

Site Name: Askeaton Fen Complex SAC

Site Code: 002279

Askeaton Fen Complex consists of a number of small fen areas to the east and south-east of Askeaton in Co. Limerick. This area has a number of undulating hills, some of which are quite steep, and is underlain by Lower Carboniferous Limestone. At the base of the hills a series of fens/reedbeds/loughs can be found, often in association with marl or peat deposits. At the south-east of Askeaton, both Cappagh and Ballymorisheen fens are surrounded by large cliff-like rocky limestone 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):

[7210] <i>Cladium</i> Fens*
[7230] Alkaline Fens

In Askeaton Fen Complex SAC a diversity of fen types are represented in a gradation from open water to drier seepage areas. One of the more important fen types, *Cladium* fen, which contains Great Fen-sedge (*Cladium mariscus*), occurs in various forms and is the most common fen type within the SAC. It is associated with wet conditions generally not >25 cm deep and can be found in mono-dominant stands growing on a marl base, such as at Feereagh and Mornane Loughs, and in the fen in the townland of Mornane. It can also be co-dominant with Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) in slightly drier conditions, such as in Deegerty, Blind Lough and Dromlohan. It is also found in association with alkaline fen species such as Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) where it grows on a peaty substrate. *Cladium* fen is indicative of extremely base rich conditions. Typical species seen growing with the Great Fen-sedge include pondweeds (*Potamogeton* spp.), Marsh Horsetail (*Equisetum palustre*), Water Horsetail (*E. fluviatile*), Lesser Water-parsnip (*Berula erecta*), Lesser Marshwort (*Apium inundatum*), Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*), particularly where marl is present, and Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*). One such area of fen within the site is the only known location in Ireland for the water beetle *Hygrotus decoratus* and is also known to contain *Hydroporus scalesianus*, a rare water beetle indicative of undisturbed fens. At the edge of some of the Great Fen-sedge fens, particularly where improved grassland is not present, there is typically found a gradation to wet marsh, which in turn grades into wet grassland. These transition habitats add to the ecological diversity of the site.

Alkaline fen is characterised by the presence of Black Bog-rush in association with brown mosses and a small sedge community. The soil is permanently waterlogged but generally not flooded unless for a short period. Examples of this fen type are

found at the edge of almost all the sites, but its extent is much less than the Great Fen-sedge fen type within the SAC. The fen in the townlands of Moig West and Graigues is a good example of alkaline fen. Species seen growing with Black Bog-rush include Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Long-stalked Yellow-sedge (*Carex lepidocarpa*), Carnation Sedge (*C. panicea*), rushes (*Juncus* spp.) and an abundance of brown mosses, including *Campylium stellatum*, *Ctenidium molluscum*, *Calliergon cuspidatum* and *Bryum pseudotriquetrum*. This fen type also grades into marsh and wet grassland.

Scrub and woodland is present on high ground in some areas, such as Ballymorisheen, Blind Lough, Ballyvogue, Dromlohan and Lough Feereagh. Species include Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), willow (*Salix* sp.), Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). This is a useful faunal habitat particularly as it is adjacent to reedbeds and fens.

A small area of limestone species-rich grassland is found to the north of Balinvirick fen. Species found which are typically associated with the habitat include the Early-purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*), Carlina Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*) and Mountain Everlasting (*Antennaria dioica*).

Snipe use the tall marsh vegetation at the edge of the fens. Birds of prey such as Sparrowhawk feed over the reedbeds and scrubland areas of the site.

Land use in the area is quite intensive, with improved grassland extending down relatively steep slopes to the edge of the fens/loughs. New drainage or the deepening of existing drains poses a threat to the aquatic habitats at the site. In some instances, the fens appear to be drying out.

This site is of conservation value because it supports two fen types, each of which exhibit many sub-types. *Cladium* fen is listed as an Annex I priority habitat under the E.U. Habitats Directive. These wetland habitats of fen, reedbeds, open water, marsh and wet grassland are also valuable in that they supply a refuge for fauna in an otherwise intensively managed countryside.