

**Site Name: Moneen Mountain SAC**

**Site Code: 000054**

Moneen Mountain is a large, composite site situated in north County Clare. It encompasses a complete range of inland Burren habitats, from open limestone pavement and its associated calcareous grasslands and heaths, to dense Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) scrub and patches of Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) woodland. The site extends inland from Muckinish Point and includes all of the higher ground between Ballyvaughan and Bell Harbour in a southerly direction for approximately 20 km. The underlying rock type is Carboniferous limestone, which rises into a series of rounded hills, intersected by deep and often steep-sided valleys to the north of the site (max. altitude 307 m) before levelling out towards the south. Traces of Galway Granite are found within the site, particularly to the north. Soil cover is shallow and the soil type most common in the area is rendzina.

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):

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| [3180] Turloughs*   |
| [4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths                              |
| [5130] Juniper Scrub  |
| [6210] Orchid-rich Calcareous Grassland*                        |
| [7220] Petrifying Springs*                                      |
| [8240] Limestone Pavement*                                      |
| [1065] Marsh Fritillary ( <i>Euphydryas aurinia</i> )           |
| [1303] Lesser Horseshoe Bat ( <i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i> ) |

The bulk of the site is made up of limestone pavement, a priority habitat listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive and its associated calcareous grasslands, juniper scrub and heaths. The limestone pavement includes smooth, blocky and shattered types. Common species typically associated with the shattered type include Burnet Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*), Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*), Blue Moor-grass (*Sesleria albicans*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*). The smooth, blocky type is deeply fissured and provides a good habitat for a variety of ferns and mosses. The bare pavement is interspersed with fine examples of species-rich dry calcareous grassland. On the higher ground of the uplands to the north and north-east of the site, heath with Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) is well developed. The main plants of the heath communities are Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*), Blue Moor-grass, Juniper (*Juniperus communis*) and sedges (*Carex* spp.).

Petrifying springs, a priority habitat listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, occurs within the site. Although the area covered by the petrifying springs is relatively small, the habitat is nonetheless important. The springs are generally intact in nature at this site, and often support a rich bryophyte community. They are often found in secluded and inaccessible areas such as inland cliffs, where disturbance is minimal.

Expanses of low Hazel scrub interspersed with bare limestone pavement and calcareous grasslands dominate much of the southern part of the site. Along the lower slopes of some of the hills to the north, Hazel and Ash have reached a sufficiently significant height to be considered as woodland, a rare habitat in the context of the Burren.

Many inland cliffs occur throughout the site, generally unvegetated but in places supporting a thick scrub cover with Hazel, Ivy (*Hedera helix*), Blackthorn and wild roses (*Rosa* spp.). These provide good sites for small breeding birds. Exposed outcrops of granite support a rich lichen flora.

Muckinish Lough, which occurs close to Pooldoody Bay, is a small but important example of a turlough. This appears to be a transitional system from a turlough to a natural rock lagoon in karst. It receives seawater that probably enters through fissures in the limestone. The lake becomes very shallow in summer and may dry out completely at times. Aquatic vegetation includes Tassleweed (*Ruppia* spp.) and Fennel Pondweed (*Potamogeton pectinatus*). This is considered an extreme in the range of turlough types in Ireland

The rare plant species, Intermediate Wintergreen (*Pyrola media*), occurs among heath vegetation on higher ground within the site. This species is listed in the Irish Red Data Book.

A breeding colony of Lesser Horseshoe Bats occurs within the site. More than 60 individuals were counted in 1998. The bats inhabit a semi-derelict cottage and a nearby out-building. Lesser Horseshoe Bat is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The dense hazel scrub provides ideal cover for mammals. Both Pine Marten and Badger have been recorded from this site. Both species are listed in the Red Data Book as threatened in Europe.

The scarce butterfly, Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas aurinia*), has been reported from the site; this species is mostly found in areas where its food plant, Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), occurs commonly. Marsh Fritillary is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive.

Breeding Cuckoo and Whitethroat are plentiful in this area, as are Yellowhammer, Stonechat and Wheatear. The area is very rich in entomological terms, with a number of species of butterfly and moth which are known in Ireland only from the Burren.

Most of the site is grazed by cattle (particularly in the winter) and also by sheep and goats. The effects of both over-grazing and under-grazing are visible in places. Intensification of agriculture has caused damage to parts of the site, while clearance of scrub and limestone pavement represent the main threat to the remainder. The practice of winter grazing at appropriate stocking levels and of suitable duration must be maintained to preserve the species richness and diversity of these grasslands. Large silage pits and cattle feeding rings situated in sensitive areas directly on the pavement pose a threat to the water quality of the area.

This site is of international scientific importance owing to the presence of fine examples of typical Burren habitats, including several habitats listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The limestone pavement and heath are particularly noteworthy. The presence of a substantial summer colony of Lesser Horseshoe Bat is also of note and the site is, furthermore, of high amenity and scenic value.