

Site Name: Ox Mountains Bogs SAC

Site Code: 002006

This site comprises several upland blanket bogs situated in the Slieve Gamph, or Ox Mountain range, on the border between counties Sligo and Mayo. The town of Tobercurry lies approximately 12 km to the south-east. Most of the underlying rock is composed of metamorphic schists and gneisses, but igneous intrusions are also found, as at the silica-rich granitic ridge to the east of Easky 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
[3160] Dystrophic Lakes
[4010] Wet Heath
[4030] Dry Heath
[7130] Blanket Bogs (Active)*
[7140] Transition Mires
[7150] Rhynchosporion Vegetation
[1013] Geyer's Whorl Snail (<i>Vertigo geyeri</i>)
[1528] Marsh Saxifrage (<i>Saxifraga hirculus</i>)

Extensive areas of active blanket bog occur throughout this site. The dominant and most frequently occurring vascular plant species are Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) and Hare's-tail Cottongrass (*E. vaginatum*). Bog mosses such as *Sphagnum papillosum* and *S. capillifolium* occur commonly through the site and contribute significantly to the vegetation.

Another important feature of the site is the large number of dystrophic, bog pool systems that occurs. The pools and their margins, as well as the quaking lawns between the pools, are dominated by Rhynchosporion vegetation. This vegetation is characterised by the bog moss *Sphagnum cuspidatum* and often an abundance of White Beak-sedge (*Rhynchospora alba*). The recently discovered *Sphagnum beothuk*, a highly oceanic and amphi-Atlantic species, occurs in the wettest hummock and pool systems. Other species which occur in these wet areas include Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Bog-sedge (*Carex limosa*), Lesser Bladderwort (*Utricularia minor*), Oblong-leaved Sundew (*Drosera intermedia*) and a diversity of bog mosses including *S. auriculatum*. Between the pools,

hummocks topped with Heather, lichens (*Cladonia* spp.) and the moss *Racomitrium lanuginosum* occur.

Several oligotrophic lakes occur on the site, the largest of which is Easky Lough. This is a stony-bottomed lake which supports aquatic vegetation typical of such lakes, i.e. Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*), quillwort (*Isoetes* sp.), Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*), Water Lobelia (*Lobelia dortmanna*), Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*), Water Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*), Sharp-flowered Rush (*Juncus acutiflorus*) and Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*), amongst others.

Wet heath is fairly extensively developed on the site, particularly on the lower slopes of the north-facing side of the Ox Mountains and along the numerous stream valleys that descend from the plateau. Drier heath areas occur in other parts of the site; these typically have vegetation of Heather, Heath Rush (*Juncus squarrosus*) and Purple Moor-grass and are often grazed by sheep.

The regionally scarce mosses *Sphagnum recurvum* var. *tenue*, *S. fuscum*, *S. imbricatum*, *S. strictum* and the liverwort *Cladopodiella fluitans* occur in blanket bog vegetation on this site. Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus*), listed under Annex II of the Habitats Directive and also on the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015, is found in association with a flush system near Letterunshin.

A population of the whorl snail *Vertigo geyeri* has recently been recorded from an area of calcareous fen within the site. This is a nationally rare species that is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive and the Ox Mountains record constitutes only the second known population in Co. Sligo.

During the winter months the bogs are used by a flock of Greenland White-fronted Goose (40-50 birds, and occasionally up to 80, have been counted at Easky Bog). In the summer a number of pairs of Golden Plover breed. Both these species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive and in the Irish Red Data Book.

The site is vulnerable to fragmentation by an extension of adjacent land uses, in particular afforestation and turbary.

The Ox Mountains Bogs SAC is of considerable conservation significance, due primarily to the extensive, largely intact areas of blanket bog it contains. This habitat is listed, and given priority status, on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The value of the site is increased by the presence of good examples of several other annex-listed habitats, i.e. wet heath, dry heath, oligotrophic lakes, transition mires, Rhynchosporion vegetation and dystrophic lakes. Also of note is the presence of Marsh Saxifrage and *Vertigo geyeri*, both nationally rare species, and the populations of two rare and threatened bird species. Part of the site has been designated as a Statutory Nature Reserve.