

Site Name: Gortacarnaun Wood SAC

Site Code: 002180

This site is situated in the foothills of the Slieve Aughty Mountains in Co. Galway, approximately 2 km east of Lough Cutra. The northern boundary is marked by the Owendalulleagh River. Gortacarnaun Wood consists of a substantial area of woodland on sloped ground between approximately 60 and 90 m. The soils are sandy clay and there are many rock outcrops.

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):

[91A0] Old Oak Woodlands

The woodland is classified as the 'Blechno-Quercetum petraeae var. coryletosum' type. Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*) is the dominant species of the canopy, with Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) being frequent. There is a well developed understorey of Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). Other tree and shrub species include Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), Rusty Willow (*Salix cinerea* subsp. *oleifolia*), Blackthorn (*Prunosa spinosa*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) and Aspen (*Populus tremula*). The ground flora appears somewhat restricted, probably due to heavy shading by such species as Holly but also due to grazing pressures. Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*) is a frequent component. Other species include Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), Wood-sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), Hard Fern (*Blechnum spicant*), Great Wood-rush (*Luzula sylvatica*), Irish Spurge (*Euphorbia hiberna*) and violets (*Viola* spp.). Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) forms a low shrub layer in places. The occurrence of Crab Apple (*Malus sylvestris*) is considered a good sign of old woodland status. The bryophyte flora is well developed in places. A notable feature of the wood is the frequency of established oak saplings.

There are indications that the wood has been subjected to exploitation in the past and may have been clear-felled in the early part of 20th century. It seems that the wood continues to be managed for timber extraction. Owing to timber extraction, there are few very old trees. The invasive alien species Rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) occurs in places.

Also found within the site are areas of heath, wetland vegetation and streams. The heath occurs to the south-east of the woodland and is used as rough pasture. There is outcropping rock and the area is being colonised by young Downy Birch trees. The wetland vegetation occurs mainly to the east of the wood. Of most interest is a fen/flushed area with iron stained water. The vegetation is dominated by Sharp-

flowered Rush (*Juncus acutiflorus*), Marsh Horsetail (*Equisetum palustre*) and Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*). Other species include Ragged-Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*), Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*), Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*), Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*), Marsh Cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*), Common Marsh-bedstraw (*Galium palustre*) and Heath Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza maculata*). Saplings of a range of tree species are established in the flush area. Also in this area there is some wet grassland and a stand of reeds (*Phragmites australis*).

Old oak woodlands are scarce in Ireland and the habitat is of particular conservation importance as it is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive.