Adjectives

Summary of Comparative forms

We're talking about big, bigger, biggest. In English, "bigger" is the comparative form, and "biggest" is the superlative form (breischéim and sárchéim in Irish, respectively).

In Irish, there is only one form of the adjective for both the comparative and superlative. You tell them apart by the form of the copula that precedes the adjective:

- Níos mó = bigger => "more bigger"
- Is mó = biggest => "most bigger"

In general, the superlative form is used much more in Irish than it is in English. In English, having only two daughters, I have an "older" one and a "younger" one. In Irish, I have an "oldest" daughter, iníon is sine, and a "youngest" one, iníon is óige. The rule in English that comparatives are used for two things, and superlatives for more than two things, does not apply in Irish.

How to form Comparatives/Superlatives

To form a comparative or superlative, you perform two steps:

1. You change the adjective into the form used for both the comparative and the superlative;
2. You place the appropriate form of the copula in front of it.

STEP 1: THE COMPARATIVE FORM OF THE ADJECTIVE

Officially, the comparative form of the adjective is the same as the feminine singular genitive form of the adjective. Clear?

Okay, that's not too helpful. Truth to tell, especially in younger speakers and the current generation, the genitive of the adjective is fading fast, outside of some very common forms and set phrases. (What the heck, the genitive of the noun is on shaky ground in some places.)

I'll just give you the most common patterns, in a slightly different order than you'll find in textbooks and references That's because I'm not going in declension order, but starting with the most consistent (perhaps easiest) patterns and moving to murkier stuff:

1. Adjectives ending in -úil consistently change to -úla: leisciúi > leisciúla, cairdiúil > cairdiúla.
2. -(e)ach tends to change to (a)í in the comparative: tábhachtacht > tábhachtaí, aisteach > aistí.
3. The strongest trend is for the adjective to somehow end up with a slender consonant + e at the end: glic > glice, láidir > láidre, ard > airde, bán > báine. Note that for adjectives that end in a broad consonant, that consonant gets slenderized along the way.
4. Most adjectives that end in a vowel don't change in the comparative.

A Couple of Tricks of the Trade

- It is common for some of those final syllables (unstressed vowel + consonant) to collapse — in the same way that the verb oscail collapses the last syllable of the root when you say osclaíonn. So dílis > dílse, láidir > láidre.
- Big Hint: It is easier to say a lot of these things than to spell them. That is, once you get in the habit of replacing -ch with -i, or -úil with -úla, it is fairly easy to work these into your speech. If you manage to get an unstressed vowel on the end of the adjective, you will be understood!
-úil, and some friends

Starting here is easy, because you see lots of adjectives with this ending (usually íúil). These adjectives form the comparative by broadening that final / and adding -a:

áitiúil  áitiúla  cairdiúil  cairdiúla  dathúil  dathúla
stairiúil  stairiúla  cáiliúil  cáiliúla  spéisiúil  spéisiúla

There are just a few common adjectives ending in -ir that behave similarly, namely:

cóir (córa)  socair (socra)  deacair (deacra)

-ach

Generally, adjectives of more than one syllable ending in -ach (short a) will have that -ach replaced by -í (to follow a slender consonant) or -aí (after broad):

aisteach  aisti  baolach  baolá  uaigneach  uaigní
iontach  iontáí  díreach  dirí  Gaelach  Gaelaí

One-syllable adjectives that end in -ch will often have a comparative ending with an added th — but these are not nearly as common. The two most common families:

buíoch (buíthí)  immíoch (immíthí)
gnách (gnátháí)  spléach (spléathaí)

slender + e

By far the most common pattern is to arrive at a slender final consonant + e. (The final e is just an uh sound, an unstressed vowel.)

Usually, if the final consonant is already slender, just add the e:

glic  glice  minic  minice  ciúin  ciúine
tinn  tinne  fiáin  fiáine  fairsing  fairsinge

Note that although minice is the Standard, you will see/hear miníci as least as often.

If the final consonant is broad, make it slender and add e

bán  báine  deas  deise  ard  airde
ceolmhar  ceolmhaire  fuar  fuaire  bog  boige
dearg  deirge  bocht  boichte  bodhar  bodhaire

Some adjectives (more than one syllable) that have an unstressed vowel in the final syllable will collapse that vowel before adding the ending, like láidir > láidre:

ramhar  raimhre  saibhir  saibhre  iséal  isle
milis  milse  dilis  dilse  domhain  doimhne

Note that because of the "helping vowel" that slips into groups of consonants, there is really no difference between láidre and láidire, which you might also see. Similar for saying deacra, etc.
No change

As mentioned, most adjectives that end in a vowel don't change:

- cruí, rua, dána, blasta, cinnte, buí, liofa, sásta, sona

Also, verbal adjectives (briste, craiceáilte) do not change.

But note that some of the most common adjectives end in a vowel and have irregular comparative forms (see next section).

(On a very side note, many of these adjectives have a form ending in -cha in parts of Conamara:
  - te => teócha
  - beo => beocha
  - rua => ruacha)

Irregular forms

suh-prize, suh-prize, suh-prize, there are some common adjectives that have rather irregular forms. Here are some of the main ones, along with a few common ones that really aren't very irregular, but have a little vowel shift:

- álainn (áille) beag (lú) breá (breátha) dócha (dóichí)
- dona, olc (measa) fada (faide) flíuch (fliche) furasta (fusa)
- gearr (giorra) maith (fearr) mór (mó) sean (sine)
- te (teo) tirim (trioma) geal (gile)

In addition, there are quite a few regional/dialect variations. In general, if you can get an unstressed vowel on the end of an adjective, your meaning will be understood.

STEP 2: PLUG IN THE COPULA

The main challenge here is that the rules are a little different when you're talking about the past.

Comparative ('more'):

- Put níos (ni + is) in front of the comparative form, in present and future:
- In the past (and conditional), we use ní ba, with lenition, and drop the a before a vowel or fh. (Now, this is perhaps becoming less common in speech, where many people will just use the present/future form níos, but it is still very common in writing.)

So, Tá Seán níos glice ná Pól. Tá Sorcha níos áille ná Sinéad.
but Bhí Seán ní ba ghlice ná Pól. Tá Sorcha ní b'áille ná Sinéad

You will also see ní b' written as a single word, níb: Tá Sorcha níb áille ná Sinéad.

Superlative ('most')

- Put is in front of the comparative form (present and future).
- Past and conditional, use ba (lenites), except before vowels/fh, when you use ab.

So, an buachaill is glice, an cailín is áille
but an buachaill ba ghlice, an cailín ab áille.
DIRECT COMPARISONS

There are two common ways to make a direct comparison — X is Y-er than Z:

*Tá Seán níos airde ná Pól* (Seán is taller than Paul).

*Is airde Seán ná Pól.*

Note that in the second case, the *is* is not the copula used to trigger a superlative, but is the copula in its usual "to be" sense: "Is taller Seán than Pól".

For the "which one is..." question, use *Cé acu + noun + superlative*, and answer with a complete sentence:

*Cé acu duine is cáiliúla, Oprah nó Wally the Beer Man?*

*Is cáiliúla Oprah nó Wally the Beer Man, or*  
*Tá Oprah níos cáiliúla ná Wally the Beer Man.*

Note: *cé acu* tends to be run together, so it sounds rather like *kyuk-uh.*