SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: GREAT SUGAR LOAF

SITE CODE: 001769

The Great Sugar Loaf is situated about 5km south-west of Bray. It is a steep mountain, 501m above sea level, and has been modified greatly by glacial erosion. It stood as a nunatak which was scoured by the Ivernian, Midland and Mountain ice sheets. Its profile thus contrasts with those of Bray Head and Howth, both over-ridden by ice sheets and flat on top.

The main habitats of the site are dry mountain heath and upland grassland. The lower slopes are dominated by gorse (*Ulex europaeus* and *U. gallii*), but Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*) also occur and become more frequent on the upper slopes. Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) is found in dense patches amongst the gorse.

The heath grades into upland grassland in places; grass species include Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*), Sheep's-fescue (*Festuca ovina*) and Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*). The wetter grassland areas have rushes (*Juncus* spp.), sedges (*Carex* spp.) and bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.).

Exposed rocky outcrops or areas of scree occur on the mountain sides, especially on the eastern slopes. The lichen and moss communities are well developed in these places, with species of *Cladonia* spp., *Dicranum* spp. and *Polytrichum* spp. occurring.

An area of woodland, known as the Quill, occurs on the lower eastern slope. This is secondary woodland dominated by Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*), Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) and Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*). Part of the woodland is wet, with Downy Birch as the dominant species and a ground flora more characteristic of wet heath. The wet seepage areas within the wood have Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*), pondweeds (*Potamogeton* spp.) and bog mosses. A rare liverwort, *Cryptothallus mirabilis*, has been recorded beneath the Sphagnum layer. The stream running from the woodland provides a hydrological link with another Natural Heritage Area, Kilmacanoge Marsh.

The site is of both ecological and geological interest, and is also a prominent feature in the landscape of north County Wicklow. Due to its ease of access and close proximity to large urban areas, the Great Sugar Loaf is a valuable educational and recreational asset.

26.11.2009