SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: RATHMOYLAN ESKER

SITE CODE: 000557

Rathmoylan Esker is a Natural Heritage Area comprising several segments on a series of north-west to south-east trending eskers located 7km south of Trim near the village of Rathmoylan in Co. Meath. Several parts of these eskers have been colonised by semi-natural deciduous and mixed woodland.

Due to extensive quarrying operations, only three intact areas of wooded esker now remain. The most natural and undisturbed portion of woodland has developed on a narrow esker ridge surrounded by pasture on three sides and an abandoned quarry on the other. Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) is the dominant tree in the canopy with frequent Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) present, particularly in the drier soils near the summit of the esker.

There is also a rich association of other tree species including Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), Sycamore (*Acer psuedoplatanus*), Horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), birch (*Betula* spp.) and occasional oak (*Quercus* spp.) and a diverse shrub and herbaceous layer including Dog-rose (*Rosa canina*) and Elder (*Sambucus nigra*). A lot of rotting wood occurs on the woodland floor and there is a good byrophyte cover in many places. Rathmoylan Esker is an excellent example of this habitat type in an undisturbed and ungrazed state. It has good species diversity, a varied age structure and has retained its natural character.

A larger tract of semi-natural woodland just to the east has a more managed and less natural character with a sparser shrub layer and lower species diversity. The canopy is primarily comprised of mature Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) with some Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), Sycamore and occasional oak.

A third area of mixed deciduous woodland occurs just to the north-east of the village. This area has been substantially reduced in size because of quarrying operations and represents the only intact piece of woodland left on this part of the esker. It comprises mature Beech and Scots Pine, with a secondary layer of young Hazel, Ash, Sycamore and Elder. There is also occasional Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and Hawthorn. The ground flora is dominated by Lesser Celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*) with occasional Lords-and-ladies (*Arum maculatum*) and Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*).

Several factors are currently threatening the quality of this site. Some areas have been damaged by the spread of Rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) and Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*). With the exception of the first woodland which is fenced off, most of the woods are heavily grazed by sheep and cattle and some of the mature trees have been felled recently.

However, some parts of this site are very natural in character and as one of the few remnants of wooded esker, this site is of high ecological and geomorphological

interest. Due to the threat from sand and gravel extraction, eskers are becoming an increasingly rare feature in the landscape which is highly sensitive to change. Rathmoylan is also one of the most easterly wooded eskers in Ireland.

6.11.2009