

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: SLIEVE BEAGH SPA

SITE CODE: 004167

The Slieve Beagh SPA comprises much of the eastern and south-eastern sectors of the Slieve Beagh upland area that extends from County Monaghan into Northern Ireland.

Mountain blanket bog is well developed at the higher altitudes and especially at Eshbrack (peak of 365 m). The vegetation is largely dominated by Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), Ling Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Hare's-tail Cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*), Common Cottongrass (*E. angustifolium*), Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) and a range of mosses such as *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *S. papillosum*, *S. tenellum* and *Hypnum cupressiforme*. Elsewhere the bog is mostly cutover and there are also wet and dry heaths present. In total, bog and heath occupies 43% of the site. The mid-slopes are afforested (40% of site), with plantations of various ages (open canopy, closed canopy, clear-fell). The remainder of the site is rough or marginal grassland (16%). Some of the old field systems support species-rich wet grassland vegetation dominated by Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*). Several small dystrophic lakes are present within the site.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for Hen Harrier.

The site is one of the strongholds for Hen Harrier in the country. A survey in 2005 recorded four pairs, representing over 1.9% of the all-Ireland total. However, when the Northern Ireland sector of Slieve Beagh is considered, there was a total of 10 breeding pairs in 2005. The mix of forestry and open areas provides optimum habitat conditions for this rare bird, which is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. The early stages of new and second-rotation conifer plantations are the most frequently used nesting sites, though some pairs may still nest in tall heather of unplanted bogs and heath. Hen Harriers will forage up to c. 5 km from the nest site, utilising open bog and moorland, young conifer plantations and hill farmland that is not too rank. Birds will often forage in openings and gaps within forests. In Ireland, small birds and small mammals appear to be the most frequently taken prey.

The site also supports breeding Merlin, with two pairs recorded in 2002-03. Further survey is required to determine the exact status of this small falcon. Red Grouse is found in unplanted areas of bog and heath – this is a species that has declined in Ireland and is now Red-listed. Peregrine nest in the Northern Ireland sector of Slieve Beagh and can be seen over the site at times.

Slieve Beagh SPA is of ornithological importance because it provides excellent nesting and foraging habitat for breeding Hen Harrier and is one of the top sites in the country for the species. The presence of three species, Hen Harrier, Merlin and Peregrine, which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive is of note.

25.1.2012