

Site Name: Balla Turlough SAC

Site Code: 000463

This turlough lies in a north-south hollow just east of the village of Balla, Co. Mayo. Along each side of its basin there are smooth, low ridges of glacial deposition, while to the east the land rises more steeply. The floor of the basin is probably flat but there is a considerable accumulation of peat in the basin, which forms a raised platform. This process of peat build-up is taking the central dome above the level of frequent flooding, and the period of inundation here may be reduced as a result. Marl deposits are also present, and marl deposition is actively occurring in places. Water seems to rise mostly on the western side of the site and from the depression at the southern end, where there are more permanent bodies of water.

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*

The peat dome has a uniform vegetation of Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and sedges (*Carex panicea* and *C. hostiana*), with scattered Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*). This vegetation type is extensive at Balla, compared to other Irish turloughs. In damper places, Marsh Cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*) and Brown Sedge (*Carex disticha*) become abundant, and here the scarce plant Marsh Stitchwort (*Stellaria palustris*) occurs, with Yellow Loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) and Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*). Marsh Stitchwort is a relatively rare species in the central lowlands of Ireland, and occurs in few turloughs.

Around the peat dome, the vegetation consists of dry and wet mesotrophic grassland, which is more typical of turlough habitats. Amphibious Bistort (*Polygonum amphibium*) and sedges (*Carex nigra* and *C. vesicaria*) are frequent in wet grassland, while Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*) and Quaking-grass (*Briza media*) occur in drier areas.

Standing water supports an emergent community with Common Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris*) and sedges (*Carex rostrata* and *C. elata*), with aquatic plants such as Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) and Fen Pondweed (*Potamogeton coloratus*). Marl ponds also contain oligotrophic communities with Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*) and Floating Club-rush (*Scirpus fluitans*). This community is more a feature of the Burren turloughs, and its occurrence here is unusual for the region.

Most of the turlough is open to cattle but grazing is light. Peat-cutting took place in the past but ceased a long time ago. The main threats to turloughs are drainage and agricultural reclamation. Balla Turlough lies in the Moy (Manulla) catchment, which was drained in the 1960's-70's. Due to local catchment conditions, the turlough still floods regularly and retains its habitat quality. The site remains oligotrophic, but this would be threatened in the event of nutrient input into its system.

The turlough and surrounding grasslands attract significant numbers of waders in winter. Counts made in one season from 1984/85 to 1986/87 indicate locally/regionally important numbers of Golden Plover (380), Lapwing (190) and Curlew (110). Swans also use the area in winter.

Balla Turlough occurs at the northern edge of the main range of turloughs in Mayo and Roscommon, and is one of very few within the Moy catchment. Overall, the turlough is of high ecological value for its range of unusual topographical features and vegetation communities. The amount and physical shape of the peat present here is of interest in offering a comparison with other northern turloughs where peat-cutting has been widespread. Turloughs are an increasingly rare habitat in Europe and Ireland, and Balla is important as an excellent example of an unusual turlough in a very natural condition.