SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: ANNAGHMORE LOUGH FEN (OFFALY)

SITE CODE: 000413

Situated about 10km south of Tullamore, on the border of Laois and Offaly below the Slieve Blooms, Annaghmore Lough Fen is a Natural Heritage Area (NHA).

All that remains of Annaghmore Lough itself is a small remnant pool, barely 2ha and only a couple of centimetres deep. It is not clear whether the lake shrinkage has been purely the result of the natural process of sediment accumulation, or whether this has been accelerated by drainage. However, the area once occupied by the lake, is now a peat accumulating, calcareous fen. In general sedges (*Carex* spp.) dominate, although other species such as Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Water Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*) and Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) are locally prominent. The presence of sedges such as Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*) and Long-stalked Yellow-sedge (*C. lepidocarpa*) and other species such as Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Grass-of-parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*) and Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) are indicative of high levels of calcium in the soil.

To the south of the old lake site, willows (*Salix* spp.) and Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) are colonising the fen area which becomes increasingly acidic with species such as Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and Bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*), before rising into the dome of a small raised bog dominated by Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and Hare's-tail Cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*), with bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.). To the west of the bog the NHA area continues, to include much of a belt of land reclaimed across the periphery of what was once a more extensive bog. Management of this area is important as it will affect the remaining bog itself. In addition, there are sections of pasture here that have not been heavily fertilised, but allowed to develop a more natural, and species-rich cover.

A scrub cover of Downy Birch has developed to the north of the old lake site.

The system is vulnerable to drainage and reclamation, and indeed in some areas this has already occurred causing sizeable intrusions into the site. Nutrient runoff from fertilisers applied to this area would damage the vegetation of the low-lying and wet fen areas through the process called eutrophication, which would allow plant species adapted to high nutrient conditions to outcompete the current fen species. Further reclamation or drainage work of any kind should not be undertaken.

Peat is being machine cut from the southwest of the bog area. Although this is a low volume operation, on such a small area of raised bog it has a very seriously adverse effect. The loss of Monettia Bog 3km to the east of this site underlines the vulnerability of peatlands in Ireland, and although the area of raised bog dome is small (about 35ha) the transition through to the fen area occupying the site of Annaghmore Lough is remarkable and may represent one of the only intact raised bog laggs in the country.

6.11.2009