



Site Name: Spahill and Clomantagh Hill SAC

Site Code: 000849

Spahill and the adjacent hills form part of an escarpment which links the Slieve Ardagh Hills with the Castlecomer Plateau in Co. Kilkenny. The hills are of limestone overlain by shales and/or sandstones, and so the surface geology is variable, with different rock types supporting different vegetation types. This particular site is mostly limestone, exposed as small ledges or as flat sheets. When the latter occurs it is often weathered into a pavement pattern, similar to that found in the Burren, Co. Clare. The hills are generally low and rounded - they rise relatively steeply from the central plain but drop south-eastwards more gently. Their surface is grassy in appearance but the soil is shallow, especially on the upper parts, and the rock breaks through frequently.

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*

The vegetation at the site is dominated by Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*), Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*) and Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), with Smooth Meadow-grass (*Poa pratensis*) and Yellow Oat-grass (*Trisetum flavescens*) occurring near outcrops. The community is species-rich with plants such as Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Hieracium pilosella*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Burnet Saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*) and sedges (*Carex caryophyllea* and *C. flacca*) scattered through it. Locally there is much eyebright (*Euphrasia* sp.), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*) and Oxeye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*).

The Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*) grows sparingly through this community. This species is listed in the Irish Red Data Book. Two other orchid species, Frog Orchid (*Coeloglossum viride*) and Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) are also recorded from the site. Some cliffs occur on the south side of Clomantagh where Southern Polypody (*Polypodium australe*) is common, along with Hairy Rock-cress (*Arabis hirsuta*).

Heathy grassland is found on particularly thin soils on the eastern slope of Spahill. Here, Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) is particularly abundant, growing with Slender St. John's-wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*), Bitter-vetch (*Lathyrus montanus*), Yellow-rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) and a little Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*).

The ground in Clomantagh is largely similar to Spahill. However, near the summit there are outliers of the overlying sandstone which appear as low rocks quite different in shape to the limestone. The difference is accentuated by the vegetation which includes more Heather, as well as Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*), Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Wavy Hair-grass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*), Tufted Hair-grass (*D. cespitosa*) and the mosses *Polytrichum juniperinum*, *Plagiothecium undulatum* and *Dicranum scoparium*.

Woodland occurs on the north-western slope, dominated by Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*), with a good range of herb species in the ground layer. Wood-rushes (*Luzula sylvestris* and *L. pilosa*) are frequent, with Wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), Greater Stitchwort (*Stellaria holostea*) and ferns (*Dryopteris dilatata* and *D. affinis*) also found. In seepage areas Golden Saxifrage (*Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*), Bugle (*Ajuga reptans*) and Remote Sedge (*Carex remota*) are characteristic, and there is a little Water Avens (*Geum rivale*), Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*) and Tufted Hair-grass at the base of the slope.

The site contains a variety of natural grassland communities that are rare in Ireland because of agricultural intensification. Taken with Cullahill Mountain to the north-east it forms a unit of high ecological interest. The presence of a population of Green-winged Orchid in grassland referable to a type listed, with priority status, on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive is notable.