



Site Name: Comeragh Mountains SAC

Site Code: 001952

The Comeragh Mountains are situated approximately 11 km south-west of Carrick-on-Suir in Co. Waterford. They consist of a plateau of Old Red Sandstone with its edges deeply scarred by recent glaciation. Corries and deep valleys are cut into the eastern and western sides leaving a central ridge with a width reduced to 270 m at its narrowest point. The rocks, which are horizontally-bedded, stand out as a series of terraces around these corries, which often house small mountain lakes such as Coumshingaun, the Sgilloge Loughs, the Coum Iarthar Loughs and Crotty's Lough.

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):

- [3110] Oligotrophic Waters containing very few minerals
- [3260] Floating River Vegetation
- [4010] Wet Heath
- [4030] Dry Heath
- [4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
- [7130] Blanket Bogs (Active)*
- [8110] Siliceous Scree
- [8210] Calcareous Rocky Slopes
- [8220] Siliceous Rocky Slopes
- [1393] Slender Green Feather-moss (*Drepanocladus vernicosus*)

The central plateau of the Comeragh Mountains is at an altitude of about 700 m and supports areas of blanket bog. The peat is up to 2 m deep in places and is rich in cottongrasses (*Eriophorum angustifolium* and *E. vaginatum*), Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) and mosses (*Sphagnum* spp., *Polytrichum* spp.). North of Coummahon, the blanket bog has suffered from erosion, in many places down to the underlying bedrock. Eroding channels, hummocks and flats of loose peat are also present.

Dry heath is found at this site in a number of forms. A form dominated by Heather is found on rocky terrain at the south of the site, and is considered good quality dry heath. At the east and south-east of the site the vegetation is found in mosaic with Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), upland grassland (grasses such as *Agrostis* spp. and *Festuca* spp. are common) and Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*). Here the habitat is sometimes associated with moraines, an interesting and uncommon feature. However, the

Heather element is much reduced in this area due to sheep grazing pressure. Grassland and heath also occur at the west of the site, but grassland is more common here and is probably encroaching due to over-grazing.

A form of wet heath which is dominated by Deergrass, in association with Heath Rush (*Juncus squarrosus*), Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*), Bell Heather, Bilberry, Tormentil and wood-rushes (*Luzula* spp.) occurs in mosaic with eroding blanket peat.

Alpine heath has been documented as occurring in the corries associated with the Sgilloge and Coumshingaun Loughs, and species records indicate a diverse flora. The habitat occurs in patches in mosaic with the vegetation of siliceous rocks and screes, narrow calcareous rock bands, upland grassland and other heath types on the cliffs. The cliff flora contains many mountain species, including several for which this is their only station in Waterford. St. Patrick's-cabbage (*Saxifraga spathularis*) grows at Coumshingaun, where there are also records for uncommon species such as Mossy Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hypnoides*), Dwarf Willow (*Salix herbacea*), Cowberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea*) and the ferns, *Hymenophyllum wilsonii* and *Cystopteris fragilis*. The mountain/rocky slope flora also includes a number of rare and threatened bryophyte species including *Antitrichia curtispindula*, *Grimmia muehlenbeckii*, *Tortella bambergeri*, *Cynodontium bruntonii*, *Plagiothecium platyphyllum* and *Sphagnum skyense*.

Coumshingaun Lough, which is located on the eastern slope, is an excellent example of an ultra-oligotrophic lake. Unlike most corrie lakes the water is exceptionally clear. It contains a stonewort, *Nitella flexilis*, and also Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*), but only down to the relatively shallow depth of 5 m. Slender Green Feather-moss (*Drepanocladus vernicosus*), a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, has been recorded at Sgilloge Loughs and two other localities in the mountains.

Water-crowfoots (*Ranunculus* spp.) are known to occur in at least some of the many upland rivers in this site, and particularly those to the east. There is an unusual and interesting chemistry associated with the rivers which exit the corrie lakes.

Peregrine, a species listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, breeds within the site, as does Raven. Hen Harrier, also listed on this Annex, is found on the site, as is Irish Hare, a Red Data Book species. Arctic Char has been recorded from the Comeragh Lakes, though not since 1930. This species is listed in the Red Data Book as threatened in Ireland.

The integrity of the remaining areas of blanket bog and the general habitat diversity of the site are under threat from land use pressures such as grazing, burning, afforestation and leisure activities.

This large site has a diverse range of habitats, including blanket bog, heath, upland grassland, scree, exposed rock, lakes and streams. The blanket bog represents the south-eastern extremity of the range of this habitat type in Ireland. There are many

corries, most of which have associated oligotrophic lakes. Overall this site is of considerable conservation importance.