SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: WALSHESTOWN FEN

SITE CODE: 001731

Walshestown Fen lies in glacial drift and limestone gravels about 4km west of Mullingar. It has developed on the site of an old raised bog that has been long since cut away. Site hydrology is now dominated by mineral flushes and springs, although at least one spring has been diverted out of the site.

Contemporary vegetation follows a water gradient - there is a small area of open water marking an old bog hole in the middle of the site, to its north-west a 'skin' of vegetation overlies semi-fluid substrate and in places the surface quakes. This is known as a fen. Fen vegetation here is varied and shows the distinct influence of limestone derived calcium. Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*) form a mosaic of dominance with other associated species such as Grass-of-parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*) and Blunt-flowered Rush (*Juncus subnodulosus*).

Further from the lake, vestiges of the former peat cutting, old peat ridges support a different flora including Heath Wood-rush (*Luzula multiflora*), Heath Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza maculata*) and Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*). An intricate mosaic of freshwater marsh and peaty grassland has developed between the ridges. South of the old bog area, around Slanestown Lough, the habitat is somewhat drier, but still with its complement of marshland species.

The importance of this site seems to have been under-rated in the past, and formulated mainly from the presence of three rare species on the site, namely Lesser Clubmoss (*Selaginella selaginoides*), Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) and especially Fly Orchid (Ophrys insectifera).

Despite the loss of a section of the site to afforestation, and attempts at drainage and agricultural intensification, this site remains an important area for the habitats described above, and is an important local refuge for fauna.

25.11.2009