SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: BALLYDUFF ESKER

SITE CODE: 000885

Ballyduff Esker in Co. Offaly runs from north of Rahan to south of Tyrellspass. As a feature of glacial deposition, the whole structure is of interest, but around Trumpet Hill a Natural Heritage Area has been proposed for designation because the area is also of considerable ecological interest. Here the eastern end comprises three high ridges with two steep sided and deep depressions. West of the road there are two main ridges with several short side branches which reflect the path of meltwater channels within the retreating ice at the end of the last ice age. The result is a well drained glacial till.

The vegetation of the Natural Heritage Area is a complex of Hazel woodland, scrub, and grassland in various stages of agricultural 'improvement'.

Although many eskers have been severely damaged if not destroyed by gravel extraction in the past, this part of Ballyduff Esker has remained virtually intact. Mature scrub of Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Hawthorn (*Crateagus monogyna*), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and willows (*Salix* spp.) is still frequent around Trumpet Hill itself. Elsewhere there is Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) scrub, and Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) which requires cyclical clearance. The open grassland areas which have not been intensively fertilised, especially at the east end and on Trumpet Hill, support diverse and interesting grassland communities that reflect the calcareous nature of the underlying till. The railway cuttings provide an additional habitat of loose open gravel where the protected Red Hemp-nettle (*Galeopsis angustifolia*) is found.

Heavy use of fertilisers has reduced the interest of other grassland areas, and mechanical damage due to overstocking has also occurred. However fertilisers will wash out of this well drained till, and with the reservoir of grassland species in the nearby unimproved areas, the potential for recovery is great. Even in its current condition this site is of great interest for its mosaic of habitats. Developed on a geomorphological feature typical of the midlands but becoming increasingly rare, this is one of the best known remaining eskers which still support an open and relatively natural flora.

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