

**Site Name: Silvermines Mountains West SAC**

**Site Code: 002258**

Silvermines Mountains West SAC is situated to the north of Keeper Hill, about 10 km south of Nenagh in Co. Tipperary. Reaching an altitude of 489 m, this rather steep ridge of Old Red Sandstone is visibly very prominent in the landscape when viewed from the Nenagh to Limerick road. The site includes the summit and slopes, mostly above 200 m, to the west of an extensively afforested area south of the town of Silvermines.

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):

[4010] Wet Heath
[4030] Dry Heath
[6130] Calaminarian Grassland

The main habitats that occur within Silvermines Mountains West SAC are heath (mostly wet heath but some dry heath) and unimproved upland grassland. The wet heath is particularly well developed with tall stands of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and a high cover of bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.). Other species of wet heath include Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), cottongrasses (*Eriophorum angustifolium* and *E. vaginatum*), Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) and Heath Rush (*Juncus squarrosus*). Smaller areas of more species-rich wet heath with Hard Fern (*Blechnum spicant*), Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*) and Great Wood-rush (*Luzula sylvatica*) also occur. From east to west there is a gradation from wet to dry heath, and from peaty to mineral soil. Dry heath, characterised by Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*) and Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*), is also found on the more steeply sloping ground below the summit ridge and on outcropping rock exposures. Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) has invaded dry heath areas on the sides of some of the streams. Patchy remnants of blanket bog occur on the summit plateau in places and there is evidence of extensive former peat-cutting here.

Calaminarian Grassland vegetation is extensive (0.9 ha) and well developed at Shallee, an extensive old lead mine on the northern side of the site, with much the largest of the four Irish populations of the rare moss *Ditrichum plumbicola* and a tiny amount of the rare liverwort *Cephaloziella nicholsonii*. Threats are obvious from ongoing restoration work on an engine house ruin, and existence of large areas of derelict land with rusting oil drums, cables and dangerous open adits and workings.

Upland grassland is widespread on the lower mountain slopes, in many of the upper fields and on the steep south-facing slopes. Grassland also extends up onto the ridge at the western end of the site. Common species that characterise this acid grassland vegetation include Sheep's-fescue (*Festuca ovina*), Mat-grass, Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*), Germander Speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*), Tormentil, Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*) and a range of mosses such as *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*, *Hylocomium splendens* and *Brachythecium rutabulum*. Parts of the lower southern slopes are covered with dense Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*).

A number of small streams and flushes descend the slopes. These sometimes support a richer vegetation, with plants such as rushes (*Juncus effusus* and *J. articulatus*), sedges (*Carex nigra*, *C. panicea*, *C. lepidocarpa*, *C. echinata*, *C. ovalis* and *C. pulicaris*) and a variety of herbs, including Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Ragged-Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*), Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*), Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*) and Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*).

The site is also important for birds. Up to 11 pairs of Hen Harriers are known to use these uplands as part of a wider range between Silvermines and Slieve Felim to the south. Hen Harriers are uncommon birds, and are listed under Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. The Silvermines provide useful foraging habitat for some of these birds.

The vegetation at this site is in good condition, with low grazing pressure throughout and no signs of over-grazing. One fifth of the site was burned in 2003 and there is evidence of former burning in another fifth. Former peat-cutting has occurred on the summit plateau and parts of the northern slopes. Afforestation, which is widespread to the east of the site, remains the greatest threat.

The site is of conservation importance for its heath and grassland vegetation, and as a foraging area for Hen Harrier, and is one of the only extensive unplanted uplands remaining in north Tipperary.