

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: SUCK RIVER CALLOWS NHA

SITE CODE: 000222

The Suck River Callows is a long sinuous area of semi-natural lowland wet grassland, which floods extensively each winter along the River Suck between Castlecoote in the north and Shannonbridge in the south, passing through Ballinasloe. The Suck River forms the Roscommon - Galway county boundary and joins the River Shannon at Shannonbridge. Along most of its borders, former raised bogs (now in the process of large-scale harvesting by Bord na Móna) are present. Just south of Ballyforan, there is a small intact raised bog on the eastern bank of the river, which contains both high bog and cutover. This is situated in the townlands of Ballina, Ballyforan, Coolatober and Cloonagh, Co. Roscommon and can be accessed from a road to the east.

The main habitat of the Suck River Callows is flood meadows of wet grassland and the associated aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats of drainage ditches. Secondary habitats of importance, which directly border the callows within the site are species-rich dry and wet calcareous grassland, flooded fen, wet woodland and a small raised bog with a tear pool system. There is a semi-natural margin between this raised bog and the river. Improved grasslands are also included within the site at the upper margin of wet grasslands.

The wet grassland vegetation consists of Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*), Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Brown Sedge (*Carex disticha*), Marsh Foxtail (*Alopecurus geniculatus*), Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*), Jointed Rush (*Juncus articulatus*), Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*) and Floating Sweet-grass (*Glyceria fluitans*). Many of these species are important food plants for the wintering wildfowl which also forage on the improved grasslands within the site. A large area of flooded fen with Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) occurs to the north of Derrycabill Bridge. Small patches of Common Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris*) occur in shallows along the river margin.

At Ballyforan the small intact raised bog has been classified as a True Midland Raised Bog. The vegetation of the high bog has been affected by burning and is dominated by Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*), Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*), Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*) and Ling Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), however, there is active Bog Moss (*Sphagnum* spp.) regeneration occurring. Species occurring on the site include *Sphagnum fuscum*, *S. imbricatum* and *S. capillifolium*, *S. cuspidatum* (in elongated tear pools), Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*), Brown Beak-sedge (*Rhynchospora fusca*) and Lesser Bladderwort (*Utricularia minor*). Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Bog-rosemary (*Andromeda polifolia*), cottongrasses (*Eriophorum* spp.) and lichens (*Cladonia* spp.) occur in the unburnt areas. The bog appears to be drying out and the western margin has been invaded by Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*).

At Ballyforan Bog, the cutover to the south of the high bog is primarily reclaimed grassland. There is an uninterrupted transition from this high bog to low-lying callow grassland to the west. Active peat-cutting occurs to the north-west and east with some scrub encroachment on old cutover.

There are also small areas of cutover at the margins of the developed (cut-away) raised bogs on the banks of the River Suck. Some of this cutover is very wet, bordering on to floodmeadows and contains permanent pools with Lesser Bladderwort. Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*), cottongrasses and orchids (*Dactylorhiza* spp.) have been recorded on these cutover areas. Regenerating birch and Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) woods occurs on old cutover margins throughout the site. These wet woodlands have an understory of Ling Heather and Bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*).

The Suck River Callows is an important site for wintering waterfowl. Of particular note is the internationally important flock of Greenland White-fronted Geese based along the Suck. The birds congregate mainly in the middle reaches of the river. A separate sub-flock is centred at Glenamaddy turlough. The average maximum winter count for the period 1988/89 to 1993/94 was 386. In recent years, the only complete count of waterfowl for the site was in January 2002. Three species had populations of national importance: Whooper Swan 124, Wigeon 1,203 and Lapwing 3,640. Other species which were present included Mute Swan 90, Teal 325, Pintail 5 and Curlew 67. Of the species which occur regularly at this site, Greenland White-fronted Geese and Whooper Swan are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. A further Annex I species, Golden Plover, occurs at times. The good quality riverine and grassland habitats are also home to populations of Otter and Irish Hare, and Brown Trout occur in the river.

Current landuses on the site include, agriculture, active peat-cutting, forestry and conservation. The wet grasslands of the callows are used for agriculture. At Ballyforan Bog, active peat-cutting is most prevalent to the north-west and along the eastern margin of the high bog. The cutover to the south has been reclaimed for agriculture. There are extensive areas of peat-cutting by Bord na Móna along the boundaries of the site and a large area of callow and esker has been recently planted with forestry. Damaging activities associated with these landuses include habitat loss and drainage throughout the site and burning of the high bog. These activities have all resulted in the loss of habitat and damage to the hydrological status of the raised bog, and pose a continuing threat to its viability. There is a no-shooting area at Muckanagh, north of Ballyforan.

The Suck River Callows NHA, along with the River Shannon Callows cSAC (216) and River Little Brosna Callows NHA (564), form by far the largest area of lowland wet grassland in Ireland and Britain. These callows are each designated as a Special Protection Area under the E.U. Birds Directive for the presence of Internationally and Nationally Important numbers of wintering waterfowl.

The presence of raised bog is of considerable conservation significance as it is a rare habitat in the E.U. and one that is becoming increasingly scarce and under threat in

Ireland. The site supports a good diversity of raised bog microhabitats, including hummocks and pools. Ireland has a high proportion of the total E.U. resource of raised bog (over 50%) and so has a special responsibility for its conservation at an international level. The site is of major ornithological importance.

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