SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: CLONFINLOUGH ESKER

SITE CODE: 000892

Clonfinlough Esker is a long ridge of glacial till which runs from Esker Hill, about 7km east of Clonmacnoise, for about 3km in a westerly direction towards Clonmacnoise. As a geomorphological feature this relict of the retreating ice is of great importance. However, the well drained, calcium rich soils of eskers often support interesting and species-rich vegetation, and three such areas of ecological importance have been selected as a Natural Heritage Area: Esker Hill, Tullaghmore Hill and a section between them.

Although recent agricultural practices have now diminished the ecological value of these areas, they still support vestiges of the former species-rich grassland, especially on the steeper slopes, where the rich mixture of lime loving plants such as Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Parsley-piert (*Aphanes arvensis*), Pignut (*Conopodium majus*) and Cowslip (*Primula veris*) are most apparent. The notable Common Broomrape (*Orobanche minor*) also occurs. Apart from the grassland there are also areas of scrub. This is mainly composed of Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) but there are also some small but interesting areas of Hawthorn (*Crateagus monogyna*) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). This mosaic of scrub and grassland is attractive to common birds and mammals.

While the biological interest of the esker has been reduced by human impacts, old grassland on eskers is still of interest and this is one of the few such areas remaining in the district. The integrity of the geomorphological feature is being threatened by an active gravel pit to the west of Tullamore Hill.

13.11.2009