



Site Name: River Finn SAC

Site Code: 002301

This site comprises almost the entire freshwater element of the River Finn and its tributaries the Corlacky, the Reelan sub-catchment, the Sruhamboy, Elatagh, Cummirk and Glashagh, and also includes Lough Finn, where the river rises. The spawning grounds at the headwaters of the Mourne and Derg Rivers, Loughs Derg and Belshade and the tidal stretch of the Foyle north of Lifford to the border are also part of the site. The Finn and Reelan, rising in the Bluestack Mountains, drain a catchment area of 195 square miles. All of the site is in Co. Donegal. The underlying geology is Dalradian Schists and Gneiss for the most part though quartzites and Carboniferous Limestones are present in the vicinity of Castlefinn. The hills around Lough Finn are also on quartzite. The mountains of Owendoo and Cloghervaddy are of granite felsite and other intrusive rocks rich in silica. There are many towns along the river but not within the site, including Lifford, Castlefinn, Stranolar and Ballybofey.

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):

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| [3110] Oligotrophic Waters containing very few minerals |
| [4010] Wet Heath |
| [7130] Blanket Bogs (Active)* |
| [7140] Transition Mires |
| [1106] Atlantic Salmon (<i>Salmo salar</i>) |
| [1355] Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>) |

Upland blanket bog occurs throughout much of the upland area of the site along the edges of the river. However, more extensive examples are found at Tullytresna and in the Owendoo/Cloghervaddy bogs. The blanket bog is dominated by Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.). Pool and hummock systems are a feature of the flatter areas, with Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), mosses (*Racomitrium lanuginosum*, *Sphagnum capillifolium* and *S. papillosum*), lichens (e.g. *Cladonia portentosa*) and the liverwort *Pleurozia purpurea* occurring abundantly on the hummocks. The scarce bog boss *S. imbricatum* is a component of some hummocks. *Sphagnum magellanicum* is found in wet flats by pools, while *S. cuspidatum* occurs abundantly within the pools themselves.

Towards the base of the northern slope and on the southern slope at Tullytresna flushes occur with bright green lawns of bog mosses and abundant rushes, particularly Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*) and Jointed Rush (*J. articulatus*). On the summit is an undulating system of hummocks and hollows, and Heather is more common.

A valley bog fills the low lying areas to the north-east of Lough Finn which is dominated by Deergrass, cottongrass, Purple Moor-grass and Heather. Mossy hummocks occur in the wetter areas.

Transition mires (or quaking bogs or scraws) occur at several locations, usually at the interface between bog and lake or stream. In Owendoo/Cloghervaddy there are many examples of small lakes south of Belshade. Some of the lakes contain floating scraws of the bog moss *S. recurvum*, Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*), Bog-sedge (*C. limosa*) and Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*). West of Owendoo River there is an extensive area of scraw with a similar suite of species but in differing abundances. Quaking areas are also associated with blanket bog at Cronamuck and Cronakerny. At Cronamuck, a small, level flushed area occurs at the base of a slope leading into a flushed stream. Diversity, including diagnostic species, is good.

Wet heath is associated with the blanket bog throughout the site and is found on the shallow peats and better drained slopes. In Owendoo/Cloghervaddy this is mostly characterised by Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Heather, Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*), Heath Rush (*Juncus squarrosus*) and Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*). The heath often grades into flush vegetation dominated by Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*).

Lowland oligotrophic lakes are found at Loughs Finn, Belshade and Derg, as well as in many of the smaller lakes within the site. Lough Derg is a large oligotrophic lake situated north of Pettigo. An extensive area of blanket bogs and conifer plantations make up the lake catchment. Typical species seen at the three lakes include a sparse covering of Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) along the lake shores, Water Lobelia (*Lobelia dortmanna*), the moss *Fontinalis antipyretica*, Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*) and Water Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*), with Bulbous Rush (*Juncus bulbosus*) and Broad-leaved Pondweed (*P. natans*) in the margins.

On the tidal stretches within the site the main habitats are the river itself, mudflats and the extensive reedbeds that have colonised the former mudflats. The habitats found are typically freshwater in nature. The large reedbeds are dominated by Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), with some Bulrush (*Typha latifolia*), Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) and Tufted Hair-grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*). Succession is demonstrated nicely within a small area, with the change from mudflats to reedbeds, and on to willow (*Salix* spp.) and Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) scrub.

Other habitats present within the site include a fringe of wet grassland/marsh along some river stretches dominated by rushes, grading into species-rich marsh in which sedges are common. Among the other species found in this habitat are Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*), Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and Soft Rush. Around Lough Derg wet fen type vegetation occurs in places with

Purple Moor-grass, Bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*), Jointed Rush and Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*). There is also some Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*), Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) and Marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*).

Where banks are steeper, particularly around Lough Derg and along the deep mountain valley of the upper stretches, dry, steep slopes support Great Wood-rush (*Luzula sylvatica*), Heather, Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*), Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*). There are areas of scrub surrounding parts of the lake margins, along the channels and on the ungrazed islands. These are composed of Alder, willows, Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) and Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*). Understorey plants include abundant ferns and mosses. The rare Narrow-leaved Helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*) occurs on the shores of Lough Derg. This species is listed in the Irish Red Data Book and is protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999.

Small pockets of conifer plantation, close to the lakes and along the strip both sides of the rivers, are included in the site.

Lough Finn holds a population of Arctic Char (*Salvelinus alpinus*). This fish is a relative of salmon and trout, and represents an arctic-alpine element in the Irish fauna. In Ireland this fish occurs only in a few cold, stony, oligotrophic lakes. It is listed in the Irish Red Data Book as threatened. The Arctic Char in Lough Finn are unusual in that they are dwarfed. These only occur in one other lake in Ireland, Lough Coornasahom, Co. Kerry and they are therefore of national importance. Arctic Char are very sensitive to water quality and therefore changes in the catchment such as afforestation should be avoided to maintain this population. Lough Derg is also important for Arctic Char, though the species was last recorded there in 1990/91.

The Finn system is one of Ireland's premier salmon waters. Although the Atlantic Salmon (*Salmo salar*) is still fished commercially in Ireland, it is considered to be endangered or locally threatened elsewhere in Europe and is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. Commercial netting on the Foyle does not begin until June and this gives spring fish a good opportunity to get into the Finn. The Finn is important in an international context in that its populations of spring salmon appear to be stable, while they are declining in many areas of Ireland and Europe. The salmon fishing season is 1st March to 15th September. Fishing for spring salmon is best east of Stranolar while the grilse run through to the upper reaches. The grilse run peaks here, depending on water, usually in mid June. The estimated rod catch from the Finn is approximately 500-800 spring salmon and 4,000 grilse annually, producing about 40% of the total Foyle count. The Loughs Agency has a management regime in place called the 'control of fishing regulations'. If enough salmon are not past the counter at Killygordon at a certain key date then both the angling and commercial fishing can be closed for set periods.

The site is also important for Otter (*Lutra lutra*), another species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. It is widespread throughout the system. In addition, the site also supports many more of the mammal species occurring in Ireland. Those

which are listed in the Irish Red Data Book include the Badger and the Irish Hare. Common Frog, another Red Data Book species, also occurs within the site.

Golden Plover, Peregrine and Merlin, threatened species listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, breed in the upland areas of the site. The Red Listed species Red Grouse occurs on the site, while the scarce Ring Ouzel, another Red List species, is also known to occur.

Agriculture, with particular emphasis on grazing, is the main land use along the Finn and its tributaries. Much of the grassland is unimproved but improved grassland and silage are also present, particularly east of Ballybofey. The spreading of slurry and fertiliser poses a threat to the water quality of this salmonid river, particularly in this region as the river is subject to extensive flooding. Fishing is a main tourist attraction on the Finn and there are a large number of Angler Associations, some with a number of beats. Fishing stands and styles have been erected in places. The River Finn is a designated Salmonid Water under the E.U. Freshwater Fish Directive. Other aspects of tourism such as boating are concentrated around Lough Finn.

Afforestation is ongoing, particularly along the western sections of the site adjacent to the headwaters and around the shores of Lough Derg. Recent planting has been carried out along the Cronamuck River. Forestry poses a threat in that sedimentation and acidification occurs. Sedimentation can cover the gravel beds resulting in a loss of suitable spawning grounds.

The site supports important populations of a number of species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, and several habitats listed on Annex I of this Directive, as well as examples of other important habitats. Blanket bog is a rare habitat type in Europe and receives priority status on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The overall diversity and ecological value of the site is increased by the presence of populations of several rare or threatened birds, mammals, fish and plants.