

Site Name: Carrowbaun, Newhall and Ballylee Turloughs SAC

Site Code: 002293

The Carrowbaun, Newhall and Ballylee Turloughs SAC complex is a group of three turloughs which are hydrologically linked in times of high flood. It is situated in the vicinity of the Thoor Ballylee Interpretive Centre, 3 km west of Peterswell and 6 km north-east of Gort, in the limestone lowlands of south Co. Galway. The site is at the southern end of a larger complex of turloughs which includes the SACs Lough Coy (2117) and Peterswell (318). It is usually the last of these to flood.

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):

[3180] Turloughs*

The lowest part of Carrowbaun turlough is at its northern end and an artificial channel links the marsh with the Ballylee River. At the north end of Ballylee there is a swallow-hole (Pollaleen) which introduces water from Lough Coy. The Ballylee River is joined from the south (via the castle) by the Streamstown River and water sinks into the channel floor, or disappears in a tangle of scrub at Pollanoween further south. Newhall lies in a broad peaty depression with gravel deposits at the southern end. At high-water levels Newhall floods into Carrowbaun West.

The northern end of Carrowbaun is covered by a wet Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*) community which remains wet all year. Plants indicating this wetness are Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*), Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), Marsh Cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*), Water Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*) and Marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*). On the drier edges Brown Sedge (*Carex disticha*), Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and Marsh Ragwort (*Senecio aquaticus*) occur. Turlough scrub at the northern end contains Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*) and some Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). This grades up into dry rocky Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) scrub with a good ground flora.

The southern end of Carrowbaun floods less often and is largely modified by fertilisation and heavy grazing. Hairy Sedge (*Carex hirta*), Common Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) and Autumn Hawkbit (*Leontodon autumnalis*) characterise this vegetation with frequent Perennial Rye-grass (*Lolium perenne*), White Clover (*Trifolium repens*) and Timothy (*Phleum pratense*) indicating semi-improvement.

Newhall is rather similar to Carrowbaun though there is less intensification and more poaching. Animal treading has exposed the peaty soil and tussocks of a drier

Carnation Sedge-Glaucous Sedge (*Carex panicea*-*C. flacca*) community occur amongst a wetter Floating Sweet-grass/starwort (*Glyceria fluitans*-*Callitriche* spp.) community.

Ballylee contains more turlough scrub than the other two sites, especially around the Pollanoween sink which is overgrown by a tangle of shrubs. Tall herbs such as Meadowsweet, Common Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) grow beneath Buckthorn, Blackthorn, Hazel, Guelder-rose (*Viburnum opulus*) and Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*). Ash occurs in turlough scrub along the central ridge. There is some dry limestone pavement along this ridge.

Much of the rest of Ballylee is uniform wet grassland with, for instance, Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*) and Crested Dog's-tail (*Cynosurus cristatus*). In places, semi-improvement has increased the percentage of Perennial Rye-grass.

Carrowbaun and Newhall are part of a complex of neighbouring turloughs and, because they are the last to flood completely, there is a concentration of waterbirds at certain times. During monthly surveys in the winters of 1995/6 and 1996/7 Carrowbaun and Newhall was noted for its diversity and numbers of waterbirds when in flood. The maximum counted was 1,740 (involving 13 species). Maximum counts during this period were as follows (a count made on 18th December 2000 is given in parenthesis): Mute Swan 4 (6); Bewick's swan 40 (0); Whooper swan 141 (118); Wigeon 356 (270); Mallard 22 (15); Teal 55 (25); Pochard 35 (9); Tufted duck 38 (16); Golden plover 400 (0); Lapwing 1,000 (0); Dunlin 140 (30); Curlew 87 (35). Whooper Swan and Bewick's Swan are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive and these numbers are of national importance. This site has been of importance for wintering swans since at least the 1970s. Dunlin are very scarce on inland waters and their presence here is of note.

Ballylee Castle, a visitors' centre, is included in the site. A pair of Kestrels nest and have successfully bred at the top of the Castle.

A breeding population of the Lesser Horseshoe Bat, an Annex II species under the E.U. Habitats Directive, has been recorded at the castle regularly since 1996. Counts for 1996 were 20+ and for 2000 were 27. Twenty roosting Long-eared Bats (*Plecotus auritus*) were also recorded. In addition, according to the literature, the castle is a known Pipistrelle Bat (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) site. These three bat species are listed as Internationally Important in the Irish Vertebrate Red Data Book.

The vegetation of Carrowbaun, Newhall and Ballylee has been largely modified by drainage works, fertilization and over-grazing, which reduce their botanical value. However, the wet plant communities in north Carrowbaun and the turlough scrub are important botanically. The presence of a high diversity of waterbirds and the roost of Lesser Horseshoe Bats adds to the ecological interest of the site.