

Site Name: Ardrahan Grassland SAC

Site Code: 002244

This site lies immediately west and north of Ardrahan in south Co. Galway. It is dominated by a large flat limestone area with a mosaic of calcareous habitats including limestone pavement, alpine heath, Juniper scrub and species rich dry grasslands. In contrast, the south-west of the site consists of a small marl lake and adjoining fens and marshes, with Juniper heath frequent on the higher ground. Soils associated with limestone pavement are generally thin rendzina; deeper pockets are more mineral rich and support limestone grassland and scrub in places.

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):

[4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
[5130] Juniper Scrub
[6210] Orchid-rich Calcareous Grassland*
[8240] Limestone Pavement*

The site contains a good example of limestone pavement, a priority habitat listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, a small though excellent example of the Annex I habitat alpine heath, areas of the Annex I priority habitat orchid-rich calcareous grassland, along with one other Annex I habitat, Juniper scrub. Of particular note is the abundance of Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) and Juniper (*Juniperus communis*) in association with a typical Burren flora including species such as Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), Spring Gentian (*Gentiana verna*) and various orchid species including Fly Orchid (*Ophrys insectifera*). The southern and western part of the area is of significant interest due to the low intensity of management in the area. Both Mountain Avens and Bearberry alpine heaths occur at this site, where they form a mosaic with Juniper scrub, limestone pavement and calcareous grasslands.

This site contains a relatively small but fine example of limestone pavement, which occurs in a mosaic with other habitats. Common species include Blue Moor-grass (*Sesleria albicans*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Flea Sedge (*Carex pulicaris*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) and Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*). Pockets of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) scrub have developed, and there are lesser amounts of Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*).

At the north of the site Juniper scrub forms a dense mat over limestone pavement along with Bearberry and Mountain Avens. Further south it occurs on higher undulating ground over a species rich calcareous heath with Wild Thyme, Carlina Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Bloody Cranesbill (*Geranium sanguineum*), Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Heather and occasional Bearberry.

Areas of orchid-rich calcareous grassland are found across the site, interspersed with areas of scrub, pavement and less species-rich grassland. At least eleven orchid species have been recorded from the site, many in good numbers. The best areas of grassland are very species rich, and support an excellent suite of calcareous indicators. Species such as Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Squinancywort (*Asperula cynanchica*), Spring-sedge (*Carex caryophyllea*), Glaucus Sedge (*Carex flacca*), Common Knapweed (*Centaurea nigra*), Eyebright (*Euphrasia officinalis* agg.), Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Juniper, Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*), Yellow-rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), Blue Moor-grass, Devil's-bit Scabious and Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*) have been commonly recorded. Species such as Mountain Avens and Spring Gentian are also present, and the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015 species Wood Bitter-vetch (*Vicia orobus*), has been recently documented. Many areas of orchid-rich grassland are however becoming swamped and overtaken by Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*).

Brackloon Lough occurs in the south of the site and is a fine example of a small shallow marl lake, one of very few in this locality. This open lake has a pronounced whitish appearance and a flora of lime-encrusted Thread-leaved Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus trichophyllus*) and a little Curled Pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*) occurs. Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) is locally abundant on the shoreline, where it grows with Many-stalked Spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), Pink Water-speedwell (*Veronica catenata*), Lesser Water-plantain (*Baldellia ranunculoides*) and some Amphibious Bistort (*Polygonum amphibium*). Although small, the lake seems in a relatively natural state.

There are two small turloughs present within the site. Both are well grazed and consist of a short-turf peaty vegetation with Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*), Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*), Creeping Buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*) (turlough form), Lesser Marshwort (*Apium inundatum*), Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*), Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) and Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*), along with Common Marsh-bedstraw (*Galium palustre*), Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Jointed Rush (*Juncus articulatus*) and Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*).

Bird species recorded from the site include Snipe, Mute Swan and Curlew.

Land use at this site consists mainly of the traditional practise of winter grazing by cattle. This is a low intensity farming practise generally confined to the Burren in Ireland and one that is vital to the maintenance of the high scientific interest of this site. However, recent agricultural improvement has damaged the scientific interest of part of the site through loss of habitat in the turlough and limestone pavement areas.

Intensification of the land usage around Brackloon Lough could lead to a deterioration in the water quality of the lake. A modification of the current grazing regime is needed to help deal with the spread of Purple Moor-grass in the best of the grassland areas of the site.

Ardrahan Grassland contains a mosaic of calcareous habitats including good examples of four habitats listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive - limestone pavement, alpine heath, orchid-rich calcareous grassland and Juniper scrub. The presence of a relatively unpolluted marl lake adds further diversity and interest of this important site.