SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: LOUGH UNNA/LOUGH UNSHAGH BOGS

SITE CODE: 000167

Lough Unna and Lough Unshagh Bogs NHA consists of upland and lowland blanket bog and associated habitats located 4km south-east of Glencolumbkille and 2km north of Slieve League Mountain in south-west Donegal. It is situated mainly within the townlands of Cashel, Contycro, Braade Lower, Meenavaghran and Straleel South. The road between Glencolumbkille and Carrick bisects the site. The site covers an altitude range of between 60m and 232m. Bedrock geology consists mainly of metamorphosed sediments that are overlain by glacial limestone till.

Two low-lying lakes occur that give the site its name (Lough Unna and Lough Unshagh) while a third lake, Lough Divna, occurs at a higher altitude. Streams, flushes, wet heath, dry heath and interconnecting bog pools also occur.

The predominant habitat is blanket bog, with species such as Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) and cottongrasses (*Eriophorum angustifolium* and *Eriophorum vaginatum*) occurring commonly. Scattered throughout are plants of Fir Clubmoss (*Huperzia selago*) and cushions of the lichen *Cladonia uncialis*.

Pools with interconnecting carpets of bog mosses, such as *Sphagnum cuspidatum, S. auriculatum, S. capillifolium, S. subnitens, S. magellanicum* and *S. papillosum*, add diversity in some areas. These pools also contain Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*), Lesser Bladderwort (*Utricularia minor)* and locally occurring species such as Oblong-leaved Sundew (*Drosera intermedia*) and Brown Beak-sedge (*Rhynchospora fusca*). Extensive mats of the liverwort *Pleurozia purpurea* are common along with the mosses *Campylopus atrovirens* and *Racomitrium lanuginosum.*

Wet quaking areas of vegetation occur as scraw, or floating mats of vegetation, on the western side of Lough Unshagh and at the base of Contycro Hill. Bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.) account for over 80% of the scraw while additional species include Bogbean, Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*), Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*), Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*), Many-stalked Spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), Bog-sedge (*Carex limosa*) and Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*). Species occurring in the lakes include White Water-lily (*Nymphaea alba*) and Floating Bur-reed (*Sparganium angustifolium*).

Wet heath habitat on thin peat is found on the slopes of Contycro Hill. Such areas support Heather, Star Sedge (*Carex echinata*), Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*), Heath Rush (*Juncus squarrosus*) and the moss *Hylocomium splendens.* Characteristic upland blanket bog species such as Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) and Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) are also locally frequent.

The site is valuable as a winter feeding habitat for the Irish Red Data Book species, Greenland White-fronted Goose. Much of the damaged bog that occupies the site, south of the main road, is included to achieve a protective area around the key geese feeding sites close to the two loughs. The lakes themselves are used by Whooper Swan and Red-throated Diver. Also present on the more undisturbed northern part of the site are Red Data Book species Red Grouse and Common Frog.

The main threat to the site is from mechanised peat extraction. This has resulted in habitat degradation, mostly in the southern half of the site. Recent cutting has occurred in the northern half, close to the road, and poses a potential threat to adjacent bog. Moderate damage from sheep grazing has also occurred on the bog north of the road while a potential threat may also come from the planting of coniferous forestry.

Lough Unna and Lough Unshagh Bogs NHA is a site of considerable conservation significance. Blanket bog habitat is a globally scarce resource. It is largely confined to coastal regions at temperate latitudes with cool, wet, oceanic climates. North-west Europe contains some of the best-developed areas of blanket bog in the world. The most extensive areas are found in Ireland and Britain. Upland blanket bogs, due to their exposure to severe climatic conditions at high elevations, are particularly vulnerable to erosion by human activities and extensive areas are currently undergoing active erosion due mainly to overgrazing. The current area of intact upland blanket bog in Ireland represents only a fraction of the original resource, due to the combined impacts of afforestation and overgrazing, and intact examples are therefore extremely valuable for nature conservation. Their long-term survival requires sensitive management. Lowland blanket bog comprises less than 3% of the world's peatlands. In Europe this type of blanket bog is restricted to Ireland, Britain, Norway and Iceland. The lowland blanket bog that occurs in Ireland is considered to be an extreme hyperoceanic variant of the habitat type, found nowhere else in the world except on the coastal fringes of north-west Scotland.

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