

Site Name: Maumturk Mountains SAC

Site Code: 002008

The Maumturk Mountains are situated east of the Twelve Bens and west of the Maumtrasnas, between the Inagh Valley and the Leenaun/Maam road in Co. Galway. The site is bounded to the north by Killary Harbour and to the south by the Galway/ Clifden road. Most of the mountains exceed 600 m in height and about half of the land within the site lies above an altitude of 250 m. In addition many rivers criss-cross the site. The main bedrock is quartzite in the south, which forms impressive cliffs but little mineral soil, and shales and slates in the northern area, which weather more easily. Bands of metamorphosed limestone (Lakes Marble Formation) occur at Lissoughter, Maumeen Gap at Knocknagur and Maamturkmore.

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
[4010] Wet Heath
[4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
[7130] Blanket Bogs (Active)*
[7150] Rhynchosporion Vegetation
[8220] Siliceous Rocky Slopes
[1106] Atlantic Salmon (<i>Salmo salar</i>)
[1833] Slender Naiad (<i>Najas flexilis</i>)

Wet heath is widespread within this site on the margins of areas of blanket bog and on the lower slopes of mountains where peat depth is less than 1m. The vegetation is typically dominated by Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), with Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*) and Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) locally sub-dominant. Other frequent species include Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Heath Milkwort (*Polygala serpyllifolia*), Many-stalked Spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*) and the sedges *Carex echinata* and *C. panicea*. On drier, more steep slopes, dry heath is present with Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) a typical frequent species. Over-grazing by sheep has greatly modified the structure and composition of the heath communities, with a reduction in Heather cover and in places the initiation of soil erosion.

Blanket bog also occurs within this site, some of which is intact and of good quality, with a particularly good example at Caher. Typical bog species are found, including Heather, Purple Moor-grass, Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Bog Asphodel,

Cross-leaved Heath, Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*), the moss *Racomitrium lanuginosum* and locally frequent hummocks of the bog mosses *Sphagnum fuscum* and *S. imbricatum*. In addition, the lichen flora is locally luxuriant and includes the rare *Cladonia rangiferina*. Flushes occur in some areas of the bog, such as on the south slope of Knocknagur. Here, species such as Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*), Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*), Jointed Rush (*Juncus articulatus*), Many-stalked Spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*) and various sedges (*Carex panicea*, *C. demissa* and *C. hostiana*) are found. At this location, the scarce Brown Beak-sedge (*Rhynchospora fusca*) is common in the surrounding bog.

Rhynchosporion vegetation is associated with the blanket bog in a few areas of the site. It is characterised by well developed inter-connecting pool systems with quaking carpets of *Sphagnum*. The pool areas are typically dominated by *Sphagnum cuspidatum* and *S. auriculatum*, with Common Cottongrass, Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), and sundews (*Drosera anglica* and *D. intermedia*). The quaking flat areas are dominated by White-beaked Sedge (*Rhynchospora alba*), Bog Asphodel and Common Cottongrass.

Oligotrophic lakes are well represented in this site, occurring mainly in the south-east near Maam Cross. The principal lakes are Lough Shindilla, Loughanillaun, Lough Nambrackboy, Lough Shannagrena, Maumwee Lough and Lehanagh Lough. Most of these are small to medium sized systems and are of good quality. Typical oligotrophic aquatic species occur, including Quillwort (*Isoetes lacustris*), Pipewort (*Eriocaulon aquaticum*), Water Lobelia (*Lobelia dortmanna*), Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) and Alternate Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum alterniflorum*). Spawning salmon and trout occur in Maumwee Lough, and perhaps others.

Other habitats present include lowland blanket bog, siliceous quartzite scree, exposed rock, upland grassland on peaty and mineral substrates, river valleys and streams, lakes, and woodland on lake islands.

In areas where base-rich rocks occur at altitude, e.g. Maumeen Gap and Lissoughter, scarce plant species such as Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), Alpine Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum alpinum*) and the Red Data Book species, Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), are found. The site supports a range of other scarce arctic-alpine/mountain plants, including Green Spleenwort (*Asplenium viride*), Brittle Bladder-fern (*Cystopteris fragilis*), Holly Fern (*Polystichum lonchitis*), Beech Fern (*Phegopteris connectilis*), Starry Saxifrage (*Saxifraga stellaris*), Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea*), Cowberry (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Dwarf Willow (*Salix herbacea*), Lesser Twayblade (*Listera cordata*), Stiff Sedge (*Carex bigelowii*) and Juniper (*Juniperus communis*).

Several other Red Data Book plant species are also found on the site, including Slender Cottongrass (*Eriophorum gracile*) and Slender Naiad (*Najas flexilis*), both occurring in just single locations. There is an old record from near Maam Cross for Wood Bitter-vetch (*Vicia orobus*), but this has not been seen on the site in recent years.

The threatened species Marsh Clubmoss (*Lycopodiella inundata*) also occurs within the site. All of these species are legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999, and Slender Naiad is also listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive.

The site is very important for salmon, a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The rivers and lakes, and especially the Bealnabrack system, provide high quality spawning and nursery rivers.

Arctic Char has been recorded in Derrynen Lough and Lough Shindilla. However, only in Lough Shindilla are there recent records for this species. This fish species is listed in the Irish Red Data Book as being threatened in Ireland. The Irish Hare has been recorded from the site and is probably widespread; this endemic subspecies is also listed in the Red Data Book as being threatened. Common Frog, also a Red Data Book species, breeds on the site.

Bird species recorded from the site include Dipper, Heron, Kestrel, Meadow Pipit, Raven, Snipe, Stonechat, Wheatear and Woodcock. Peregrine, a species listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, occurs within the site.

The main damaging activities and threats to the Maumturk Mountains are over-grazing, peat cutting and afforestation. Grazing, in particular by sheep, is widespread and quite severe within the site. This has resulted in the erosion of both lowland and mountain blanket bog, and in the modification and destruction of heath communities, particularly in the southern half of the site. Peat cutting, both by hand and by machine, has become more of a problem in recent years but is largely confined to areas of deep, lowland blanket bog. The above activities are the most extensive, but other threats and potentially damaging activities include land drainage and reclamation, fertilization, quarrying and dumping.

This site is of conservation interest as it is a good example of an extensive mountain landscape, containing blanket bog, large areas of heath, siliceous rocky vegetation, oligotrophic lakes and upland grassland. The areas of blanket bog at Teernakill and Caher are largely unaffected by over-grazing and are in very good condition. The presence of rare and protected plant species and of the scarce Arctic Char adds to the interest of the site.