

## SITE SYNOPSIS

**SITE NAME: LOUGH DERRAVARAGH NHA**

**SITE CODE: 000684**

Lough Derravaragh is located approximately 12 km north of Mullingar town mainly in the townlands Clonava, Derrya, Kiltoom, Donore, Ballynakill, Streamstown and Knockbody in Co. Westmeath. The majority of the site comprises the lake, but it also includes a variety of wetland, grassland and woodland habitats. The site includes a small area of raised bog. The site is bounded in the north-west by the River Inny.

The River Inny, which is a major tributary of the River Shannon, flows into and out of Lough Derravaragh at its north-west end. At this end, the lake is wide and shallow and the raised bog and cutover is found in this area. Lough Derravaragh is shallow and its water is hard with an alkaline pH. There is only a small area of raised bog in the site, but formerly it comprised a very large bog complex which extended to the north-west of the lake. Most of this has now been cutover and large areas have been reclaimed for agriculture. The remaining area of bog has hummock/hollow complexes but no pools. Coniferous forestry has been planted on the high bog and a section of cutover. Cutover is found all around the high bog and there is also a separate small area of old cutover 2.5 km south of the raised bog.

Much of the high bog has vegetation typical of a Midland Raised Bog, with such species as Ling Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and Hare's-tail Cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*). The hummock-forming bog moss *Sphagnum papillosum* has been recorded on the high bog as has the more scarce *S. imbricatum*. Overall, *Sphagnum* covers around one third of the high bog area and the centre of the bog is wet with standing water in places. The aquatic bog moss *S. cuspidatum* has been recorded in the hollows on the bog. Ling Heather and Hare's-tail Cottongrass are common on the hummocks as are lichens (*Cladonia* sp.). There are dried out channels on the bog which are colonised by algae, Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*) and lichens. Coniferous forestry has been planted on the western side of the high bog and on adjoining areas of cutover. On the cutover in the south-east, south and north of the site of the site there are areas of Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) woodland, with patches of Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) scrub in between.

A notable feature of Lough Derravaragh is the range of Charophytes (Stoneworts) that occur in the lake; to date eight species have been recorded here, several of which have a restricted range in Ireland. Around the lake margin, a range of habitats have been created as a result of drainage of the River Inny. At the western end are extensive reed beds and swamps dominated by Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) with scattered stands of Downy Birch and willows (*Salix* spp.). Elsewhere, there is freshwater marsh vegetation dominated by sedges (*Carex* spp.) and often tussock-forming grasses such as Tufted Hair-grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*) and fescues (*Festuca* spp.), with a range of flowering herbs including Nodding Bur-Marigold (*Bidens cernua*) and Trifid Bur-Marigold (*Bidens tripartita*). The lakeshore is a

mineral-rich substrate and several plant species of poor fen habitats occur in abundance, such as Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and Long-stalked Yellow-sedge (*Carex lepidocarpa*). Knockeyon and the other hills around the south-eastern end of the lake support deciduous woodland which is comprised mostly of native species. Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*) are abundant. Exotic species occur occasionally, including Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*).

Lough Derravaragh is an important site for wintering waterfowl, and is of particular note as a site for geese, swans and diving duck. It is a traditional haunt for the internationally important midland flock of Greenland White-fronted Geese (which also use Loughs Iron, Owel and Ennel). This flock, whose numbers usually range between 300 and 400 birds, use the lake mainly for roosting purposes. Counts for principal waterfowl species over the five winters 1995/96 to 1999/00 are as follows (figures are average maxima): Little Grebe 42, Great Crested Grebe 34, Cormorant 34, Mute Swan 159, Whooper Swan 102, Greenland White-fronted Goose 409, Wigeon 207, Teal 52, Mallard 195, Pintail 6, Shoveler 12, Pochard 3129, Tufted Duck 1,073, Goldeneye 46, Coot 1,358, Golden Plover 158 and Lapwing 1,079. The populations of Little Grebe, Mute Swan, Whooper Swan, Pochard, Tufted Duck and Coot are of National Importance. At times, the Pochard population, which is one of the largest in the country, has exceeded the threshold for International Importance (i.e. 3,500).

This site regularly supports nationally important populations of six species, and at times is used by the internationally important population of Greenland White-fronted Geese which is based in the region. Three of the species which occur at the site (Greenland White-fronted Geese, Whooper Swan, Golden Plover) are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. The rare Charophyte *Chara denudata*, has been recorded in Lough Derravaragh and the Red Data Book species Otter and Irish Hare have also been noted from the site.

Current landuses on the site include active peat-cutting, agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting and leisure activities. On the southern margins of the high bog there is a small area of active peat-cutting. There are only a small number of agricultural fields within the site, with a few on reclaimed cutover. There is coniferous forestry on a small section of high bog and cutover. Damaging activities associated with these landuses include drainage throughout the site and burning of the high bog. The lake is an important amenity for anglers, as it holds a population of Brown Trout. Knockbody Wood is used for shooting Pheasant. Local groups use the lake for canoeing and watersports. Parts of the site have also been used for dumping and as an encampment. These activities have resulted in the loss of habitat and damage to the hydrological status of the site, and pose a threat to its viability.

Lough Derravaragh 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. The site supports a good diversity of raised bog microhabitats, including hummocks and hollows. Ireland has a high proportion of the total E.U. resource of the raised bog (over 50%) and so has a special responsibility for its conservation at an international level. Lough Derravaragh itself

is of importance for its aquatic flora and fauna and for its marginal wetland habitats. It is also of major ornithological importance and is designated a Special Protection Area under the E.U. Birds Directive.

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