



Site Name: Cullahill Mountain SAC

Site Code: 000831

Cullahill Mountain SAC lies on a western outlier of the Castlecomer plateau, 6 km north-east of Johnstown in Co. Kilkenny. In this area, the underlying limestone has been exposed relatively recently by erosion of the higher shales. The rock is in the form of an escarpment, with a steep side facing the central plain (and the Cork-Dublin road) and more gradual slopes to the south-east where the shale soon appears.

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):

[6210] Orchid-rich Calcareous Grassland*
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The vegetation of most of the site comprises a herb-rich grassland over limestone. Grasses found include Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*), Sheep's-fescue (*Festuca ovina*), Downy Oat-grass (*Avenula pubescens*) and Yellow Oat-grass (*Trisetum flavescens*). Amongst these grasses Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Hieracium pilosella*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Carline Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*), Mountain Everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*) and eyebrighta (*Euphrasia* spp.) grow, while a number of smaller annual species are associated with rock outcrops. The orchid flora of the grassland is notably rich, with Common Twayblade (*Listera ovata*), Frog Orchid (*Coeloglossum viride*), Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*), Early-purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*) and Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*) occurring. Green-winged Orchid is an uncommon species and the site is particularly notable for the abundance of this species (some 350 individuals were recently recorded from the site).

On its west side, the site extends downslope to some Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*)/Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) woodland which is regenerating well and spreading on the hill. Some of the trees grow out of moss-covered rocks and although the ground flora is as yet fairly sparse, most of the expected species occur within the wood. Woodland on limestone is quite rare in the midlands and is distinct from adjacent Hazel stands on shale, such as at Spahill.

This site is of conservation importance due to the presence of a priority-listed Annex I habitat type (orchid-rich calcareous grassland), as well as the occurrence of a large population of the rare plant species, Green-winged Orchid.