SITE SYNOPSIS

Site Name: Caherglassaun Turlough SAC

Site Code: 000238

Caherglassaun is a large lake located 6 km north-west of Gort and 5 km south-east of Kinvarra in the low-lying farmland of east Co. Galway. Situated in a natural depression just to the north-west of Coole Nature Reserve, this site comprises a permanent lake at its core, while the rest of the basin functions as a turlough. At times of high water, the site can flood to a depth of 10-15 m. A series of collapse features act as swallow-holes.

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):

[3180] Turloughs*
[3270] Chenopodion rubri p.p. and Bidention p.p. vegetation
[1303] Lesser Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*)

Caherglassaun is an interesting site and shows some features which are not typical of turloughs. Firstly, it has a permanent lake at its base which is relatively deep and has an aquatic flora of Pondweeds (*Potamogeton* spp.) and Rigid Hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*). Secondly, because of its proximity to sea-level, the lake fluctuates 30 cm or so in a tidal cycle, but it is delayed significantly behind tidal height at Kinvarra. As a result of the fluctuation, an unusual plant community exists, dominated by Needle Spike-rush (*Eleocharis acicularis*) and Common Spike-rush (*E. palustris*). This resembles a saltmarsh in appearance although the water is not brackish. Other plant species which occur in the turlough at Caherglassaun include Creeping Yellow-cress (*Rorippa sylvestris*) and Water-purslane (*Lythrum portula*).

A mixed deciduous woodland occurs on rocky ground on the western side of the site. The canopy is dominated by Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and Buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*). This is a young woodland which may develop further into an Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*)-dominated stand in the absence of high grazing pressure.

Areas of exposed limestone occur within the site and include pavement, low cliffs and caves. This brings unusual plant species, such as Hairy Rock-cress (*Arabis hirsuta*), Biting Stonecrop (*Sedum acre*) and Polypody ferns (*Polypodium* spp.) into the edge of a turlough and adds diversity to the site. The rocky habitats also provide roosting sites for bats.

Three rare plant species, which are listed in the Irish Red Data Book, occur on the site. Mudwort (*Limosella aquatica*) occurs here - it tends to occur in sites which retain water into the summer months and in vegetation that corresponds to the E.U. Habitats Directive Annex I habitat type 'rivers with muddy banks with Chenopodion rubri p.p. and Bidention p.p. vegetation'. The south Galway area is the species' headquarters in Ireland. It is listed in the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999. Both Fen Violet (*Viola persicifolia*) and Northern Yellow-cress (*Rorippa islandica*) occur at Caherglassaun. These are characteristic turlough species which occur only to a very limited extent in other habitats.

A bat roost exists within the site. Lesser Horseshoe Bat and Natterer's Bat, which is listed in the Irish Red Data Book, roost here. Lesser Horseshoe Bat is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, and Ireland has the largest national population in Europe. Loss of suitable summer habitat and disturbance during hibernation are the major threats to this species.

Caherglassaun shares in the populations of waterfowl that are based on Coole Lough. Whooper Swans, Wigeon and Lapwing are all regular visitors, though their numbers are low, while Lapwing may also nest here in some summers. Whooper Swan is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.

Any development which would involve drainage or alteration of the water table would threaten this site. Presence of grazers will also influence the site - low grazing levels would facilitate the further development of woodland at the site.

Caherglassaun is of considerable conservation value, and was rated as the sixth most important large turlough in a recent national survey, based on the vegetation found there. It has the most pronounced "tidal" fluctuation of any large site, and is remarkable for its complement of rare plants and animals.