SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: BALRATH WOODS

SITE CODE: 001579

Balrath, or Flemingstown Woods form narrow wooded roadside strips along the N2 and the L125 at their junction, about 5km south-west of Duleek in Co. Meath. They are wholly owned by Coillte and form the Balrath Woods Natural Heritage Area.

There are three blocks of woodland, which are largely similar in species composition. The main tree species is oak (*Quercus* spp.), although the non-native Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) is widespread and sometimes dominant. Other native tree species include Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), birch (*Betula* spp.) and Wych Elm (*Ulmus glabra*). The native element of the shrub layer is composed of Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), bramble (*Rubus* spp.) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). These species form scrub in some places on the site. Apart from Beech, non-native trees include Horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), spruce (Picea spp.) and Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*). The non-native element of the shrub layer is represented by Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*), which is particularly prevalent in the middle block, Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*), which occurs particularly around the wood margins, and dogwood (*Cornus* spp., probably *C. sericea*).

The ground layer is composed mainly of Ivy (*Hedera helix*) and Lesser Celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*). In places, the ground is quite damp, and supports species such as Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*). Willows (*Salix* spp.) and occasional Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) mark the damp areas.

Recently, the Common Wintergreen (*Pyrola minor*) was recorded in Balrath Woods. This plant species is now known to be rarer than was previously thought and will probably be listed in the Irish Red Data Book in due course. Its occurrence here is significant in terms of the conservation value of this site.

Balrath Woods host a wide variety of native and non-native tree and shrub species, many of which have originated through plantings. The plantings of ornamental species may have taken place within an existing tract of native woodland, or may have been planted to form new woodland. Coillte record the plantings as dating back to 1825. The woodland is small in area and linear in shape, and exhibits edge effects over much of its extent.

Balrath Woods is of importance within a county where very few mature woodlands with any degree of natural character are to be found. Other areas of woodland contiguous with this site, which lie outside the Natural Heritage Area, have suffered much physical damage, including clearance, during the past 30 years. The occurrence of a nationally rare plant in Balrath Woods enhances the importance of this site.

23.11.2009