

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: OWENDUFF/NEPHIN COMPLEX SPA

SITE CODE: 004098

This large area of relatively intact blanket bog and mountains incorporates the catchment of the Owenduff River and much of the Nephin Beg Mountain range in Co. Mayo. Lough Feeagh, which is located approximately 5 km north-northwest of Newport, lies at the south-east corner of the site. From here, the site extends northwards to the Owenmore River and almost to the town of Bangor Erris, and westwards to the townland of Ballycroy. Within the site the terrain varies enormously, from the peaks of the Nephin Beg Mountains, which reach a maximum altitude of 717 m, to the low-lying floodplain of the Owenduff River in the western sector. Along its southern and easterly limits, the site is bounded by coniferous plantations and/or the high mountain slopes of the Nephin Bogs. Along its northern and western margins, the site is fringed by agricultural land reclaimed from bog or from wet floodplain vegetation.

The upper slopes of the mountains support wet heath, upland grassland and cliff vegetation. The lower mountain slopes are covered with blanket bog, with a broad representation of good quality bog habitats occurring.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Merlin and Golden Plover.

The Owenduff/Nephin Complex SPA supports an excellent diversity of bird species characteristic of blanket bog and mountain habitats.

Merlin nests within the site (population conservatively estimated at between 4 and 8 pairs). This small falcon has a preference for heather bog areas, particularly marginal zones between blanket bog and heath/upland grassland. The Merlins hunt small birds, especially Meadow Pipits. A nationally important population of Golden Plover also breeds within the site (15 pairs in 2004).

The high cliffs and crags provide good nesting sites for Peregrine (3 known breeding territories) whilst the extensive boglands provide foraging terrain.

Greenland White-fronted Goose also utilises the site in winter. The population is a sub-flock of the main Bog of Erris population (4 other sub-flocks). Eighteen bogland feeding areas, scattered over 200 km², are known as well as some wet grassland and lake sites. The birds utilise the many small lakes and the open bogland for roosting.

Red Grouse occurs on the bogs throughout the site, particularly where there is a good cover of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), which provides the principal food for the bird. A recent study showed that the species occurs at low densities, with 149-220 birds

estimated to occur within the site. Red Grouse is considered to be a declining species in Ireland and is a Red List species.

Widespread bird species which occur within the site include Meadow Pipit, Skylark, Wheatear, Raven, Hooded Crow and Kestrel.

The Owenduff/Nepin Complex SPA provides one of the best examples of blanket bog and upland bird communities in the country. Of particular importance is that there are four regularly-occurring species that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive (Greenland White-fronted Goose, Merlin, Peregrine and Golden Plover), as well as a good population of Red Grouse. Much of the site is a National Park and the Owenduff catchment is a Ramsar Convention site.