

Site Name: Williamstown Turloughs SAC

Site Code: 002296

Williamstown Turloughs are a suite of turloughs - Curragh, Polleagh (and Polleagh West) and Gortduff - the first two of which are situated alongside the R380 road about 7 km west of Williamstown, Co. Galway. They lie within a complex of esker ridges and raised and valley peats, close to the Shannon - Corrib watershed. Drainage is westwards. To the north-west is the Old Red Sandstone ridge of Slieve Dart and sandstone is probably present at, or close, to the north-west side of Curragh turlough.

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*

Polleagh Lough is an oligotrophic turlough. It has a permanent very shallow lake which is probably dependent for its existence in summer on a perched water-table fed only by water from its surrounding small catchment area. This catchment area includes a significant area to the east of the main road. Polleagh Lough is joined to Polleagh West at times of high flood, completely surrounding a low hill of glacial drift. In summer, Polleagh West almost dries out. Curragh is similar in many ways and is in hydraulic continuity with Polleagh. Gortduff is a small well-grazed, elongated and undulating steep-sided turlough with a number of sink-holes. It has a permanent pond (at its south-eastern end) which is also dependent on a perched water-table.

Polleagh has a particularly diverse vegetation with eleven true turlough plant communities. Reedbeds with Common Reed (*Phragmites communis*) and Common Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris* subsp. *lacustris*) cover a significant part of the southern end. Marl pond vegetation with Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*), Lesser Water-plantain (*Baldellia ranunculoides*) and Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*) occur where a layer of marl deposition covers a bare peat substrate, especially in the northern and eastern shorelines. Wet annual vegetation occurs along the narrow parts of Polleagh West which contains a small number of specialised annual plants such as Redshank (*Polygonum persicaria*), Red Goosefoot (*Chenopodium rubrum*), Marsh Cudweed (*Filaginella uliginosa*) and Northern Yellow-cress (*Rorippa islandica*). Amphibious Bistort (*Polygonum amphibium*) is quite widespread in the turlough and occurs as almost pure stands with Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*) and the moss *Fontinalis antipyretica*. Much of the remainder of the turlough comprises a low growing sward of mixed sedges (*Carex* spp.).

Curragh has a less diverse vegetation with five true turlough plant communities. Pure stands of Amphibious Bistort with *Fontinalis antipyretica* occupy much of the small hollows and larger bays close to the lake margins. Elsewhere sedge grassland is widespread.

The steep sides of Gortduff show a good zonation from Amphibious Bistort at the base to a dry Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*) community which merges into semi-improved and improved grassland around the upper margins.

For a small site this suite of turloughs is considered to have a good diversity of wintering waterbirds. Peak numbers at Polleagh during twice monthly counts from December 1995 to April 1996 were as follows: Whooper Swan 8; Mute Swan 3; Mallard 34; Wigeon 230; Teal 20; Shoveler 4; Tufted Duck 17; Pochard 5; Goldeneye 2; Lapwing 1,190; Golden Plover 1,550; Curlew 155; Dunlin 31; Redshank 2; Moorhen 6 and Black-headed Gull 110. Curragh had lesser numbers of all species but there is likely to be frequent interchange between the two turloughs. During a further site visit (31/01/2001) a similar range and number were recorded (numbers refer to Polleagh, Curragh and Gortduff combined): Whooper Swan 9; Mute Swan 2; Mallard 55; Wigeon 200; Teal 30; Tufted Duck 8; Lapwing 800; Golden Plover 150; Curlew 55; Dunlin 25 and Redshank 1. A good number of waterbirds were present in grassy pools in the north of Polleagh where the two turloughs join at high-water levels. In 1996 Polleagh and Curragh held significant numbers of breeding waders: Snipe 10 (drummers); Lapwing 12 pairs; Redshank 7 pairs and Ringed Plover 2 pairs. In addition, small numbers of Tufted Duck, Mallard, Little Grebes and Moorhen also breed.

The Annex II species Otter (*Lutra lutra*) was recorded at the site in 1996. Fish have been reported in both Polleagh and Curragh Loughs.

Drainage works which have damaged the site were carried out privately in 1996 and are still effective to date. Drainage at the eastern end of Polleagh has been reversed and water to the turlough is being lost at times of high flood. Water input from the small catchment is also being lost during the summer. The long term effect on this suite of turloughs has not yet been assessed.

An assessment of the ecological value of these turloughs, using a recognised evaluation system, ranks Polleagh and Curragh combined as being the 11th most valuable turlough in Ireland in terms of nature conservation value. On this basis the Williamstown Turloughs are evaluated as being of international importance, meriting strict conservation measures. Northern Yellow-cress is a Red Data Book species and a characteristic turlough species. Golden Plover have reached nationally important numbers. Lapwing has been in decline in Ireland as a breeding bird since the early 1990s though a substantial population occurred here in 1996. Ringed plovers are scarce as an inland breeding species. Thus the occurrence of all of these species adds further to the importance of this site.