

**Site Name: Vale of Clara (Rathdrum Wood) SAC**

**Site Code: 000733**

The Vale of Clara woodland is situated mostly on the east side of the Avonmore River, immediately north of Rathdrum in Co. Wicklow. It lies between 107 and 244 m above sea level, and forms an integral part of one of the most scenic valleys in Wicklow. The woodland is a remnant of the once extensive forests of east Wicklow, which may have occupied this site since the end of the last Ice Age. Unfortunately, the hardwoods have been replaced, or underplanted with conifers, since the 1940s. However, most of the site is now within the Vale of Clara Nature Reserve, ensuring that the future of the existing hardwoods.

The woods in the Vale of Clara are a mosaic of relatively pure oak woodland (Sessile Oak, *Quercus petraea*), mixed woodland and commercial plantations, growing on an acidic orange-brown, sandy loam over a schist bedrock. A distinct mor humus, often several centimetres thick, overlies the mineral soil.

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):

[91A0] Old Oak Woodlands
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The oak woods are good examples of the species-poor Blechno-Quercetum vegetation community, and are best developed in the Cronybyrne area. The understorey is mostly of Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*). The ground flora includes Great Wood-rush (*Luzula sylvatica*), Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), Ivy (*Hedera helix*), Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*), Wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*) and violets (*Viola* spp.).

The areas of mixed woodland contain a variety of underplanted conifers, as well as Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and other introduced deciduous species. The planted conifer compartments contain a wide range of conifer species. An area of wet woodland is well developed near Ballyhad Bridge. The Avonmore River, which flows through the site, creates further habitat diversity.

Narrow-leaved Helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*), a rare plant species which is listed in the Irish Red Data Book, has been recorded from the locality, as has the scarce, Ivy-leaved Bellflower (*Wahlenbergia hederacea*). Narrow-leaved Helleborine is protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999. Several rare species of Myxomycete fungus have also been recorded from the site, namely *Cribraria rufa*,

*Diderma floriforme*, *Stemonitis smithii* (only known Irish site) and *Trichia verrucosa* (in its only known Republic of Ireland site).

The woodland bird community includes the Jay, Long-eared Owl, Treecreeper, Woodcock and Blackcap. The Wood Warbler and Crossbill have also been recorded, while the Dipper and Grey Wagtail occur on the Avonmore River.

The Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*) butterfly has been seen within the woods.

This site is a good example of what remains of the once extensive oak forests of east Wicklow, and is representative of the relatively dry, acid oak woods of eastern Ireland. The woodlands are of considerable conservation significance as they conform to a type listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The historical record of land use within the woods adds to the interest of the site, as does the occurrence of a number of rare and scarce species.