



**Site Name: Pilgrim's Road Esker SAC**

**Site Code: 001776**

Pilgrim's Road Esker SAC is a narrow esker ridge extending 2 km east from Clonmacnoise in Co. Offaly. The site is adjacent to the River Shannon Callows, to the north, and Mongan raised bog, to the south. The western area includes Bunthulla Hill (north of the road) and Hanging Hill (south of the road); the central area runs along both sides of the summit ridge before widening out eastwards to include a substantial area of esker grassland centred on the site of an old ring-fort.

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 most species-rich grasslands at this site occur on Hanging Hill, a small and very steep-sided hill of unstable calcareous soil. Plant species typical of this habitat occur in abundance, including Carline Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*), Common Centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*) and Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*), with a range of orchids, e.g. Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), Fragrant Orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*) and Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*). The most species-rich vegetation on Bunthulla Hill occurs on the south- and south-west facing slopes, where Spring Sedge (*Carex caryophyllea*) and Autumn Gentian (*Gentianella amarella*) are abundant among the closed sward. The rest of Bunthulla Hill retains elements of the original flora despite having been semi-improved by means of fertiliser application.

Grassland in the central area consists of similar orchid-rich swards, also with Autumn Gentian, a species that is locally frequent in the centre of Ireland and scarce elsewhere. Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*) also occurs here. The western extension of this central area contains a young, species-rich flora developing after recent clearance (post-1984) of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) woodland. Two small areas of Hazel woodland occur on the northern side of the central area. These are heavily grazed. Some areas of dense Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) scrub are also included within the site.

The site supports a large population of the rare Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*), a Red Data Book species. This population is one of the largest in Ireland, with over 1,000 individuals recorded in 1991, showing the full colour range for the species.

Land use on the site is mostly grazing by cattle (also rabbits) and this helps to prevent encroachment of scrub, a potential threat to the species-rich grassland. In

places to the east, where grazing is less intensive, Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) encroachment is evident. Lack of fertiliser application has allowed the localised species-rich flora to survive. If fertiliser application were ceased over the whole area species-richness would gradually increase throughout.

Pilgrim's Road Esker is the most scenically impressive esker in the midlands and the one best known to the public. Orchid-rich calcareous grassland is a rare habitat in Ireland and is listed as a priority habitat under Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. Furthermore the population of the rare Green-winged Orchid is the largest known in Ireland.