climate change is not something that is affecting the icecaps and oceans - it is going on all around us”*, stated John Murphy.

He continued, *“As seen this year again, spring has arrived earlier than normal meaning some of our insects and plants are appearing several weeks earlier. This change is having negative knock-on effects for the birds and other wildlife that depend on them for food.”*

*“By the time bird species return from Africa to Ireland to nest and breed, they are finding that the Irish season has well progressed. Currently, the hatching of flies and insects, which are vitally important for these species to feed on, are at an advanced stage. Due to these changes, certain species will not flourish as before and will subsequently incur a reduction in population numbers”*, Mr. Murphy explained.

Meanwhile, Mr. Murphy said that the planting of non-native and commercial tree species was having a detrimental effect on certain species of wildlife. He said that the Shannon Wetlands, located on the River Estuary at Shannon Town in County Clare, was a prime example of how invasive species can damage wetlands ecosystems.

The Shannon Wetlands is designated within the Shannon Town plan as a Wildlife zone and is regarded as a highly important area for a wide variety of birds, insects, plants and mammals. This Wetland Area was the last place in Shannon where the now rare and almost extinct Corncrake bred in the town.

According to Mr. Murphy, *“While Sitka Spruce trees may be harmless and beneficial in their natural surroundings, numerous plantations of the non-native species have seriously damaged the Shannon Wetlands ecosystem, reduced biodiversity and degraded important wildlife habits. Such plantations, which are of little conservation value, have negatively impacted upon Biodiversity and have destroyed the undergrowth that is essential to so many species of wildlife. As a result, we have seen a significant decrease in the population of Trans-Saharan migrants like the Sedge and Grasshopper Warbler.”*

Mr. Murphy said that the Grasshopper Warbler is now red-listed in Britain and is similarly under threat in Ireland. *“The planting of non-indigenous and invasive species has led to the destruction of the Grasshopper Warbler’s habitat. As seen in the Shannon Wetlands, the Sitka Spruce has destroyed deep vegetation and bramble bushes, which host these birds”*, he stated.

*“The decrease in the number of Grasshopper Warblers in the Shannon Wetlands has been witnessed by the Shannon Wetlands Group, which was established with the assistance of the Clare Biodiversity Group and Heritage Office. Earlier this year, the Group received Heritage Council Funding under the local community Heritage Grant scheme to the value of EUR4,500 to clear existing Sitka Spruce trees to allow for a rejuvenation of the undergrowth and wetland habitat. The funding will also be used to clean up litter, and to erect on-site information Display Board outlining the wildlife using and living in the habitat”*, Mr. Murphy concluded.

At present, there is an estimated 10,500 breeding pairs of Grasshopper Warblers in Britain with a further 5,500 in Ireland. There is 280-430,000 breeding pairs across much of Europe, but the bird is rare or absent in southerly regions such as Spain, Italy, Greece and the Balkans. Grasshopper Warblers were previously on the amber-listed because of a contraction in range during the period preceding 1988-91. There was a rapid population decline between the mid 1960s and mid 1980s, when numbers became too small for annual monitoring to continue.