

Site Name: Glenloughaun Esker SAC

Site Code: 002213

Situated approximately 5 km south-west of Ballinasloe in Co. Galway, this small site comprises a fine example of dry, mostly unimproved, orchid-rich calcareous grassland on an esker ridge. A feature of the site is the somewhat unusual mixture of calcicole and calcifuge species. Leaching of the base-rich substrate of the esker is likely to have given rise to soil conditions suitable for colonisation by calcifuge plants.

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):

[6210] Orchid-rich Calcareous Grassland*
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At Glenloughaun Esker SAC, species typical of dry calcareous grassland which are present include Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*), eyebright (*Euphrasia* sp.), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Cowslip (*Primula veris*), Common Centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*), Common Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*), Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*) and Spring-sedge (*Carex caryophyllea*). The calcifuge component is represented by such species as Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), Heath Milkwort (*Polygala serpyllifolia*), Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*) and Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvatica*).

Of particular interest is the occurrence of a large population of Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*), a scarce orchid of calcareous grassland which is listed in the Red Data Book. Early-purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*) also occurs.

Scrub is present in places within and around the site, with Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) is also present. Any further spread of these species into the grassland areas would be detrimental to habitat quality.

The site is grazed at moderate levels by cattle and some areas have been partly improved through fertilization resulting in a lower plant diversity. Quarrying of the esker for gravel or sand would be very detrimental to the site.

Overall, this grassland site has an excellent species diversity and a very significant population of the scarce Green-winged Orchid. It is typical of the orchid-rich

calcareous grassland habitat and is perhaps one of the best remaining examples in the country.