

## SITE SYNOPSIS

**SITE NAME: RIVER LITTLE BROSNA CALLOWS NHA**

**SITE CODE: 000564**

The River Little Brosna Callows NHA is located 5 km south-west of Banagher, Co. Offaly and stretches from the canal at the junction with the River Shannon, some 9 km along the River Little Brosna to a point 1 km above the new bridge on the R438 road. The site extends from both sides of the river and is situated in the townlands of Clonahenoge, Cloghan Demesne, Gortskeha, Newtown, Clonrah and Glaster in County Offaly and the townlands of Annagh, Clongowna and Ballyoughter in Co. Tipperary.

The main habitat is the extensive area of low-lying callows on the floodplains of the River Little Brosna and River Shannon. These wet meadows are subject to prolonged flooding in winter and early spring. A wide range of callow pasture is present, with the vegetation influenced by the exact flooding regime and the peat content of the soil. The raised bog habitat at Cloghan Demesne consists of a small dome of high bog with associated cutover. Four remnants of raised bog are also included on the southern side of the Little Brosna with Annagh bog, the most easterly, being the largest and most intact. Mixed deciduous woodland, east of Cloghan Demesne is included in the site.

The main grassland types present are alluvial, sedge-rich, calcareous and improved grasslands. The inundated alluvial grassland is dominated by Floating Sweet-grass (*Glyceria fluitans*) with other low-growing, wetland grasses such as Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*) and Marsh Foxtail (*Alopecurus geniculatus*). Wetland herbs such as Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*) and Water Forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*) are frequent, and the distinction between this grassland and freshwater marsh is indistinct. Sedge-rich grasslands occur on peaty soils, with small sedges such as Yellow Sedge (*Carex demissa*), Flea Sedge (*Carex pulicaris*) and Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*) present. The high base status and the naturalness of this vegetation is indicated by species such as Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*) and Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*). Similar areas that have received more fertiliser are dominated by Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*). Some improved agricultural pasture is included in the site and dry grassland occurs in the well-drained calcareous areas.

The high bog at Cloghan Demesne is a flat uniform dome and supports characteristic raised bog vegetation and well developed hummock/ hollow complexes. A number of softer areas occur but none of these are quaking. The scarce species Brown Beak-sedge (*Rhynchospora fusca*) is recorded from the site. There is a small flush to the east. Cutover surrounds all of the bog margins, and scrub encroachment has occurred to the north and north-east on old abandoned cutover.

The southern boundary of the site encompasses cutover areas, now a mosaic of habitats of grassland, fen and Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) woodland. There are notable stands of Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and Saw Sedge (*Cladium*

*mariscus*). Cregg wood is found to the east of the raised bog at Cloghan Demesne. It is a mature mixed woodland mainly dominated by Oak (*Quercus* sp.) along with some Downy Birch and Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*). Some felling has taken place in the recent past. This site also boasts outstanding variety and quality of wet grassland and marshland. The ditches that cross the site are also an important refuge for many scarce wetland species such as Flowering Rush (*Butomus umbellatus*) and River Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe fluviatilis*). Other scarce or notable plant species on the site include Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) at Annagh bog, Pale Butterwort (*Pinguicula lusitanica*) and Oblong-leaved Sundew (*Drosera intermedia*) in the cutaway areas.

The River Little Brosna Callows is an internationally important site for wintering waterfowl, being noted both for numbers and diversity of species. In the five year period 1995/96 to 1999/00, the mean peak waterfowl count (excluding gulls) was 30,223 birds (qualifying threshold for international importance is 30,000). Of particular note is the internationally important flock of Greenland White-fronted Geese based along the Brosna (though the birds also have a range of other feeding and roosting sites on grassland and bogs in the vicinity). Average peak count for the flock over the five winters 1995/96 to 1999/00 was 454. The population of Black-tailed Godwit is also of international importance, with an average maximum of 2,900 for the same five-year period. This flock, which is the largest in the country, has exceeded 4,000 and there is also an important spring passage. A further seven species have populations of national importance. These are Whooper Swan 122, Wigeon 9,608, Teal 2,756, Pintail 130, Shoveler 164, Golden Plover 11,408 and Lapwing 2,900. The populations of Wigeon, Teal and Golden Plover are consistently among the largest in the country. Other species which have regionally important populations include Mute Swan 82, Mallard 334 and Dunlin 434, the latter species being of note as it is the largest inland population in the country. Of the species which occur regularly at this site, three (Greenland White-fronted Geese, Whooper Swan, Golden Plover) are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.

The Brosna callows are also of importance for breeding waders. In 2002, 22 pairs of Redshank and 23 pairs of Snipe were recorded. These numbers, however, are considerably lower than in 1987 when 65 pairs of Redshank and 35 pairs of Snipe were present, along with 41 pairs of Lapwing (no Lapwing present in 2002). The globally endangered Corn Crake formerly bred on the Brosna callows, with 2 calling birds in 1993, and may still breed occasionally.

Part of the site is a no shooting area, the Little Brosna Wildfowl. Current landuse on the site consists of peat-cutting at Cloghan Demesne, along all the margins of the high bog. However there are no recent drains on the high bog. Damaging activities associated with this landuse include drainage and burning. These are all activities that have resulted in loss of habitat and damage to the hydrological status of the high bog, and pose a continuing threat to its viability.

The River Little Brosna Callows NHA is a site of considerable conservation significance, including as it does, a raised bog, a rare habitat in the E.U. and one that is becoming increasingly scarce and under threat in Ireland. This bog is one of the few remaining raised bogs developed on the former floodplain of the River Shannon and its tributaries. The site supports a good diversity of raised bog microhabitats

including some hummock/hollow complexes. The presence of mature deciduous woodland adds to the overall habitat diversity. The close proximity to the River Shannon increases the ecological interest and conservation value of the site. 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 international importance for its waterfowl and is designated a Special Protection Area under the E.U. Birds Directive.