SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: RIDGE OF PORTLAOISE

SITE CODE: 000876

The ridge of Portlaoise is an elongated raised ridge or esker formed of sand and gravel which was deposited when a mass of ice covered this area during the last period of glaciation. The esker runs through the eastern part of Portlaoise town and extends in a south-south-east to north-north-west direction. North of the town, the secondary road to Mountmellick runs along the top of the ridge, while south of Portlaoise the L26 road to Timahoe runs alongside it.

Much of the esker is wooded. In the southern part, Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) form the canopy. Elsewhere, multi-stemmed Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and/or Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) predominate, with a range of other native species, for example Wych Elm (*Ulmus glabra*), Elder (*Sambucus nigra*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) occasionally present. Ground flora beneath the woodland canopy includes Wood Melic (*Melica uniflora*), Sanicle (*Sanicula europaea*), Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), with a range of ferns such as Hart's-tongue (*Phyllitis scolopendrium*) and grasses including False Brome (*Brachypodium sylvaticum*).

Open grassland on the esker is calcareous and typically species-rich. Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*) and Cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*) are among the grasses which predominate. Herbs present include Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Pignut (*Conopodium majus*) and Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*).

There are a number of disused gravel pits located along the length of the esker which are assessed by means of old trackways. All of these add habitat diversity to the site.

Nettle-leaved Bellflower (*Campanula trachelium*) is a rare species which is legally protected under the Flora Protection Order of 1987. This plant has been recently recorded on this site – a new station for the species. Elsewhere in Ireland it is virtually confined to the south-east of the country, and has been reported from only three sites since 1970. Another rare plant, listed in the Red Data Book, Blue Fleabane (*Erigeron acer*), occurs in disused gravel pits within the site. It is a plant of eskers, dry grassland, sandy pastures and walls (especially on calcium-rich substrates) and has been recorded from only five 10km squares since 1970.

Light grazing by cattle/sheep is not necessarily incompatible with conservation of esker habitats although overgrazing can result in a lack of tree regeneration and damage to ground flora.

Eskers are under increasing threat in Ireland, due to the demand for sand and gravel for the construction industry. Of the few eskers which have survived, only a small percentage retain their semi-natural flora of woodland and this is one of the best

examples of esker in Co. Laois, along with those at Timahoe (000421) to the south-east and Clonaslee (000859), to the north-west. The ridge of Portlaoise also has two rare plants, one of which is protected under the Flora Protection Order.

9.12.2009