

**Site Name: Leannan River SAC**

**Site Code: 002176**

Situated in north Co. Donegal, this site comprises the River Leannan and its main tributaries and lakes, including Loughs Fern, Gartan and Akibbon. The river from source to sea measures 46 km and drains a catchment area of 282 km<sup>2</sup>. The Bullaba River drains off the Glendowan Mountains and flows into Lough Gartan. The Leannan River flows from Lough Gartan in a north-easterly direction, passes through Lough Fern, and then onwards in an easterly direction through the town of Rathmelton and into Lough Swilly. The main tributaries within the site are the lower Glashagh and Lurgy.

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
- [3130] Oligotrophic to Mesotrophic Standing Waters
- [1029] Freshwater Pearl Mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*)
- [1106] Atlantic Salmon (*Salmo salar*)
- [1355] Otter (*Lutra lutra*)
- [1833] Slender Naiad (*Najas flexilis*)

The river has good water quality and its banks are fringed more or less continuously by deciduous woodland. The adjacent habitat is mainly wet grassland which has been improved to varying degrees for grazing. There is also a good scattering of woodland, mostly deciduous, in the surrounding area.

Gartan Lough and Lough Akibbon are excellent examples of oligotrophic lakes, a habitat type listed in Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. Both are medium sized lakes and have vegetation that includes Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*), Quillwort (*Isoetes lacustris*), Water Lobelia (*Lobelia dortmanna*), Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*), Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*) and the scarce Pillwort (*Pilularia globulifera*). Of particular note is the presence of Slender Naiad (*Najas flexilis*) in Lough Akibbon, as this species is listed in Annex II of the Habitats Directive, as well as on the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015. The other large lake in the site, Lough Fern, is a more mesotrophic lake system.

A range of Red Data Book plant species occur within site - Bird Cherry (*Prunus padus*), Globeflower (*Trollius europaeus*), Heath Cudweed (*Omalotheca sylvatica*),

Small-white Orchid (*Pseudochis albida*) and Pillwort. The last four from this list are legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015.

A principal interest of this site lies in the presence of a population of Freshwater Pearl Mussel, a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive and also protected under the Wildlife Act, 1976. A survey in 1995 estimated the population within the site at about 1,000 individuals, ranging in age from comparatively young (< 5 years) to 80+ years.

The site also supports Atlantic Salmon, another species listed in Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The Leannan is a good spring and grilse salmon river with extensive spawning habitats and good water quality. Lough Gartan has a population of Arctic Char (*Salvelinus alpinus*), a species listed in the Red Data Book.

Otter, a species listed on Annex II, is also known at the site. The site has a population of Leisler's Bat (*Nyctalus leisleri*) (67 individuals in July 1993), also a Red Data Book species.

Red-throated Diver, a species that is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, uses the site.

Relating specifically to the Freshwater Pearl Mussel, the section of river within the site appears to have escaped recent pearl fishing, but the area below the site has recently been fished out. Pearl fishing remains a threat to all sections of this river. A main threat to the overall quality of the site is intensification of agriculture in the surrounding areas which could lead to eutrophication of the lake and river waters. Lake acidification is also a potential threat. Reduction in water quality, lake acidification and introduction of alien fish species are all threats to the population of Arctic Char in Lough Gartan. The population of breeding Red-throated Diver is vulnerable to disturbance from activities such as boating and angling.

This site is of high conservation importance, due to the presence of the Habitats Directive Annex I habitat oligotrophic lakes of sandy plains, as well as the Annex II species Freshwater Pearl Mussel, Otter, Atlantic Salmon and Slender Naiad. A range of Red Data Book plant and animal species also occur.