SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: LOUGH NANAG ESKER

SITE CODE: 000910

Situated about 2km south-west of Clonmacnoise and between the River Shannon callows and a raised bog undergoing commercial peat extraction, the site comprises, for the most part, an esker ridge composed of glacial gravels. A small lake occurs in the south-eastern section of the site. The underlying rock is of Carboniferous limestone.

The site is much modified by grassland improvement and comprises a mosaic of improved grassland, dry calcareous grassland, wet grassland, scrub, woodland, dense Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), swamp and lake communities. Much of the site is on a calcareous substrate - Lough Nanag itself shows influence from the adjacent acidic raised bog.

Much of what would formerly have been good quality dry calcareous grassland has been lost through grassland improvement and only small areas of this habitat remain. Two such areas support small populations of the rare and legally protected (Flora Protection Order, 1987), Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*). The diversity of the esker area is increased by scrub and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) woodland, which has occasional Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*) and a mossy ground layer with much Ivy (*Hedera helix*). A small disused gravel pit has been allowed to become recolonised and now supports several species of open grassland which have declined elsewhere on the site.

In contrast to the lime-loving species of the esker, Lough Nanag is surrounded by typical peatland communities. Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*) swamps fringe the water and divides the lake up into pools; Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) has colonised several of these. Around the shore in the wetter areas Bog-sedge (*Carex limosa*), a rare species in the county, can be found. A small number of wildfowl species use the wetland for roosting. There is an interesting transition from the relatively acid surroundings of the lake, typified by Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and Bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*), to the esker grassland.

The site is vulnerable to further grassland improvement, both overgrazing and undergrazing, encroachment of scrub, and gravel extraction. Lough Nanag is vulnerable to drainage and eutrophication.

Although the floristic diversity of the esker grassland has declined, it still retains some interest. The juxtaposition of the esker and the acidic peatland lake and wetland, makes the site all the more interesting and unusual.

13.11.2009