

Site Name: Galtee Mountains SAC

Site Code: 000646

Situated in east Limerick and south Tipperary, the Galtee Mountains are Ireland's highest range of inland mountains. Galtymore has an elevation of 920 m and the main ridge, mostly above 700 m, extends approximately 10 km from east to west. The mountains are derived from folding of Old Red Sandstone and Silurian rocks. Heath is the main vegetation type within the site, with significant amounts of humid grassland and blanket bog occurring also. There is a series of small corrie lakes on the northern side of the mountain range, and the site encompasses the headstreams of numerous tributaries of the river Suir. The cliffs above the corries support arctic-alpine vegetation and the site as a whole supports several notable Irish rarities.

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):

[4010] Wet Heath
[4030] Dry Heath
[4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
[6230] Species-rich <i>Nardus</i> Grassland*
[7130] Blanket Bogs (Active)*
[8110] Siliceous Scree
[8210] Calcareous Rocky Slopes
[8220] Siliceous Rocky Slopes

In areas of dry heath Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) dominates the vegetation, with Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) also common. This habitat type often grades into wet heath and alpine/subalpine heath. It is probably best developed on the steeper slopes. Additional species recorded from the areas of alpine/subalpine heath include Dwarf Willow (*Salix herbacea*), Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*), Hare's-tail Cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*), Great Wood-rush (*Luzula sylvatica*) and Starry Saxifrage (*Saxifraga stellaris*), amongst others.

Species-rich upland grassland occurs on steep slopes, particularly in the west of the site, and often in mosaic with humid grassland and heath. The rare species Small-white Orchid (*Pseudorchis albida*) has been recorded from within this habitat. The main grass species present include Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*), Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*) and Sheep's-fescue (*Festuca ovina*), while the main sedges are Green-ribbed Sedge (*Carex binervis*), Carnation Sedge (*C. panicea*) and Pill Sedge (*C. pilulifera*). Herb species include Heath

Bedstraw, Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvatica*), Heath Milkwort (*Polygala serpyllifolia*) and Common Milkwort (*P. vulgaris*). Heath species such as Heather and Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*) are also found.

Blanket bog is localised at the site and occurs mainly at high altitudes, largely confined to flatter areas along and beside ridge tops. There is often good cover of bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.), along with Common Cottongrass (*E. angustifolium*) and Heather. Erosion is severe on many ridges and cols where deep peat deposits (up to 2 m) have accumulated. The uncommon species Stiff Sedge (*Carex bigelowii*) is found in this habitat at the site.

The north-facing cliffs within the site are of botanical importance as they support arctic-alpine communities with some rare plant species. These areas are linked to the habitats 'calcareous rocky slopes', 'siliceous rocky slopes' and 'siliceous scree'. Uncommon species include Northern Rock-cress (*Cardaminopsis petraea*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea*), Alpine Saw-wort (*Saussurea alpina*), Irish Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rosacea*) and the Red Listed bryophytes *Bartramia ithyphylla* and *Pohlia elongata* var. *greenii*. Other specialised mountain plants found on the site include Viviparous Fescue (*Festuca vivipara*), Fir Clubmoss (*Huperzia selago*) and Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*). The cliffs also support patches of Great Wood-rush, Bilberry, birch (*Betula* sp.), Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) and Eared Willow (*Salix aurita*). There are several fern species recorded, most notably Brittle Bladder-fern (*Cystopteris fragilis*), Wilson's Filmy-fern (*Hymenophyllum wilsonii*), Tonbridge Filmy-fern (*H. tunbrigense*) and Green Spleenwort (*Asplenium viride*).

The rare species Small-white Orchid, Northern Rock-cress and Alpine Saw-wort have been recorded from the site. These species are included in the Red Data Book and the first two are legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015.

The site supports breeding Peregrine, a species listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.

Over-grazing by sheep and frequent burning are causing potentially serious damage to some areas of heath and grassland. Afforestation threatens the lower slopes and valleys. Hill walking takes place at the site and may result in trampling damage in places.

This site is of high conservation value due to the fact that it contains a range of important upland habitats in a relatively isolated inland mountain site. Eight of these habitats are listed in Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, and two of those have priority status. The presence of a number of rare, scarce and uncommon plant species adds greatly to the significance of the SAC.