SITE SYNOPSIS

Site Name: Cuilcagh - Anierin Uplands SAC

Site Code: 000584

This site follows a series of shale uplands in the counties of Cavan and Leitrim, including to the north, Cuilcagh Mountain on the border with Northern Ireland, Benbrack, Bencroy, and to the south, Slieve Anierin, rising above Lough Allen. It links the following pre-existing Areas of Scientific Interest: Bellavally Mountain, Cuilcagh Mountain and Lough Cratty Bog, Moneenterriff Cliffs and Levenakilla Bog. The site is of special interest because of its geology, physiography and upland flora and fauna.

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):

[3110] Oligotrophic Waters containing very few minerals
[3160] Dystrophic Lakes
[4010] Wet Heath
[4030] Dry Heath
[4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
[6230] Species-rich *Nardus* Grassland*
[7130] Blanket Bogs (Active)*
[7140] Transition Mires
[7220] Petrifying Springs*
[8110] Siliceous Scree
[8220] Siliceous Rocky Slopes
[1393] Slender Green Feather-moss (*Drepanocladus vernicosus*)

Geological interest is comprised of the complete representation of the Carboniferous Leitrim Group, including richly fossiliferous sequences of sandstones, shales and mudstones. Physiographical interest relates to various active processes, notably slope weathering, as well as the presence of peat and pseudo-karst features. The total sequence on the Upper Cuilcagh area provides an excellent section through approximately 560 m of the Leitrim Group of Carboniferous rocks. On the lower ground, particularly on east Cuilcagh, a series of potholes or shakeholes (dry vertical shafts) and sinks (shafts and surface water plunges) have developed on limestone. Pollnagallun is one of these. Landforms due to past and present processes are also noticable and include periglacial rock shattering throughout the area, associated blockfields at the edges (Moneenterriff), rock slides throughout and bog flows.

The biological interest of the site is associated with the presence of one of the largest expanses of intact mountain blanket bog in Ireland (seen at Cratty's Lough at the north-east of the site), and also with upland grasslands on the steepest slopes of the peaks, fine examples of dry heath on the less steep slopes of these peaks and a gradation from these to wet heaths and wet rush (*Juncus* spp.) grasslands. A well-developed oceanic, montane bryophyte flora exists throughout. At the tops of ridges such as at Slieve Anierin, Bencroy, Benbrack and at The Playbank, on level terrain at the slope bases, and often sandwiched between two succeeding slopes, blanket peat also occurs. The extensive blanket bog exhibits a wide range of characteristic vegetation and structural features, with well-developed pool/hummock and lawn complexes, drier peat, acid flushes and bog bursts. The presence of a large number of streams (or river sources) adds to the biological interest.

Flat blanket peat areas on water-logged ground is characterised by the presence of such species as Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*), Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) and small amounts of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) over a bog moss mat of predominantly *Sphagnum capillifolium* and *S. papillosum*.

On more freely-draining gentle slopes, abundant and tall Heather, Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and Hare's-tail Cottongrass (*E. vaginatum*) are more typical over a mixed bryophyte layer of *Sphagnum capillifolium, Hypnum jutlandicum* and *Rhytidiadelphus* spp. The presence of weak flushing of acidic water through the surface peat layer is indicated by the occurrence of sparsely scattered Purple Moor-grass (*Molinea caerulea*) or Sharp-flowered Rush (*Juncus acutiflorus*). The rare moss *Drepanocladus vernicosus*, a species protected under the Flora (Protection) Order 2015 and listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, is found in a flush in Commas Townland.

Where flushing is concentrated over a thinner peat or a peaty gley soil or is associated with iron-staining, the vegetation is characterised by a small sedge (*Carex* spp.) community with Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*), butterwort (*Pinguicula* spp.), Water Forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*), Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*), Common Marsh-bedstraw (*Galium palustre*), Water Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*) and a range of non-ombrotrophic bryophytes.

A small number of oligotrophic lakes occur within the site, with Lough Nambrack, Knockgorm Lake and Munter Eolas Lough being the main examples. These often have limited vegetation. Scattered throughout the site are dystrophic lakes, with peat bases and often peat-stained water. These lakes typically have sparse vegetation, with Common Cottongrass, Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) and *Sphagnum* mosses being the dominant plants.

Sloped ground and areas of shallow peat support heath communities. Wet heath is extensive and is dominated by Cross-leaved Heath, Heather, Bilberry, Purple Moor-grass, Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Heath Rush (*Juncus squarrosus*), and mosses in the following groups: *Rhytidiadelphus* spp., *Sphagnum* spp. and *Polytrichum* spp. Dry

heath is also well-represented within the site and is typically found where shallow peats occur on sloped ground in association with exposed rock. Heather is usually the dominant species in the vegetation, and is often accompanied by Bilberry, Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) and, in places, Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*). Tormentil and Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*) are also common species. Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) is a scarcer species of the dry and alpine heath vegetation. Upland grassland frequently merges with the heath community and is dominated by Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*) and bent grasses (*Agrostis* spp.), with Heath Bedstraw, Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvatica*) and Tormentil also common. In places it is considered to be species rich. In wetter areas, the grassland communities are dominated by rushes (*Juncus effusus*, *J. acutiflorus* and some *J. articulatus*).

Inland cliffs of shale and sandstones, as well as gorges and scree slopes, are a feature of this large mountain site. Good examples occur at Moneenterriff, south and north-west of Cuilcagh Mountain, Bellavally Gap and east and west of Slieve Anieran. Here the heathy vegetation is augmented by typical cliff and scree species, particularly ferns such as the Broad Buckler-fern (*Dryopteris dilatata*). These areas are generally rich in bryophytes and ferns. The rare and unusual moss *Discelium nudum* is associated with exposed shaly clay on incised stream banks in the lower parts of the site.

On the low steep slopes at the north-east of the site, such as at Gorteennaglogh, some small areas of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) woodland add to the habitat diversity of the site. A small number of unimproved enclosed fields are also included on the edges of the site.

A number of locally rare plant species, including the Red Listed moss *Dicranodontium asperulum*, occur. Other species found on the site which are scarce in Ireland or in the Leitrim/Cavan area include White Sedge (*Carex curta*), Common Yellow-sedge (*C. demissa*), Bog-sedge (*C. limosa*), Blue Moor-grass (*Sesleria albicans*), Cowberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), Beech Fern (*Phegopteris connectilis*), Lesser Twayblade (*Listera cordata*), Starry Saxifrage (*Saxifraga stellaris*), Stag's-horn Clubmoss (*Lycopodium clavatum*), and the lichens *Cladonia anomaea, C. bellidiflora, C. ciliata* var. *tenuis*, *C. crispata* var. *cetrariiformis, C. incrassata, C. coniocraea, C. pyxidata* and *C. strepsilis.*

The site provides good habitat for breeding wading birds, with Curlew, Golden Plover and Dunlin nesting in small numbers. Other typical upland species such as Peregrine, Merlin and Ring Ouzel are also present. Golden Plover, Peregrine and Merlin are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive and, along with Dunlin and Ring Ouzel, are Red Data Book species. Red Grouse, also a Red-listed species, is present on the site.

The blanket bog areas of this site are extensive and relatively undisturbed. Natural transitions from blanket bog to heath and acidic grassland are evident, and cliffs, small ravines and small woodland blocks add diversity to the site.