

**Site Name: Lough Oughter and Associated Loughs SAC**

**Site Code: 000007**

Lough Oughter and its associated loughs occupy much of the lowland drumlin belt in north and central Cavan between Upper Lough Erne, Killeshandra and Cavan town. The site is a maze of waterways, islands, small lakes and peninsulas including some 90 inter-drumlin lakes and 14 basins in the course of the Erne River. The area lies on Silurian and Ordovician strata with Carboniferous limestone immediately surrounding.

The site is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) selected for the following habitats and/or species listed on Annex I / II of the E.U. Habitats Directive (\* = priority; numbers in brackets are Natura 2000 codes):

[3150] Natural Eutrophic Lakes [91D0] Bog Woodland* [1355] Otter ( <i>Lutra lutra</i> )
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As well as the habitats and species listed above, the site also contains areas of dry woodland, marsh, reedbed and wet pasture.

Drainage within the area is inefficient and the water levels are prone to natural fluctuation as a result. The regularly flooded areas still accommodate a variety of specialist plant species such as Amphibious Bistort (*Polygonum amphibium*) and Marsh Foxtail (*Alopecurus geniculatus*), as well as rarer species such as Needle Spike-rush (*Eleocharis acicularis*) and Lesser Marshwort (*Apium inundatum*).

The lakes and basins are shallow, and the water well mixed and nutrient rich (eutrophic). The aquatic flora is varied with several pondweed species such as Blunt-leaved Pondweed (*Potamogeton obtusifolius*), Shining Pondweed (*Potamogeton lucens*), Broad-leaved Pondweed (*Potamogeton natans*), Reddish Pondweed (*Potamogeton alpinus*) and Various-leaved Pondweed (*Potamogeton gramineus*). Typical in the zone of aquatic plants are Yellow Water-lily (*Nuphar lutea*), Canadian Pondweed (*Elodea canadensis*), Mare's-tail (*Hippuris vulgaris*), Water Milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*), Brooklime (*Veronica beccabunga*), Water-dropwort species (*Oenanthe* spp.) and Water-starwort (*Callitriche* sp.). The aquatic community includes species of limited distribution in Ireland such as the Duckweed species *Lemna gibba* and *Spirodela polyrhiza*.

Around much of the shoreline there are well developed swamp and marsh communities, typically with a zone of Common Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris*) in front of a zone of Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) which is in turn backed by a more

species-rich zone of sedges, grasses and herbs, particularly Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*), Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*), Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Water Plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*), Rough Horsetail (*Equisetum hyemale*), Water Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*) and Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*). Less widespread species also occur on the wet lake margins; species such as Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*), Water Dock (*Rumex hydrolapathum*), Greater Water-parsnip (*Sium latifolium*), Cowbane (*Cicuta virosa*), Tufted-sedge (*Carex elata*), Water Soldier (*Stratiotes aloides*), Arrowhead (*Sagittaria sagittifolia*), Flowering Rush (*Butomus umbellatus*) and Greater Spearwort (*Ranunculus lingua*) may be locally prominent.

There are many variations on this typical zonation of sheltered shores with species such as Bulrush (*Typha* sp.), Branched Bur-reed (*Sparganium erectum*) and Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) gaining local prominence. More exposed shores lack the extensive swamp zones; here smaller species such as Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*) can be found.

Level, wet pastures tend to be dominated by Creeping Bent and rushes (*Juncus* spp.) with a scattering of marshland and wet grassland plants such as Marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*), Water Forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*) and Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*). Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*) is most abundant with frequent Hard Rush (*Juncus inflexus*) and Sharp-flowered Rush (*Juncus acutiflorus*), and less widespread Conglomerate Rush (*Juncus conglomeratus*) also occurring.

Where a general lack of grazing pressure or a particular slope has allowed it, deciduous woodland has re-established itself behind the reedbeds. Two species of Willow (*Salix caprea* and *S. cinerea*) are common constituents, along with Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*). Along submerged margins Alder and Willow are most commonly found with a flooded understorey typically containing Reed Canary-grass, Meadow Sweet, Yellow Iris and in places Tufted-sedge and Greater Tussock-sedge (*Carex paniculata*). Downy Birch occurs along lake edges and also forms stands of wet woodland on cutover bog with varying degrees of wet and dry peat. Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Marsh Cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*) and bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.) occur in areas with pools and dry areas. Where there is dry peat, Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) and gorse (*Ulex* sp.) occur under the birch canopy. Birch dominated wood is also found in association with Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) bog.

In areas of wet bog with good *Sphagnum* cover, bog woodland has developed. Downy Birch characterises this habitat; other typical species include Purple Moor-grass and Bottle Sedge.

Dry broadleaved woodland is characterised by Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), Hazel, Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and Oak (*Quercus* spp.), while shrubs include Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) and Guelder-rose (*Viburnum opulus*). The Red Data Book species Bird Cherry (*Prunus padus*) has also been recorded from the site.

The clayey soils have a characteristic flora, including Wood Avens (*Geum urbanum*), Wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), Herb-Robert (*Geranium robertianum*) and Wood-sedge (*Carex sylvatica*).

The site supports a substantial population of water birds including internationally important numbers of Whooper Swan (average peak 231) and nationally important numbers of Tufted Duck (average peak 247) and Cormorant (average peak 130), as well as important numbers of species such as Greenland White-fronted Goose, Great Crested Grebe, Wigeon, Teal and Pochard. Lapwing, Snipe and Golden Plover also utilise the wet grassland areas. Wildfowl Sanctuaries exist at Inchin Lough, Derrygid Lough, Farnham Lough, Derrybrick Lough, Derrinishbeg Lough and Annagh Lough. Part of the site is designated a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive.

Otter, a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, occurs at the site. Irish Hare has also been recorded. Both of these species are listed in the Irish Red Data Book and are legally protected under the Wildlife Act, 1976.

The main threats to the quality of the site are water polluting activities (such as run-off from fertiliser and slurry application, and sewage discharge) which have raised the nutrient status of some lakes to hypertrophic. Housing and boating developments are on the increase, both adjacent to and within the site. There is also significant fishing and shooting pressure on and around the lakes. Increased afforestation has resulted in some loss of wetland habitat and also loss of feeding ground for wintering birds such as Greenland White-fronted Goose.

The Lough Oughter area contains important examples of two habitats listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive and supports a population of the Annex II species, Otter. The site as a whole is the best inland example of a flooded drumlin landscape in Ireland and has many rich and varied biological communities. Nowhere else in the country does such an intimate mixture of land and water occur over a comparable area, and many of the species of wetland plants, some considered quite commonplace in Lough Oughter and its associated loughs, are infrequent elsewhere.