

Site Name: Lough Fingall Complex SAC

Site Code: 000606

This site is situated immediately south-east of Ballindeereen in Co. Galway, and within 2-3 km of Galway Bay. It is within the stretch of flat low-lying bare limestones known as the Ardrahan limestones, which extend from the foot of the Burren hills northwards towards Craughwell. The site comprises a complex of habitats, the dominant being turloughs and limestone pavement.

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*
[4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
[5130] Juniper Scrub
[6210] Orchid-rich Calcareous Grassland*
[7210] <i>Cladium</i> Fens*
[8240] Limestone Pavement*
[1303] Lesser Horseshoe Bat (<i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i>)

The turloughs at this site are oligotrophic (nutrient-poor) and calcareous in character. Their catchment areas are relatively small and water tends to remain in them for considerable periods of time. The surface waters usually occupy distinct separate basins in most years but during extreme floods these can be linked together as one large expanse of open water. Taken together these turloughs represent one of the largest expanses of oligotrophic turlough vegetation in the country.

Ballinderreen turlough occupies a flat limestone pavement basin and supports extensive areas of Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and sedge (*Carex* spp.) fen vegetation. Marl ponds occur in the lower lying parts, with Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*), Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*), Many-stalked Spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), Alternate Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum alternifolium*), along with a little Horned Pondweed (*Zannichellia palustris*) and stonewort (*Chara hispida* var. *major*). Rare plants found at this turlough include Fen Violet (*Viola persicifolia*), a Red Data Book species, Water Germander (*Teucrium scordium*) and Marsh Fern (*Thelypteris palustris*).

A smaller area to the south-east of Ballinderreen, Frenchpark turlough, contains a Black Bog-rush/Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) stand with patches of Great Fen-sedge (*Cladium mariscus*) within it. Cuiladooish turlough is of linear shape with a high

central section. It has level limestone pavement forming its eastern side and is aligned and lies parallel with Lough Fingall, which is effectively also a turlough. There is much Buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*) scrub here and at the northern end of the main lake. Carraghadoo turlough has a shallow basin without standing water in summer and with less peat. Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*) and Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*) are the main species here. The shores of Tullaghnafrankagh Lough flood during winter and have a similar, if slightly more eutrophic (nutrient-rich), vegetation. Alder Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), a Red Data Book species, grows on sloping limestone pavement close to the limit of winter flooding in several places.

Limestone pavement occurs throughout the site. It varies from the classic bare open pavement, with little vegetation, to pavement and shattered limestone blocks interspersed with calcareous grassland, heath, turlough and scrub. A rich and diverse flora occurs, with many of the typical Burren species represented - Bloody Crane's-bill (*Geranium sanguineum*), Herb-Robert (*G. robertianum*), Rustyback (*Ceterach officinarum*), Burnet Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*) and Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*), along with some rarer species such as Spring Gentian (*Gentiana verna*) and Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*).

Orchid species present in areas of calcareous grassland at the site include Fly Orchid (*Ophrys insectifera*), Lesser Butterfly-orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*), Early-purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*) and several *Dactylorhiza* species. In the past, the scarce Dense-flowered Orchid (*Neotinea maculata*) has been recorded from the site.

Lough Fingall, Cloghballymore Lough and Cahernalinsky Lough are shallow infilling lakes with stands of Great Fen-sedge and other fen and wetland vegetation such as Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) and Tufted-sedge (*Carex elata*).

Juniper scrub and lowland alpine heath occur in close association with one another. The juniper scrub is dominated by Juniper (*Juniperus communis*), with Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and rose (*Rosa* spp.) species. Lowland alpine heath is characterised by Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) and Mountain Avens, a rare vegetation type known from a few areas in the Burren, the Lough Fingall area and the Moycullen area near Lough Corrib.

Cloghballymore House provides a summer breeding site for the Lesser Horseshoe Bat, a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The bats use the large roof space, although a smaller number roost in a boiler house, gaining access by means of gaps around the pipes. The surrounding mixed woods provide suitable foraging habitat within a short radius of the day roost site. In 1993 more than 200 bats were counted at this site, which makes it of international importance.

The site is of local importance for wintering waterfowl, particularly Lapwing (max. count 381 in 1995/96), with 6 breeding pairs recorded in 1996. Some scarce invertebrate species have been recorded from the Lough Fingall area.

The main land use in the site is cattle grazing, which is mostly of light to moderate intensity. Clearance of limestone pavement and scrub has taken place in the past and burning is a threat to the heath habitats. A drainage scheme to relieve exceptional flooding has been implemented recently. There are no immediate threats facing the bat population.

This site is of great conservation importance for the presence of six E.U. Habitats Directive habitats, including four priority habitats. The transitions and gradations between habitats, for example between turloughs, lakes and limestone pavement, gives rise to a range of physical conditions that favour many uncommon species. In addition, the site supports an internationally important population of Lesser Horseshoe Bats.