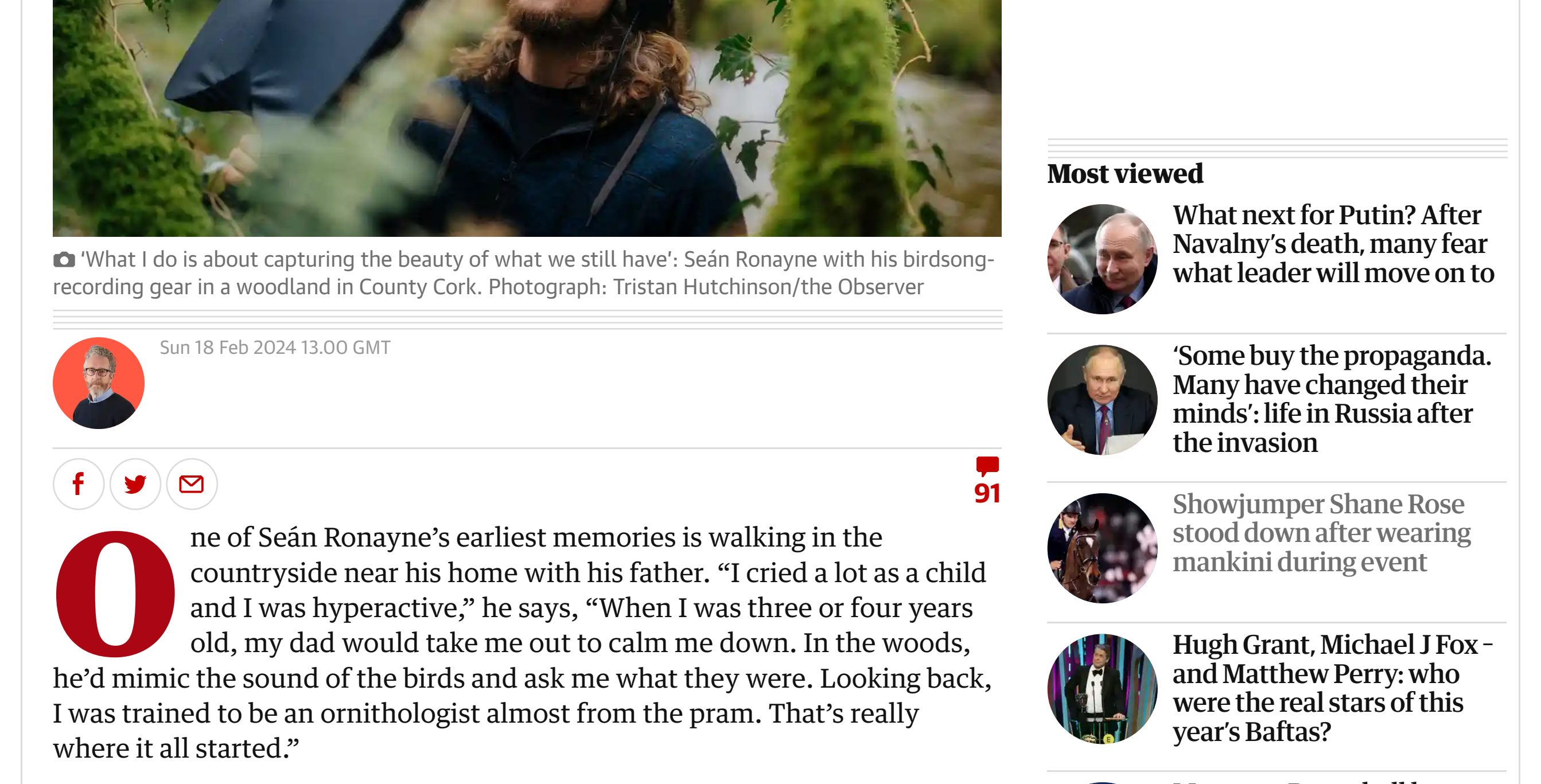


“Total immersive obsession’: meet the man on a mission to record every bird in Ireland

Sean O’Hagan

The ornithologist Seán Ronayne’s all-consuming quest has made him an unlikely celebrity in Cork, and his passion for nature is raising awareness about the seriousness of Ireland’s ecological crisis



What I do is about capturing the beauty of what we still have: Seán Ronayne with his birdsong-recording gear in a woodland in County Cork. Photograph: Tristan Hutchinson/the Observer

Sun 18 Feb 2024 13:00 GMT

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One of Seán Ronayne’s earliest memories is walking in the countryside near his home with his father. “I cried a lot as a child and I was hyperactive,” he says, “When I was three or four years old, my dad would take me out to calm me down. In the woods, he’d mimic the sound of the birds and ask me what they were. Looking back, I was trained to be an ornithologist almost from the pram. That’s really where it all started.”

As he grew older, Ronayne, who was something of a solitary child, would spend a lot of time at his kitchen window in Cobh, County Cork, peering through binoculars at the birds feeding in his garden and writing down their names in a notebook. At 14, he could identify most of the birds he saw by the sounds they made.

Now, aged 35, Ronayne is on a mission to record the sound of every bird species in Ireland. Thus far, he has amassed nearly 10,000 recordings and, having meticulously analysed them on his laptop, has identified 194 regularly occurring species. “I have three primary targets left - grey partridge, great skua and red-breasted merganser,” he tells me in his characteristically precise way, “before I start to go for secondary, less regularly occurring species.”

What Ronayne calls his “total immersive obsession” with birds and their songs has made him Ireland’s best known ornithologist and a passionate advocate for biodiversity and ecological awareness. After a recent appearance on a popular Irish TV chatshow hosted by the comedian Tommy Tiernan, which went viral on social media, he has also become an unlikely and somewhat reluctant celebrity. “I’m essentially a shy person, so it was a bit stressful,” he says of the experience, “and I honestly never expected the huge public reaction, but it was great to be able to promote the subject I care about the most.”

By mimicking other species it’s encountered, the bird on your doorstep tells its story, including of epic migrations

I am speaking to Ronayne over the phone to rural Cork where, he tells me, he is “standing next to some cow fields looking at a conifer plantation as part of a bird survey”. Conifers and cow fields, it turns out, are among his least favourite places. In Birdsong, a forthcoming documentary about him, he explains why. “If you look at a Google map of Ireland, it is a jigsaw of intensive cow fields,” he tells a rapt audience at one of his illustrated talks. “The hedgerows that divide them have been slashed and thrashed, the bogs are being drained, and really sensitive areas in the uplands are being planted with conifers.” He describes conifer plantations witheringly as being as “bleak and species-poor” as their name suggests.

Ronayne’s interest in bird life deepened, he explains, when he lived for a time in Catalunya and immersed himself in the habitats and ecology of the Pyrenees. “It was a truly wild and beautiful place, where I could be totally alone with my own thoughts and surrounded by all these unfamiliar sounds.” When he returned to Ireland, he initially felt bereft. “It brought home to me the fact that all we have in Ireland are remnants of those wild spaces and, for a time, I did think, how can I cope? In a way, what I do is about capturing the beauty of what we still have and increasing people’s awareness of it so that maybe we can turn it around in some way.”

Photograph: Tristan Hutchinson/the Observer

In Catalunya, he met his partner, Alba, who now accompanies him on many of his sound surveys, but initially, he says, laughing, she “had to put up with the madness” of his vocation. As the documentary reveals, it was Alba who, intrigued by the all-consuming nature of his interest in birds and his apparent lack of interest in revealing anything else about himself, undertook a masters degree in education, specialising in autism.

“I could see he was different in some ways,” she tells the film-makers, “and I needed to approach him in a different way. I learned a lot, actually.” Likewise, Ronayne. “It all started to make sense,” he says. “So I went for a diagnosis. Just to understand it and learn how to deal with it.”

For someone who admits to once being shy to the point of antisocial, Ronayne is an engaging public speaker who effortlessly imparts his own wonderment at each new discovery he makes to the audiences that now fill local halls in Ireland to hear him speak. He tells me of a recent speaking event he held at “a festival in Wicklow where people primarily wanted to party, yet the marquee was packed”. Afterwards, he led a guided walk through the nearby fields and the entire audience followed in his wake. It was, he says, “an extraordinarily powerful and moving moment”.

Ronayne is about to release a digital-only ambient album, Wild Silence, comprising 15-minute tracks that, he says, “capture the sound of a whole habitat free from human noise”. It includes a soundscape of a dawn chorus that begins with a single cuckoo and builds as other birds awaken and join in, and another of a more intimate ritual recorded in the entrance of a puffin burrow on a rocky cliff. “They come and go and greet each other,” he says. “You can hear their footsteps in the burrow, but also the sound they make when they clap bills, which happens when the male returns with a mouthful of sand eels and the female comes out to meet him.”

By far the most popular section of Ronayne’s public talks is when he describes the almost uncanny ability of some bird species to mimic other birds and animals they encounter. He recalls walking with his dog in the woods and hearing what he assumed was another dog barking nearby, only to discover the sound came from above and was made by a jay. “They are extraordinary little birds,” he says. “When a jay mimics a dog, it is telling other jays that there is a threat on the ground. If it mimics a buzzard, it is telling them the threat is from above.”

More extraordinary still is the common whitethroat, a small bird that, in summer, breeds in Ireland, before migrating in autumn through the Mediterranean to winter in Senegal in west Africa. On their epic migratory journeys, they absorb and repeat every other bird sound they hear. Ronayne recorded some whitethroats in Ireland, as they flew up into the air, wildly singing. When he analysed the recording, he discovered that between 70% and 80% of their frantic outburst comprised of mimicry of other species.

As a result of intensive farming, 63% of Ireland’s native bird species are currently at risk of extinction

“Mimicry was a real eye-opener for me,” he says, still sounding excited. “It made me see birds in a totally different light. Once you are able to decipher the mimicry in a bird’s song, the connection becomes personal, but it can also tell you so much: where it is living, where it has wintered, and where it has been on its journey in-between. The bird on your doorstep that you may take for granted is essentially imparting its story through mimicking the other species it has encountered. They also connect us, not least because what we do in Ireland, and how it impacts on their habitat, can cause complications in Senegal.”

Ronayne’s passion for wild birds, and the precious but dwindling habitats that support them, has struck a chord in Ireland at a moment of dawning awareness of the seriousness of the country’s ecological crisis. “It’s an outrage, but many people still don’t realise how bad it is,” he says, sounding uncharacteristically angry. “Ireland is one of the most nature-depleted countries in Europe. We have lost 90% of our wetlands, more than any other country in the world, and have just 1% of native tree cover, the lowest in Europe.”

The core issue is intensive farming, with more than 60% of the land given over to what, in government-speak, is called improved agricultural grassland. “It means that everything has been removed except rye grass for animal feed,” Ronayne says. “Fields are now cut maybe three or four times a year for silage, whereas there used to be traditional hay meadows that would have been host to nesting species like the corncrake, skylark, lapwing and curlew.”

As a result, 63% of Ireland’s native bird species are at risk of extinction, including the hen harrier, an Irish flagship species whose numbers have plummeted dramatically: the last national survey, in 2022, recorded just 85 confirmed pairs. “We are a country,” Ronayne says, ruefully, “that has amassed an impressive degree of grim statistics, which tells us nature is being assaulted from every angle.”

While many of the native birds Ronayne tracks in Birdsong against a backdrop of mountains, wetlands and vast Irish skies were once abundant and are now endangered, his tentative optimism and sense of wonder are inspiring. He searches for the elusive corncrake on Tory Island and travels with Alba to spend the night on Skellig Michael, one of two small, but dizzyingly high, rocky islands that rise dramatically out of the Atlantic off the coast of Kerry. This inhospitable place, once home to hermit monks, hosts an astonishing array of wild - and noisy - birds: puffins, guillemots, kittiwakes, razorbills, fulmars, storm petrels and the elusive and eerie-sounding Manx shearwater, which he manages to record beneath a full moon casting its reflection over a still, shimmering sea.

Despite these moments of elemental beauty, the film has an elegiac tone. Ronayne sets out to listen for the small and secretive ring ouzel, which was once common throughout Ireland but, as of last year when there was just one confirmed sighting of a pair, is classed as critically endangered. Using a hi-tech recording device concealed in heather, he captures a series of short, shrill tweets, the first ever recording of the bird in Ireland. It is a bittersweet moment, not least because, as he poetically puts it, his recording of “this haunting melancholic song of the valleys of the uplands is essentially the sound of extinction”.

I ask Ronayne if it is hard to be optimistic in the face of such irrevocable ecological loss. “Of course, yes,” he says, “but you have to keep pushing. You can’t become hopeless. And the response to what I am doing has made me more optimistic. People want to be guided. The young, in particular, have a big job ahead of them. For me, it is important to communicate the scale of the problems we are all facing, but also the beauty and the wonder.”

Seán Ronayne is on X at @SoundsIrish and Instagram @irishwildlifesounds; irishwildlifesounds.com. The documentary Birdsong will premiere at the Dublin international film festival on 29 February

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