

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: LOUGH OWEL SPA

SITE CODE: 004047

Lough Owel is a medium- to large-sized lake in Co. Westmeath, with a length of *c.* 6 km along its long axis and a maximum width of 3 km. It is fed by a number of small streams and the main outflow is to the Royal Canal. Water is relatively shallow, with a maximum depth of 22 m. Overlying Carboniferous limestone, Lough Owel is one of the most important examples of a limestone lake in the Midlands. The water is moderately hard, alkaline and virtually colourless. The lake appears to be relatively unproductive with low levels of orthophosphate and moderate chlorophyll concentrations. The lake is classified as a mesotrophic system and its status has been stable in recent years.

Aquatic vegetation includes a number of stoneworts (*Chara* spp., notably *C. denudata* and *C. tomentosa* which are Red Data Book species). The rocky nature of the shoreline has given rise to marginal vegetation which is patchy and sparse. Apart from some reedswamp formed by Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) and Common Clubrush (*Scirpus lacustris*), shoreline vegetation is dominated by occasional patches of Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*). Areas of marsh and fen occur above the shoreline in the northern and south-western corners of the lake. Several small islands occur in the southern sector.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Shoveler and Coot. The E.U. Birds Directive pays particular attention to wetlands and, as these form part of this SPA, the site and its associated waterbirds are of special conservation interest for Wetlands & Waterbirds.

Lough Owel is one of the most important Midland lakes for wintering waterfowl, with nationally important populations of Shoveler (142) and Coot (1,825) - figures given are mean peaks for the five seasons 1995/96-1999/00. The populations for both of these species represent a significant proportion (*c.* 4.7% and 6.5%) of the respective All-Ireland totals. The lake is utilised by Pochard (291), Tufted Duck (227) and Goldeneye (75). The lake has been used as a roost by the internationally important Midland lakes Greenland White-fronted Goose population (200 recorded at the site in 2004/05). The lake also supports populations of Little Grebe (16), Great Crested Grebe (18) and Cormorant (32). Lough Owel is one of the most important fishing lakes in the Midlands and is especially good for Trout. The lake also holds an important population of White-clawed Crayfish (*Austropotamobius pallipes*), a species that is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive.

Lough Owel supports nationally important populations of two species, Shoveler and Coot. It is also notable as it is used as a roost site on occasion by the internationally important Midlands Greenland White-fronted Goose flock. Greenland White-fronted

Goose is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Lough Owel is a Ramsar Convention site.

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