

The first step in trying to conserve biodiversity is to map and measure it, and gathering data on the plants and animals occurring should be a priority activity of biodiversity conservation. Finding the resources and expertise to achieve this is a very real obstacle. At a recent biodiversity training event for local community groups hosted by the Irish Wildlife Trust and Westmeath County Council I was asked by an amateur biologist whether their effort in recording nature really made a difference.

Research carried out by amateurs or 'citizen science' is recognised by all as an enormous resource in the conservation effort. Just as the choices of individuals in communities that are made a million times a day count most towards local and global conservation efforts, it is the individual contributions of citizen scientists that can contribute most to those first steps. A good example of the role of amateurs is in the identification of bird calls, individuals with specialist skills which have been built over time and with personal experience are key to the many research and monitoring projects carried out by Birdwatch Ireland. Amateur biologists like these frequently assist professionals and decision makers with specialist knowledge directly or through the wide range of similarly crucial NGO's involved in the area of biodiversity, such as the Irish Wildlife Trust, Bat Conservation Ireland, the Irish Peatland Conservation Council and the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland and the results from these projects ultimately contribute to national and European legislation.

One goal of both the National and County Biodiversity Plans is to begin to gather together the huge resource of local knowledge and amateur research, which is to some degree overlooked by our legislation. Key to this process is what you do with the data you collect. Whether it's an individual road kill record or mammal sighting or a local biodiversity plan, the information you've collected is most valuable when available to others or when added to an online database.

Targeting schools and the general public [Biology.ie](http://Biology.ie) has a live map to which you can add your recordings and provides a 'my sightings' personal account where all of your recordings can be viewed. The site also has a handy GPS converter for Google map positions and has direct links to the national Road Kill Survey and the All Ireland Ladybird Survey.

The National Biodiversity Data Centre [Biodiversityireland.ie](http://Biodiversityireland.ie) accepts recordings for all species, native or invasive and is especially focussed on developing an Atlas of Mammals in Ireland. This database combines professional and amateur recordings to create all Ireland maps and is an important tool used daily by ecologists and local government across the county. So get out a pencil or camera and get out recording!