



Site Name: Kiltartan Cave (Coole) SAC

Site Code: 000286

Kiltartan cave is a natural limestone cave situated north of Coole Park in Co. Galway, just off the main Galway-Ennis road. It is used as a hibernating site for the Lesser Horseshoe Bat.

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):

[8310] Caves

[1303] Lesser Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*)

This cave, which has been well documented since 1863, is a segment of an abandoned streamcourse of the Gort River. A 3 m descent into the cave divides into two main passages. A muddy slope south from the entrance leads to the Entrance Hall. The Entrance Hall is the only real chamber in the cave, where the ceiling height measures approximately 6 m. A number of passages lead from this; most are silty and muddy. To the east of the Entrance Hall there are a series of well-decorated passages etched into joints, which contain stalactites and curtains with serrated edges hanging from the roof and walls. The cave contains the following representative cave features: elliptical phreatic tube with local modification by roof collapse, roof tube still preserved in places, gour pools, straw stalactites and botryoidal calcite deposits. Water levels within the cave are known to fluctuate in winter with some passages filling completely with water; during severe flooding in 1994/95, all sections of the cave were filled with water except for small pockets in the roof.

The Lesser Horseshoe Bat, an Annex II species, uses the cave as a hibernation site. Numbers of Lesser Horseshoe Bats counted prior to the serious flooding in 1994/95 varied between 44 and 70. During the floods the cave was filled to the entrance. Following the floods, bat numbers remained low (10-15) until January 2001, when 41 individuals were counted. Most hibernating bats are found on the right hand side of the cave entrance, in a passage historically known as the 'Bat Passage', which runs north for 40 m and is floored by boulders.

The entrance of the cave is sheltered with Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) trees and the surrounding vegetation is of scrub and hedgerows, which provides suitable foraging habitat and shelter for the bats. Coole Wood is within 500 m of the cave.

Although well-known and regularly visited by caving groups, disturbance to the cave and the wintering bats is thought to be minimal.

This is a particularly fine example of a fossil streamway cave, which contains many features of geological interest. Caves are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The presence of a significant population of Lesser Horseshoe Bat makes the site of international importance.