

Site Name: Ridge Road, SW of Rapemills SAC

Site Code: 000919

This site consists of steep-sided, twin esker ridges formed from glacial gravels. It is situated under 2 km south-west of the village of Rapemills in Co. Offaly. The more northerly ridge supports a road running towards the Little Brosna River. Hollows are present with deeper soils which are more nutrient-enriched, while the banks are slightly leached.

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 is primarily unimproved grassland in the western section and a mixture of dry, unimproved esker grassland and wet grassland in the more easterly section. An important feature of this site is the presence of orchid-rich calcareous grassland. This vegetation supports a rich diversity of plant species and a variety of unusual plant communities. Along with several uncommon or localised plant species, this site supports a large population of Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*), a Red Data Book species.

Noteworthy is the presence of herb communities containing Bloody Crane's-bill (*Geranium sanguineum*), Burnet Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*) and Zigzag Clover (*Trifolium medium*), in association with woody species such as Yew (*Taxus baccata*) and Buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*). Other herb species present are Upright Brome (*Bromus erectus*), Dog's Mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*), Stone Bramble (*Rubus saxatilis*) and Wild Madder (*Rubia peregrina*), while shrubs such as Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*), Crab Apple (*Malus sylvestris*) and Dwarf Cherry (*Prunus cerasus*) are also present. Some banks have mature Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) woods. The herb species mentioned are unusual in a midland, inland context.

Species-rich calcareous grasslands are sensitive to agricultural improvement, for example fertiliser application and re-seeding. At Ridge Road, the steep esker banks have restricted the agricultural use of this site and the lands are, in general, unfertilized. The site is used for cattle grazing. Overall, grazing is a positive influence on calcareous grasslands. However, it is important that the correct level of grazing is achieved, i.e. enough to halt the spread of shrub species and to maintain the balance between scrub and species-rich grassland. Too much grazing would result in damage to the vegetation cover.

Although small, this site is of ecological value as a good example of species-rich calcareous grassland, rich in orchids. This habitat type is increasingly rare as a result of agricultural intensification, and is given priority status on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The vegetation at Ridge Road is diverse and features a variety of unusual plant communities, as well as a large population of Green-winged Orchid. Eskers are becoming increasingly rare in Ireland - many have been destroyed as a result of gravel extraction.