

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: SLIEVE AUGHTY MOUNTAINS SPA

SITE CODE: 004168

The Slieve Aughty Mountains SPA is a very large site that extends southwards from just south of Lough Rea, County Galway to Scariff in County Clare. The peaks are not notably high or indeed pronounced; the site rises to a maximum 400 m at Maghera west of Lough Graney. The site includes many small- and medium-sized lakes, notably Lough Graney and Lough Atorick; several important rivers rise in the site, including the Owendalulleagh and Graney. Lough Derg occurs immediately to the south-east. The Slieve Aughty Mountains are predominantly comprised of Old Red Sandstone, but outliers of Lower Palaeozoic rocks provide occasional outcrops capping the hills.

The site consists of a variety of upland habitats, though approximately half is afforested. The coniferous forests include first and second rotation plantations, with both pre-thicket and post-thicket stands present. Substantial areas of clear-fell are also present at any one time. The principal tree species present are Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) and Lodgepole Pine (*Pinus contorta*). Almost one-third of the site is unplanted blanket bog and heath, with both wet and dry heath present. Well-developed blanket bog occurs at several locations, notably Sonnagh, Loughatorick South and Glendree.

The vegetation is characterised by such species as Ling Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Hare's-tail Cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*), Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*) and especially Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*). Bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.) are well-represented. The remainder of the site is mostly rough grassland that is used for hill farming. This varies in composition and includes some wet areas with rushes (*Juncus* spp.) and some areas subject to scrub encroachment.

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

The Slieve Aughty Mountains are a stronghold for Hen Harrier and support the second largest concentration in the country. A survey in 2005 recorded 27 pairs, which represents over 12% of the all-Ireland population. A somewhat lower count of between 15 and 23 pairs in the 1998-2000 period is considered to reflect poorer coverage then. 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 a breeding population of Merlin. The population size is not well known but is likely to exceed five pairs. Red Grouse is found on many of the unplanted areas of bog and heath – this is a species that has declined in Ireland and is now Red-listed.

The Slieve Aughty Mountains SPA is of ornithological significance, as it provides excellent nesting and foraging habitat for nationally important breeding populations of Hen Harrier and Merlin, two species that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Some woodlands within the Slieve Aughty Mountains SPA are designated as Statutory Nature Reserves.

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