



Site Name: Lough Cutra SAC

Site Code: 000299

Lough Cutra is a large oligo/mesotrophic freshwater lake lying on limestone, but with much sediment washed down from the sandstone hills above. This lake is situated about 4 km south-east of Gort, Co. Galway. A series of connected woodlands on the western side of the lake has been included as foraging habitat for the Lesser Horseshoe Bats which roost at the site.

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):

[1303] Lesser Horseshoe Bat (<i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i>)

The vegetation around Lough Cutra is diverse, with reedbeds in sheltered bays, marshes and fens on sandy and peaty ground, and both semi-natural and planted woodlands. Shallow-water communities include species such as Jointed Rush (*Juncus articulatus*), Bulbous Rush (*J. bulbosus*), Alternate Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum alternifolium*), Water-plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*), Floating Club-rush (*Scirpus fluitans*), Lesser Water-plantain (*Baldellia ranunculoides*), Water Lobelia (*Lobelia dortmanna*) and Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*). Winter-flooded areas support marsh vegetation with Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*), Common Marsh-bedstraw (*Galium palustre*) and Purple-loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), amongst others, and with notable species such as Lesser Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum minus*), Northern Bedstraw (*Galium boreale*) and Blue-eyed-grass (*Sisyrinchium bermudiana*). On wet peaty areas fen vegetation includes Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Great Fen-sedge (*Cladium mariscus*) and a range of associated sedges (*Carex* spp.) and fen mosses.

Included in the site is a small (approx. 3 ha) turlough, very small areas of alkaline fen and occasional fields with affinities to *Molinia* meadow. A relatively large poor fen is present in the north of the site, adjoining the lake. The mouth of the Owendalulleagh River has formed an unusual delta where a good quality old willow-dominated wet woodland (mainly Rusty Willow, *Salix cinerea* subsp. *oleifolia*) has developed behind vegetated sand bars.

Woodland occurs around much of the lakeshore, as well as on a number of islands. Wet woodland on peat is dominated by Rusty Willow and Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*). An old record of Irish Spurge (*Euphorbia hibernica*) probably comes from drier woodland which occurs in the Lough Cutra Demesne.

These woodlands provide feeding grounds for Lesser Horseshoe Bats. Between 1999 and 2001 up to 93 bats have been recorded in hibernation at Lough Cutra Castle and it is thought likely that a summer nursery roost also occurs here.

The lake is a regionally/locally important site for waterfowl. Monthly counts between November 1995 and March 1996, as part of an intensive study on flooding in the catchment, gave the following numbers: Whooper Swan (18), Mallard (101), Teal (69), Tufted Duck (83) and Goldeneye (58). The latter also use the nearby Ballynakill Lough. The lake has a long-established breeding colony of Cormorants, with 34 nests in 1996. Higher numbers (166 pairs, 1985) have been recorded in the past. Small numbers also winter on the lake. In recent years there have been no records of Greenland White-fronted Goose from the lake, although in the past flocks of 60-80 birds were regular and were considered to be birds from the Rahasane or Creganna population.

The lake is used for fishing and tourism. Precautions should be taken to ensure the lake and its surrounding area is protected from damaging operations such as application of artificial fertilisers, development close to the lakeshore, drainage and felling of woodland areas.

Lough Cutra is of conservation interest for the range of wetland habitat types it contains, particularly alkaline fen. The presence of an internationally important colony of Lesser Horseshoe Bats, a species listed on Annex II of the Habitats Directive, and a regionally important population of Cormorants add further interest to the site.