



Canoeists prepare for training on Lough Gur this week.

(LL)

# Wildlife worry at Lough Gur



The only sign of bird life on the Lough Gur shore today is a mallard.



John Coffey of Lough Gur . . . found evidence of vermin destroying bird life.

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By PATRICIA FEEHILY

ALARM bells are ringing at pre-historic Lough Gur, one of County Limerick's greatest tourist attractions.

In fact, one scientist has warned that the lake will eventually vanish.

A drastic reduction in the wild bird population, and dramatic changes in the water level, are only two of the developments causing concern to local people who have intimate knowledge of the atmospheric lake.

"The lake needs attention urgently," said local wildlife enthusiast, Francis O'Loughlin of Holycross, who is raising wild duck himself in an effort to restore the balance of nature. "A good number of issues need to be addressed," Mr O'Loughlin added.

Not only is it a pre-historic site of great national and international importance, but Lough Gur is also a wildlife sanctuary, and an EU designated area of scientific interest, yet it is now suffering signs of official neglect.

Visitors from all over the world have been attracted to its haunting shores, but at least one regular Lough Gur visitor is disillusioned. PJ Hogan, writing from Villa Street in Hereford, says: "On a recent visit I was horrified to see that beautiful Lough Gur is now, except for a few swans, bereft of all other species of wildlife."

It may be an exaggeration, but only a slight one. Francis O'Loughlin knows the exact wild bird population of Lough Gur - 19

geese, four swans, six to eight pairs of mallard duck, two or three pairs of coot and a couple of nesting water hens.

It's a far cry from the teeming wildlife of the lake as recently as a couple of years ago.

A number of factors, Mr O'Loughlin said, are contributing to the decrease in the wild bird population. The Maigue drainage scheme deprived various species of their traditional wetlands. Now migratory birds don't come in the same numbers anymore.

Then an invasion of mink in the area left devastation in its trail. But many of the mink were captured, Mr O'Loughlin said.

John Coffey who lives close by the lake, said that he has found evidence of the destruction of nests by vermin on his own land.

Visitor, Patrick Ryan, of Glenroe, said that the swans are missing this year, and that he has never seen so few birds on the lake.

But Mr O'Loughlin said that the area still has a huge population of whooper swans.

He believes that official bodies interested in Lough Gur, such as Shannon Development, the County Council and Ballyhoura Faite, should be turning their attentions towards restocking the lake.

"These wild birds can be fostered. I'm doing it myself. I travelled to Gorey last week to bring back a clutch of mallard," he said.

But perhaps the most disastrous development of all is a natural one, aided by human actions of human settlement. Local scientist, Noreen M Leyden, in a thesis for her masters degree at Trinity College, Dublin, two years ago, called for "some type of control programme" to stop and con-



Francis O'Loughlin of Holycross, with a pair of six-week-old ducklings which he hopes will help to bring new life to Lough Gur.

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trol the eutrophication of Lough Gur.

Speaking geologically, the lake could eventually vanish, she said, writing in the current edition of the Lough Gur and District Historical Society journal.

The changing water level of the lake is also posing problems. Although many dry areas were once submerged, Mr O'Loughlin claims that the water level has risen dramatically this

year because two million gallons of water a day which once sourced the local water supply, is now flowing back into the lake. The natural outflow from the lake, he believes, is now blocked, resulting in no flush of the lake waters, something which Ms Layden says is characteristic of the lake in spring and summer.

Finally, if the duck were scarce on Lough Gur when

we visited last week, there were signs of vastly increased human activity, with canoeists from the Kilfinane Education Centre practising their skills on the calm waters.

Neolithic man left Lough Gur, more or less as he had found it - undisturbed, its fragile balances intact. But there are signs that all is not well there now, and the least we can do is to heed those warnings.



Patrick Ryan from Glenroe . . . has seen a dramatic decrease in the wildbird population.

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Man jailed for discharging

