SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: LOUGH FEA DEMESNE

SITE CODE: 000560

About 1km south of Carrickmacross to the west of a road junction are two small fields of limestone grassland which are extremely rich in varieties and numbers of orchids. Bordering the grassland is a large mixed woodland yielding several interesting species.

In l972, An Foras Forbartha provided the following description for the site:-

The calcareous grassland is grazed by cattle and is dominated by Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*) and Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*). Flowering herbaceous species include Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Mountain Everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*), Eyebright (*Euphrasia* agg.), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*) and Selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*). In addition five species of orchid were recorded, including hundreds of Fragrant Orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*) and Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*).

Within the grassland, several rock outcrops occur providing another habitat in which uncommon species grow. On the east-facing slopes of the outcrops Upright Brome (*Bromus erectus*) occurs. This is scarce in Ireland and this siting represents a new county record. Herbaceous species in flower include Oxeye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Hieracium pilosella*), Slender St. John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and Burnet-saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*).

Small bushes of Dog-rose (*Rosa canina*) and Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) are scattered on the hillocks. A small marsh in the hollow adds to the ecological diversity of the area. Three zones can be distinguished within the wet hollow:- (i) an outer area dominated by Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), (ii) a middle zone dominated by Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*) and (iii) a central zone which is essentially a sedge community with two sedges in particular (*Carex nigra* and *Carex vesicaria*).

In the very wet areas grow Lesser Water-plantain (*Baldellia ranunculoides*), Broad-leaved Pondweed (*Potamogetan natans*) and Fine-leaved Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe aquatica*).

To the west of the grassland are Lough Fea Woods. This substantial area of mixed woodland consists mainly of magnificent Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), about 35m in height. Also present are Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), European Larch (*Larix decidua*), Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) and oak (*Quercus* spp.). Further into the demesne birch trees (*Betula* spp.) and conifers replace the Beech.

The ground flora along the eastern boundary is a complete sword of Dog's Mercury (*Mercuralis perennis*) which is scarce in Ireland. It is introduced in most of the localities as it is here.

The woodland supports a number of uncommon breeding birds such as Blackcap and Jay, as well as accommodating most of the common species.

A cave is present in the north of the site. This is Kilmactrashna Cave described by J.C. Coleman: "entrance about 2 foot square and inside there is a sloping passage 30 foot in length. It terminates in a chamber about 7 foot high with a short ascending fissure to the right".

This site is considered to be regionally important because of the limited extent of limestone grasslands within Monaghan county with most limestone areas being restricted to small outcrops in the south and north-west. This area is of outstanding botanical interest even though it is small in extent, with a rich abundance of species. The presence of two scarce species adds to the site's interest.

6.11.2009