

Site Name: Lough Coy SAC

Site Code: 002117

Lough Coy is situated approximately 6.5 km north-east of Gort in Co. Galway and lies close to the Slieve Aughty hills. The site consists of a small permanent lake in the middle of an almost circular turlough basin. There are drift deposits, as well as outcropping rocks and boulders on the relatively steep side walls, and small areas of scrub towards the top of the basin. Areas of improved grassland above the normal flood line are included in the site for hydrological reasons. The underlying soils consist of alluvial gleys and a gleyed, rendzina-like soil.

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):

[3180] Turloughs*

A large swallow-hole occurs at one side of the basin, slightly above summer water level, and water enters and leaves the turlough mostly through this. During the winter the fluctuation in levels is extreme and there are no emergent plants such as Common Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris*) or Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) in the lake. The turlough experiences a large throughput of water and is dependent on the flows in the tributaries of the Coole River. Lough Coy is an excellent example of a 'riverine' type of turlough, and is in essence the floodplain of an underground river.

In summer the area which is under water contracts to a degree depending on the prevailing weather. Mud is often exposed, and splits into polygonal plates. This is the habitat for a variety of specialised plants such as Mudwort (*Limosella aquatica*), Needle Spike-rush (*Eleocharis acicularis*), Northern Yellow-cress (*Rorippa islandica*) and the liverwort *Riccia cavernosa*. The lakeshore itself has some of these species, along with Knotgrass (*Polygonum aviculare*) and Redshank (*Polygonum persicaria*). Above this is a more continuous cover of the sedges *Carex nigra* and *C. hirta*, Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), Creeping Cinquefoil (*Potentilla reptans*), Corn Mint (*Mentha arvensis*) and Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*). A vegetation characterised by Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Northern Bedstraw (*Galium boreale*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and Adder's-tongue (*Ophioglossum vulgare*) grows amongst the rocks, and also includes both Dog Violet (*Viola canina*) and the uncommon Fen Violet (*V. persicifolia*). The limestone boulders on the upper slopes have a covering of the moss *Cinclidotus fontinaloides*. The fringe of scrub at the edge of the basin is mostly of Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*) and Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), with some Hazel (*Corylus avellana*).

Lough Coy is part of a complex of small sites (along with nearby Blackrock, Ballylee and Bullaunagh turloughs) which supports a nationally important population of Whooper Swans and regionally/locally important numbers of several duck and wader species. Maximum counts at Lough Coy in winter 1995/96 were as follows: Whooper Swan 78, Wigeon 285, Teal 283, Pochard 45, Lapwing 300, Dunlin 120 and Curlew 80. Birds move frequently between the various sites in response to water levels and disturbance. Lough Coy is often one of the few sites in the district which holds water in late summer and autumn, and consequently it is of importance for post-breeding birds and early autumn arrivals, e.g. 132 Mallard were counted in August 1996 and 149 Wigeon in September 1996.

Of particular note is the occurrence of three Red Data Book plant species at this site - Mudwort, Fen Violet and Northern Yellow-cress. Mudwort is legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999.

The main land use within the site is cattle grazing which is quite heavy at the lake margins and on parts of the slopes. There is some removal of gravel from the drift deposits on the north western edge.

Lough Coy is an excellent example of a eutrophic (nutrient-rich) turlough. The extreme water fluctuation supports a distinctive zonation of vegetation and provides many niches for specialist plants. It is an important site for wintering waterfowl.