SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: CLOONASCRAGH FEN AND BLACK WOOD

SITE CODE: 001247

Cloonascragh Fen and Black Wood consist of two small areas of different habitats situated 8km north of Laurencetown in east Co. Galway. Both are associated with a section of a long esker ridge running east-west which crosses the River Suck and River Shannon. Both are at the edge of Cloonascragh Bog which is thoroughly drained. Much of the esker in this vicinity is being worked (or has been worked out).

The fen is an area between the esker and the bog and is partly quite dry. It consists of a fairly species-rich vegetation in which four orchids are widespread and common – Common Twayblade (*Listera ovata*), Lesser Butterfly-orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*), Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), and Heath Spotted-orchid (*D. maculata*). Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*) and Common Milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*) are common. A number of short old 'causeways' across the fen are made of esker material and consequently support a calcareous flora with Mountain Everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*), Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Hieracium pilosella*) and Carline Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*). The central section of this long narrow site is the wettest and is probably the location of the rare snail *Vertigo geyeri*. The only open water is in the form of small 'bog holes' full of Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) and Lesser Tussock-sedge (*Carex diandra*), but the ground is semi-quaking. Sparse reeds occur here suggesting the former presence of a small lake. Great Sundew *(Drosera anglica*) is abundant at the edge of the old hand-cut face of the bog.

The very scarce and declining semi-aquatic snail species *Vertigo geyeri* has one of its main Irish sites here (last report 1981). This snail is listed in Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive as it is declining throughout Europe. It requires wet calcareous fen grassland with some open water and little shading. There is a possibility that some habitat rehabilitation is required at this site to preserve the species for the future.

At Black Wood dense woodland of old coppiced Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) occurs on two very steep-sided esker ridges separated by a hollow of species-rich dry meadow developed from the woodland soils. The ground flora of this wood is extremely species-rich and unaffected by grazing with a luxuriant growth and high ground cover of all species, which include Early-purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*), Common Twayblade, Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), Ramsons (*Allium ursinum*) and Sanicle (*Sanicula europaea*). There are many other typical woodland species, including grasses and sedges (*Carex* spp.). The site includes a woodland transition from esker soils to peat. Red Campion (*Silene dioica*) is common on the peat with Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*). Golden-saxifrage (Chrysosplenium oppositifolium) is particularly abundant at the junction between esker and peat. A variety of common woodland birds are breeding here, as well as the Whitethroat.

Obviously, further encroachment of the sand quarry into the northern section of this wood would destroy most of the woodland site.

The fen is one of the main sites for the very scarce and declining snail. Woodland on eskers is a rare and fragmented habitat in Ireland. There has probably always been woodland at Black Wood. Although coppicing has occurred, the ground flora is extremely diverse and intact. In this situation it gives rare clues as to the character of the original post-glacial woodland development. The transition to peat gives the wood extra interest.

18.11.2009