SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: ROYAL CANAL

SITE CODE: 002103

The Royal Canal is a man-made waterway linking the River Liffey at Dublin to the River Shannon near Tarmonbarry. There is a branch line from Kilashee to Longford Town. The canal NHA comprises the central channel and the banks on either side of it. The main water supply is from Lough Owel (also an NHA) via a feeder channel into the canal at Mullingar. The Royal Canal was closed to navigation in 1961. The section of canal west of Mullingar was allowed to dry out, and the eastern section silted up and became overgrown. Restoration began in 1988, and is still in progress.

A number of different habitats are found within the canal boundaries - hedgerow, tall herbs, calcareous grassland, reed fringe, open water, scrub and woodland.

The hedgerow, although diverse, is dominated by Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*). On the limestone soils of the midlands Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) and Guelder-rose (*Viburnum opulus*) are present.

The vegetation of the towpath is usually dominated by grass species. Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*) and Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*) are typical species of the calcareous grasslands of the midlands. Where the canal was built through a bog, soil (usually calcareous) was brought in to make the banks. The contrast between the calcicolous species of the towpath and the calcifuge species of the bog is very striking.

Otter spraints are found along the towpath, particularly where the canal passes over a river or stream.

The rare and legally protected Opposite-leaved Pondweed (*Groenlandia densa*) (Flora Protection Order 1987) is present at one site in Dublin, between Locks 4 and 5. *Tolypella intricata* (a stonewort listed in the Red Data Book as being vulnerable) is also in the Royal Canal in Dublin, the only site in Ireland where it is now found.

The ecological value of the canal lies more in the diversity of species it supports along its linear habitats than in the presence of rare species. It crosses through agricultural land and therefore provides a refuge for species threatened by modern farming methods.

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