

Site Name: Curraghchase Woods SAC

Site Code: 000174

This site is situated approximately 7 km east of Askeaton in Co. Limerick. The area is characterised by glacial drift deposits over Carboniferous limestone. The site consists largely of mixed woodland and a series of wetlands.

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):

[91E0] Alluvial Forests*
[91J0] Yew Woodlands*
[1303] Lesser Horseshoe Bat (<i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i>)

One of the main interests at the site is the presence of a hibernation site of the Lesser Horseshoe Bat. The bats hibernate in the cellars of the former mansion Curraghchase House. The entrance to the cellar is now grilled and all other access points blocked to prevent disturbance. In recent years bats have remained within the cellar throughout the year.

In winter 1995/96 more than 60 bats were recorded in the hibernation site, rating the site of international importance. It is considered that the number of bats will increase now that the site is protected from disturbance. This is the largest known site for this species in Co. Limerick.

The woodland consists of both deciduous species and stands of commercial conifers. Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) is the most frequent deciduous species, but Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*), Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) and Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) are also present. Spruce (*Picea* sp.) and Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) are the commonest conifers. Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) scrub and areas of wet woodland (*Salix* spp.) also occur.

The alluvial forest occurs in the southern part of the site and occupies low ground in a stream valley and some areas adjacent to a small lake. The dominant canopy species include Rusty Willow (*Salix cinerea* subsp. *oleifolia*), Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) and Ash. Exotics also occur, both conifer and broadleaved species, such as Beech and Horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*). A rich herb layer is found where the conifers are less dense, characterised by such species as Bugle (*Ajuga reptans*), Hemlock Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Water-cress (*Nasturtium officinale*), Common Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and Wood Sanicle (*Sanicula europaea*).

The Yew wood occurs as a stand on a limestone ridge above a stream valley. It is associated with an Oak-Ash wood, but also has a range of commercial planted species. Nevertheless, Yew is well represented and is readily regenerating. Other species present include Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Ash, Pedunculate Oak, Hazel and Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*).

A series of small lakes and fens runs the length of the site. Some of these lakes are overgrown with vegetation. Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Great Fen-sedge (*Cladium mariscus*), Greater Tussock-sedge (*Carex paniculata*), Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*) and Blunt-flowered Rush (*Juncus subnodulosus*) are some of the wetland species recorded. These wetlands, along with some wet grassland, add habitat diversity to the site.

The semi-natural habitats within the site provide ideal foraging habitat for the Lesser Horseshoe Bat. Further planting of conifer tree species at the expense of deciduous species should be avoided and attempts should be made to increase the area of deciduous woodland.

The combination of a secure hibernation site and suitable foraging habitat and the presence of over 60 individuals make Curraghchase Woods an internationally important site for the Lesser Horseshoe Bat. The presence of two woodland types that are listed with priority status on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, and especially Yew woodland, which is of very limited occurrence in Ireland, is of particular note.