

Site Name: Ballyprior Grassland SAC

Site Code: 002256

Ballyprior Grassland, 4 km south of the village of Stradbally in Co. Laois, is located at the north end of the Castlecomer Plateau on largely limestone bedrock. The soils of the area are generally thin and well drained, varying from a deeper sandy loam in lower places (10-20 cm depth), to thin or stony soil over local drift (5-10 cm depth) on the elevated plateau.

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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Ballyprior Grassland SAC contains old grassland habitat of high quality and the site is important due to the loss of similar habitat in surrounding areas. The site has an exceptionally rich myco-flora (fungi) which is a good indication of grassland quality (in terms of continuity, lack of disturbance and low nutrient status).

In the grassland there is abundant cover of grasses and herbs with a high species diversity, but low bryophyte cover. Quaking-grass (*Briza media*) is an abundant species, reflecting the calcareous conditions, in association with abundant Sheep's-fescue (*Festuca ovina*), Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*), Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*) and Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*). Other species present include Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*), the sedges *Carex caryophyllea*, *C. flacca* and *C. pulicaris*, and Field Wood-rush (*Luzula campestris*). The herb-rich, calcicole flora is characterised by Early-purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Hieracium pilosella*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*), Oxeye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), Rough Hawkbit (*Leontodon hispidus*), Carline Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*) and Autumn Gentian (*Gentianella amarella*), with Heath Dog-violet (*Viola canina*), Mountain Everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*) and Maidenhair Spleenwort (*Asplenium trichomanes*) prevalent around rock out-crops. On deeper soils, Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*) and Pignut (*Conopodium majus*) are frequent.

The presence in certain places of species such as Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*), Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) and Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*) indicates variation in conditions with paucity of minerals, and adds to the species diversity. Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) scrub, with a well

developed ground flora, occurs on the extreme west margins of the grassland. There are also several ponds within the site adding further habitat diversity.

The Irish Hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*) occurs in the site. This endemic sub-species is listed in the Red Data Book and is legally protected under the Wildlife Act, 1976.

Ballyprior Grassland was traditionally managed as a commonage for grazing of cattle and horses. But the recent division of the lands into private holdings has led to a drive to improve the agricultural quality and output of these lands. Much of the farmland in surrounding areas is improved. Recent damage has occurred to parts of the site and some damaged habitat has been excluded. Semi-improved grassland has developed from enrichment and fertilising in the west of the site, with persistent Common Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) in places. South of the site, recent afforestation has resulted in loss of contiguous grassland habitat.

Ballyprior Grassland is an important example of orchid-rich calcareous grassland, a habitat listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The site contains a diverse flora and an exceptionally rich myco-flora. This site is also important in the context of the loss of most other similar species rich grasslands in the area to agricultural improvement.