

Site Name: Blackwater River (Kerry) SAC

Site Code: 002173

This large site is situated on the south-western slopes of the Macgillycuddy Reeks in Co. Kerry and overlooks the Kenmare River inlet. The underlying geology of the area is Old Red Sandstone. The site comprises most of the catchment of the Blackwater River system. Two other main rivers, the Kealduff and Derreendarragh, link into the Blackwater and these rivers are characterised by having numerous tributary streams. The rivers rise at altitudes of up to 600 m and flow quite rapidly over their journey of about 10 km to the sea. Water quality is generally good.

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):

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| [4030] Dry Heath |
| [1024] Kerry Slug (<i>Geomalacus maculosus</i>) |
| [1029] Freshwater Pearl Mussel (<i>Margaritifera margaritifera</i>) |
| [1106] Atlantic Salmon (<i>Salmo salar</i>) |
| [1303] Lesser Horseshoe Bat (<i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i>) |
| [1355] Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>) |

The most frequent habitats within the site are upland grassland and various types of heaths. The grassland is improved to varying extents, especially in the lower parts of the catchment. Common plant species of the less improved grassland include Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*), Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*). On the more peaty, acidic soils, the grassland grades into dry and wet heaths. Typical plant species of the dry heath include Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*), Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) and Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*). The wetter heath areas have a well developed moss layer, with bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.) being frequent. Other plants of the wet heath include Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Purple Moor-grass, Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*), Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*) and Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*). Where the peat is deeper blanket bog has developed, though much of this is now cut away. The bog vegetation is typically dominated by Heather, Purple Moor-grass and bog mosses.

Deciduous woodland occurs along the upper stretches of the Kealduff River and also along the lower part of the Blackwater River, with smaller patches elsewhere within the site. The principal tree species are Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*), willows (*Salix* spp.), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*), the latter especially

along the Blackwater. A scarce plant species which occurs along the Blackwater River is Ivy-leaved Bellflower (*Wahlenbergia hederacea*).

The rivers within the site have important populations of the Freshwater Pearl Mussel. The Pearl Mussel is a species of high conservation importance due to large declines across its range. This has been due largely to a deterioration in water quality, but also to illegal pearl fishing. The Kerry Slug, another species which is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, is also found within this site where suitable habitat exists.

The rivers have good populations of Brown Trout, and provide spawning grounds for Sea Trout and Salmon. Overall, the site is considered of high importance for the conservation of the Salmon.

Otter occurs throughout the site. Another important species which occurs within the site is the Lesser Horseshoe Bat. A derelict stone building at Derreenafoyle is used as a nursery site by the bat and in July 1996, approximately 150 bats were counted in the roost site, which makes it of international importance. The site is close to woodland and scrub which provide both suitable foraging habitat and shelter for bats to commute between this site and the winter hibernation site(s).

The site is visited at times by a number of bird species of conservation importance, notably Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Hen Harrier and Chough. All of these species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.

The main land uses within the site are agriculture (mostly grazing) and forestry. Some of the upland grassland and heath areas have been over-grazed in the past, while the intensity of afforestation within the catchment threatens water quality.

This site is of high conservation value owing to the occurrence of a number of fauna species which are listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The site also supports good examples of dry heath, a habitat that is listed on Annex I of this Directive.