SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: KILCORMAC ESKER

SITE CODE: 000906

Eskers are long ridges of glacial till which were deposited at the end of the last ice age. As geomorphological features, these relicts of the retreating ice are of great importance. However, the well drained, calcium-rich soils of eskers often support interesting and species-rich vegetation. An esker chain runs from the Shannon, past Birr to Screggan, about 10km southwest of Tullamore. Parts of the stretch from Idle corner to Screggan, constitutes the Kilcormac Esker proposed Natural Heritage Area (NHA).

Pockets of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), with oak (*Quercus* spp.), Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria* agg.), Hawthorn (*Crateagus monogyna*), Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), birch (*Betula* spp.) and Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) are scattered along this area and give some insight into the pre-existing woodland communities developed here. Often they are unfenced and trampling by cattle resulting in an impoverished ground flora. But where a ground flora has been allowed to develop, for example in the eastern blocks, it features abundant Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) with Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) and Early-purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*). The latter species also remain in better quality open grassland.

Some areas have recently been invaded by Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*).

The gravel from which the esker is composed, is calcium-rich, and when left grazed but not intensively fertilised, results in a short species-rich fescue (*Festuca* spp.) turf. Some rather degraded grassland has been included, as it retains some elements of the esker grassland flora.

The grazing of stock is an important part of managing the grassland areas, but remaining pockets of woodland would benefit from the exclusion of stock.

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