

Site Name: Screen Hills SAC

Site Code: 000708

The Screen Hills are located in the south-east of Ireland, just north of the Wexford Slob. The site is characterised by a type of glacial landscape known as “kettle and kame”, a term which refers to kettlehole lakes found in hollows between small hills. The lakes, which are mostly small, mark the positions of former ice blocks in an acidic, sandy moraine.

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 [4030] Dry Heath

The lakes in the site are of two broad types. The first type are low-lying and in contact with groundwater, and these are influenced by what is occurring over a wide area. The second type are suspended at a height above the regional water table, and are influenced by the area immediately surrounding them. These lakes can usually be considered oligotrophic, although nutrient input from the adjacent land may change this.

The lakes vary in size, though most are pond-sized, and have widely different plant and animal communities. These include bog formation in all stages, from open sandy shores with only a narrow band of emergent vegetation, to wide rafts of floating fen type vegetation, to small *Sphagnum* bogs with Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*), to consolidated Heather/ willow/ birch (*Calluna vulgaris*/*Salix* sp./*Betula* sp.).

Many of the plant species which are found in these lakes are rare in south-east Ireland. They include Great Fen-sedge (*Cladium mariscus*), White Water-lily (*Nymphaea alba*), Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) and Lesser Bladderwort (*Utricularia minor*). Species of good quality boggy habitats are widespread, such as Lesser Tussock-sedge (*Carex diandra*), Marsh Cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*), Marsh St. John's-wort (*Hypericum elodes*), Lesser Water-plantain (*Baldellia ranunculoides*) and Water Dock (*Rumex hydrolapathum*). Lake edges in grazed fields have species typical of exposed mud such as Water-purslane (*Lythrum portula*), Nodding Bur-marigold (*Bidens cernua*), Trifid Bur-marigold (*B. tripartita*) and Lesser Marshwort (*Apium inundatum*). Six-stamened Waterwort (*Elatine hexandra*) has been recorded but not recently re-found.

Dry heath at the site is extensive and species-rich. The heath vegetation at the site differs from most heaths elsewhere in the virtual absence of Heather, and in the presence of a diverse range of annual species. Substantial populations of the following Red Data Book species have been found at this very important and complex site, and in other localities on and adjoining the moraine: Small Cudweed (*Logfia minima*), Heath Cudweed (*Omalotheca sylvatica*), Hairy Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus subbiflorus*) and Bird's-foot (*Ornithopus perpusillus*). Musk Thistle (*Carduus nutans*), another Red Data Book species, is also present in large numbers. It may have been introduced with cattle feed, but is thoroughly established. Other typical plant species of the heath at this site include Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*), Sheep's Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), violets (*Viola* spp.), Common Cudweed (*Filago vulgaris*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and the uncommon species Knotted Clover (*Trifolium striatum*), Lesser Trefoil (*T. dubium*) and Annual Knawel (*Scleranthus annuus*). Four of the species mentioned above are legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999 – Small Cudweed, Heath Cudweed, Hairy Bird's-foot-trefoil and Annual Knawel.

The site is under threat of reclamation for intensive agriculture. Some fields have been re-seeded with Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*), while others have been brought into crop production. This process of agricultural improvement eventually leads to the loss of rare plant habitat and also increases the risk of pollution to the lakes.

The Screen Hills contain important examples of two habitats listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, with the heath area being particularly unusual. The area is very important as a good example of a "kettle and kame" glacial landscape. The presence of several Red Data Book plant species adds further importance to this site.