

Early one morning on Dublin Bay...

The morning light breaks across a hazy October skyline, illuminating what remains of the tide, which is slowly retreating from Dollymount Strand. In its wake, there remains a shallow lagoon, surrounded by vast expanses of sand and mudflats that stretch far out into the Bay. And as the sun throws back the cover of darkness from the sand dunes and salt marshes of North Bull Island, Dublin's most recent visitors begin to emerge from their hiding places...

They have been arriving for a few weeks, stealth-like, from such far flung places as Russia, Scandanavia and Siberia, to spend the winter feasting on the rich pickings provided by Dublin Bay. They, of course, are birds! Thousands of birds, in every shape, colour, and size imaginable...

Without warning, a thousand Teal rise up into the sky, with the green band across their eyes flashing like the mask of Zorro, as they turn on their wing, and descend to the still waters of the lagoon. More colour soon follows, reds, whites and chestnuts, as Shelducks and Shovelers begin to arrive, and the serenity of the morning quickly disappears.

A gaggle of Brent Geese, fifteen hundred strong from Polar Bear Pass in the Arctic Circle, waddle their way towards the acres of eelgrass left exposed by the retreating tide, as a mob of waders begin what looks like a frenzied attack on the bay's invertebrates. It's led by the usual suspects... a gangster's squad of Curlews, Godwits, and Plovers, with Knots and Redshanks bringing up the rear. However, on closer inspection, it's clear that this is a very sophisticated and well organised assault. Each bird, you see, has a specialized weapon that targets a different prey – their bill size! And the most impressive of these, which reaches deep down into the mud, belongs to the Curlew.

Meanwhile, as all this is going on, a flock of Oystercatchers, decide to ignore their own names, and opt instead, to dine on Dublin Bay's most famous shellfish... Molly Malone's very own, cockles and mussels!



And this is how it continues... twenty thousand birds appear to aimlessly mill around, but in reality, each and every one is focused on the mission at hand – to find something tasty for breakfast, before the returning tide forces them back to their hiding places amongst the sand dunes and salt marshes of North Bull Island!

By Shane Casey, Biodiversity Officer, Dublin City Council