SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: HILL OF MAEL AND THE ROCK OF CURRY

SITE CODE: 000681

Roughly midway between Lough Derravaragh and Lough Sheelin, about 6km north of Castlepollard, the Hill of Mael and the Rock of Curry are twin protrusions of pale grey reef limestone, otherwise known as the Meoul Hills. Both hills and a narrow connection between them are designated a Natural Heritage Area (NHA).

Bare limestone outcrops on both hills. Although the only extensive cliffs are on the Rock of Curry, the generally horizontal strata have resulted in the development of some limestone pavement on both hills which is largely obscured by calcareous turf. On the grassy summits the depth of the soil seems to determine its calcium content - on thinner soils species that demand a high calcium status such as Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Field Gentian (*Gentianella campestris*) and Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*) characterise the grassland. On thicker soils leaching allows species such as Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*) and Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) to grow.

On the limestone, species such as Maidenhair Spleenwort (*Asplenium trichomanes*), Wall-rue (*Asplenium ruta-muraria*) and Shining Crane's-bill (*Geranium lucidum*) occur. Ivy Broomrape (*Orobanche hederae*) is parasitic upon the swathes of Ivy (*Hedera helix*).

Much of the southern slopes are covered in scrub, with more mature areas of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), Hawthorn (*Crateagus monogyna*), Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*). Here understorey plants such as Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) are found. Elsewhere the scrub is less mature and contains much Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), and in places is seen to be spreading out from the hedges. The NHA also includes some areas of relatively unimproved pasture on the flanks of the hills. These are in floristic contrast with the hilltop grasslands.

This area is unique in County Westmeath with the few limestone exposures in the midlands being of great importance.

The eastern slopes of the Hill of Mael have been extensively planted with conifers. Afforestation, bulldozing of scrub areas, and fertilisation of the grassland areas are the main threats to this NHA.

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