

National Parks & Wildlife Service

Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC
(site code 002199)

**Conservation objectives supporting document -
raised bog habitats**

Version 1

June 2023

Contents

1	INTRODUCTION	3
1.1	RAISED BOGS	3
1.1.1	<i>Raised Bog Microtopography</i>	<i>4</i>
1.1.2	<i>Typical Flora of Irish Raised Bogs.....</i>	<i>5</i>
1.1.3	<i>Typical Fauna of Irish Raised Bogs.....</i>	<i>7</i>
1.2	HABITATS DIRECTIVE RAISED BOG HABITATS IN IRELAND	9
1.2.1	<i>Restoration of Active Raised Bog in Ireland.....</i>	<i>10</i>
1.3	BALLYGAR (AGHRANE) BOG SAC	11
1.3.1	<i>Flora of Ballygar Bog</i>	<i>11</i>
1.3.2	<i>Fauna of Ballygar Bog.....</i>	<i>12</i>
2	CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES	13
2.1	AREA	13
2.2	RANGE.....	14
2.3	STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS	14
2.3.1	<i>High bog area</i>	<i>15</i>
2.3.2	<i>Hydrological regime: water levels</i>	<i>15</i>
2.3.3	<i>Hydrological regime: flow patterns</i>	<i>16</i>
2.3.4	<i>Transitional areas between high bog and adjacent mineral soils (including cutover areas).....</i>	<i>16</i>
2.3.5	<i>Vegetation quality: central ecotope, active flush, soaks, bog woodland</i>	<i>16</i>
2.3.6	<i>Vegetation quality: microtopographical features</i>	<i>17</i>
2.3.7	<i>Vegetation quality: bog moss (Sphagnum) species</i>	<i>17</i>
2.3.8	<i>Typical ARB species: flora</i>	<i>18</i>
2.3.9	<i>Typical ARB species: fauna.....</i>	<i>18</i>
2.3.10	<i>Elements of local distinctiveness</i>	<i>19</i>
2.3.10.1	<i>Site features</i>	<i>19</i>
2.3.10.2	<i>Rare flora.....</i>	<i>19</i>
2.3.10.3	<i>Rare fauna</i>	<i>19</i>
2.3.11	<i>Negative physical indicators.....</i>	<i>19</i>
2.3.12	<i>Vegetation composition: native negative indicator species.....</i>	<i>20</i>
2.3.13	<i>Vegetation composition: non-native invasive species.....</i>	<i>20</i>
2.3.14	<i>Air quality: nitrogen deposition.....</i>	<i>20</i>
2.3.15	<i>Water quality.....</i>	<i>21</i>
3	REFERENCES.....	23

Map 1: Extent of potential active raised bog on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC.

Map 2: Distribution of active raised bog vegetation on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC.

Map 3: Digital elevation model and drainage patterns at Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC.

1 Introduction

This document presents a summary of the background information that has informed the process of setting the Site-Specific Conservation Objective in relation to the Habitats Directive Annex I habitat 'Active raised bog' (habitat code 7110) and Annex I habitat 'Degraded raised bog' (hereafter referred to as Active Raised Bog (ARB) and Degraded Raised Bog (DRB)) for which Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC has been designated.

Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC is entirely within Ballygar Bog Natural Heritage Area (NHA) (site code 000229).

Restoration works were undertaken on this SAC as part of the EU LIFE-funded project 'Demonstration Best Practice in Raised Bog Restoration' (LIFE09 NAT/IE/000222) implemented by Coillte.

1.1 Raised Bogs

Raised bogs are accumulations of deep peat (typically 3-12m) that originated in shallow lake basins or topographic depressions. The name is derived from the elevated surface, or dome, that develops as raised bogs grow upwards through the accumulation of peat; the domed effect is often exaggerated when the margins of a bog are damaged by turf cutting or drainage, and are drying out. Raised bogs are most abundant in the lowlands of central and mid-west Ireland.

Irish raised bogs are classified into two sub-types (Schouten, 1984): 1. Western or intermediate raised bogs, and 2. True midland or eastern raised bogs, based on phytosociological and morphological characteristics. In terms of overall morphology, the main difference between these two raised bog types is that while eastern raised bogs tended to stay more confined to the depressions in which they were formed, western raised bogs tended to grow out beyond their original basin, presumably a result of the higher rainfall levels (Cross 1990). In terms of vegetation differences the most obvious difference between the two bog types is the presence of a number of oceanic plant species on western raised bogs which are absent from the true midland raised bogs. The liverwort species *Pleurozia purpurea*¹ and the moss species *Campylopus atrovirens* grow on western raised bogs but not on eastern raised bogs; similarly, *Carex panicea* is generally more common on the high bog surfaces of western raised bogs (Schouten 1984). All of these plant species are widespread in the low-level Atlantic blanket bogs and their presence in western raised bogs is presumed to be due to the higher rainfall levels and greater rain-derived nutrient fluxes.

Exploitation has been extensive and none of the remaining Irish raised bogs are completely intact (Cross 1990). It is estimated that less than 10% of the original raised bog habitat in Ireland is in a near intact state (uncut), with less than 0.5% continuing to support active raised bogs (ARB) (NPWS 2017), see Section 1.2 for an explanation of Habitats Directive Annex I raised bog habitats. Excavated face banks, whether active or inactive, are a common feature around the margins. Any areas where part of the bog has been removed are termed cutover bog, with the remaining area referred to as high bog or intact bog. In a natural state, raised bogs are circled by a wetland fringe, known as the lagg zone, which is usually characterised by fen communities. In Ireland, most lagg have been lost through drainage and land reclamation (Fossitt 2000).

¹ Note on species nomenclature: *In the case of plant species, only scientific names are used throughout the main text while common English names are included in tables. In the case of faunal species, common English names are used throughout the text together with scientific names.*

The surface of a relatively intact raised bog is typically wet, acid, deficient in plant nutrients, and supports specialised plant communities that are low in overall diversity and comprising species adapted to the biologically harsh conditions. The vegetation is open, treeless and bog mosses or *Sphagnum* species dominate the ground layer. Small-scale mosaics of plant communities are characteristic and reflect the complex microtopography of hummocks and hollows on the bog surface (see Section 1.1.1 below). Raised bogs are driest at the margins and wetness generally increases towards the centre of the peat mass where well-developed pool systems are most likely to occur.

Raised bogs may also contain soaks and flushes (wet 'active' or dry 'inactive') due to the increased supply of nutrients over time through concentrated surface flows, or where there are links with regional groundwater or the underlying mineral substratum. Slight mineral enrichment and / or constant through flow of water provide conditions suitable for a range of species that are not typically associated with other areas of raised bog.

When damaged by peat extraction or drainage, the water table in the peat drops and the bog surface becomes relatively dry; pools are rare or absent, cover of bog mosses is greatly reduced and *Calluna vulgaris* increases in abundance. The drop in water table causes the peat to compress under its own weight causing the bog surface to deform. Greater deformation occurs closest to areas where the water table has dropped. This increases the slope of the bog surface causing rain falling on the ground surface to flow off the bog more quickly. The effect is normally greatest around the margins and in a typical situation surface wetness increases towards the centre of the bog. Trees such as *Betula pubescens* and *Pinus sylvestris* frequently invade the drier cut margins, but may also occur in flushed areas.

In Ireland, the Annex I habitat ARB is currently considered to be in Unfavourable-Bad conservation status principally as a result of marginal turf cutting, more recent semi-industrial peat extraction, and associated drainage effects caused by these activities (NPWS 2008; 2013). The lowering of regional groundwater levels is also known to have had an effect on some sites. Fires associated with turf cutting, dumping, or agricultural activities may also adversely affect the condition of the habitat.

1.1.1 Raised Bog Microtopography

Raised bogs are typically treeless and are characterised by a distinctive vegetation dominated by bog mosses (*Sphagnum*), sedges, and dwarf shrubs, all of which are adapted to waterlogged, acidic and exposed conditions. Bog mosses, which have unique properties, are the principal component of peat, and are largely responsible for the typical surface features of hummocks, hollows, lawns, and pools. The wettest bogs, which have extensive pool systems, have the greatest variety of plant and animal life and support a range of specialist species.

The following terms that describe microtopography are generally accepted in the study of mire ecology (Gore 1983). A schematic diagram showing the typical microtopographical divisions is presented in Figure 1.

Pools

Depressions in the bog surface where the water table remains above the surface level all year around or below surface level for only a very short period of time. They are characterised by the presence of aquatic plant species such as *Sphagnum cuspidatum*, *S. denticulatum*, and *Cladopodiella fluitans*. In more degraded scenarios or where high seasonal water fluctuation occurs, the pools contain open water and/or algae. Tear pools are found on bogs where internal tensions, due to mass movement of peat, has taken place within the high bog and has

caused the development of elongated pools. These are frequently found on western bogs and may be natural or anthropogenic in origin.

Hollows

These are shallow depressions (less than 5cm deep) on the bog surface where surface water collects, or where the water table reaches or lies just above ground level, depending on seasonal conditions. They are often filled with *Sphagnum* species such as *S. papillosum* and *S. cuspidatum*. They take many forms but are often eye shaped. Marginal hollows tend to be elongated as they are focused points for surface water run off. They are often dominated by *Narthecium ossifragum*.

Lawns

These are shallow hollows or flat areas where one species dominates to form a lawn. This is frequently a *Sphagnum* species, such as *Sphagnum magellanicum*, or *S. papillosum* which can completely fill in a hollow to form a small lawn.

Flats

These are more or less flat areas which are intermediate between hollow and hummock communities. They tend to be drier than the above situations.

Hummocks

These are mounds on the bog surface which can range from a few centimetres to more than one metre in height. They are usually composed mainly of *Sphagnum* species, such as *Sphagnum magellanicum*, *S. capillifolium*, *S. austinii* and *S. fuscum* but other bryophyte species such as *Hypnum jutlandicum* and *Leucobryum glaucum* are also important, especially as the hummock grows taller and becomes drier. *Calluna vulgaris* is another important element, as it flourishes where the water table is not at surface level (Kelly & Schouten 2002).

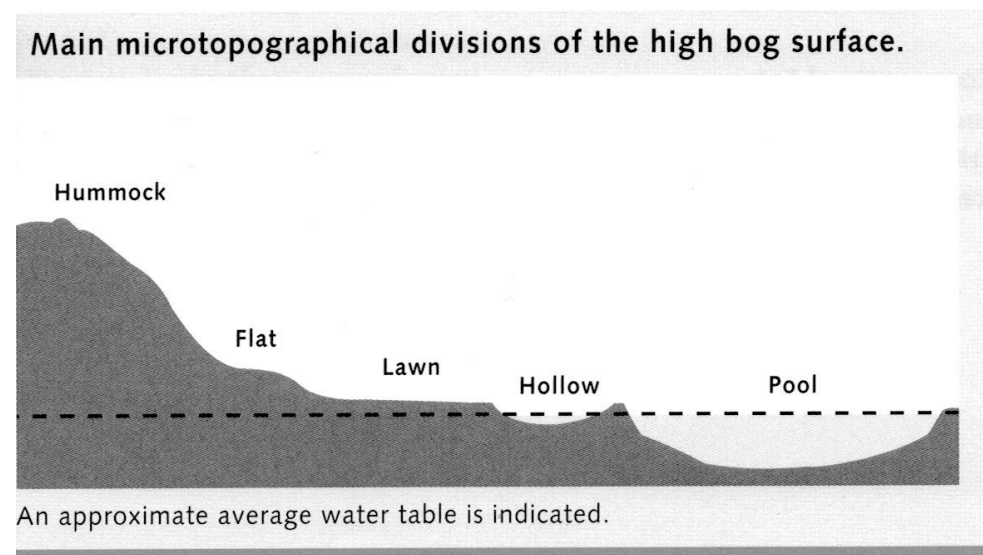


Figure 1 Raised bog microtopographical divisions on the high bog surface (reproduced from Kelly & Schouten 2002).

1.1.2 Typical Flora of Irish Raised Bogs

Raised bogs are characterised by a distinctive vegetation dominated by a variety of mosses (e.g. *Sphagnum* spp., *Hypnum* spp., *Racomitrium* spp.), sedges and grass like species (e.g.

Eriophorum spp., *Rhynchospora* spp., *Molinia caerulea* and *Carex* spp.), and dwarf shrubs (e.g. *Calluna vulgaris*, *Erica tetralix*, *Vaccinium* spp. and *Empetrum nigrum*). In addition to these groups, a number of other species characterise raised bogs including carnivorous plants (e.g. *Drosera* spp., *Utricularia* spp.), lichens of both the bog surface and epiphytes on the stems of dwarf shrubs and the occasional trees on bogs (e.g. *Cladonia* spp., *Usnea* spp.). Herbaceous plants are not a significant element on raised bogs and include a few commonly occurring species such as *Menyanthes trifoliata*, *Pedicularis sylvatica*, *Narthecium ossifragum* and *Potentilla erecta* (Cross 1990).

Drier areas and hummocks usually support *Calluna vulgaris*, *Eriophorum vaginatum*, *Trichophorum germanicum*, *Erica tetralix*, lichens (*Cladonia* spp.), bog mosses (*Sphagnum capillifolium*, *S. austinii*, *S. fuscum*, *S. papillosum*) and other mosses (*Dicranum scoparium*, *Leucobryum glaucum*). Wet hollow areas and pools are characterised by *Eriophorum angustifolium*, *Rhynchospora alba*, *Narthecium ossifragum*, *Drosera* spp., *Menyanthes trifoliata*, bladderworts (*Utricularia* spp.) and bog mosses (*Sphagnum cuspidatum*, *S. denticulatum* and *S. magellanicum*).

A list of flora species that are regarded as being typical of ARB habitat in Ireland is presented in Table 1. A number of these typical species would have a restricted distribution and do not occur throughout the range of the habitat in Ireland (see above), therefore only a subset of these species would be expected to be present on any individual bog.

Table 1 Flora species typically associated with raised bog ecosystems in Ireland (after NPWS 2013). *Species list is based on vegetation communities defined by Kelly (1993) and Kelly & Schouten (2002).*

Common name	Scientific Name
Bog rosemary	<i>Andromeda polifolia</i>
Bog bead moss	<i>Aulacomnium palustre</i>
Bristly Swan-neck moss*	<i>Campylopus atrovirens*</i>
Lichen	<i>Cladonia ciliata</i>
Lichen	<i>Cladonia portentosa</i>
Long leaved sundew	<i>Drosera anglica</i>
Intermediate leaved sundew*	<i>Drosera intermedia*</i>
Round leaved sundew	<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>
Common cotton grass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>
Hare's tail cotton grass	<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i>
Large white moss	<i>Leucobryum glaucum</i>
Bogbean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Bog asphodel	<i>Narthecium ossifragum</i>
Purple spoonwort*	<i>Pleurozia purpurea*</i>
Woolly fringe moss*	<i>Racomitrium lanuginosum*</i>
White beak-sedge	<i>Rhynchospora alba</i>
Austin's bog moss	<i>Sphagnum austinii</i>
Red bog moss	<i>Sphagnum capillifolium</i>
Feathery bog moss	<i>Sphagnum cuspidatum</i>
Cow-horn bog moss*	<i>Sphagnum denticulatum*</i>
Rusty bog moss	<i>Sphagnum fuscum</i>
Magellanic bog moss	<i>Sphagnum magellanicum</i>
Papillose bog moss	<i>Sphagnum papillosum</i>
Golden bog moss*	<i>Sphagnum pulchrum*</i>
Lustrous bog moss	<i>Sphagnum subnitens</i>
Bladderwort	<i>Utricularia minor</i>
Cranberry	<i>Vaccinium oxycoccus</i>

Notes: * Species more typical of western raised bog sites.

1.1.3 Typical Fauna of Irish Raised Bogs

Raised bogs are extremely nutrient poor ecosystems. Acidic, waterlogged and exposed conditions make them an unattractive habitat for animal life. As a consequence they are relatively poor both in terms of species diversity and population densities. Many species are opportunists, vagrant or temporary rather than specialists, but nonetheless may have an important impact on the ecosystem through nutrient imports and exports or other interactions (Cross 1990). A list of fauna species that would be typically associated with raised bog habitat in Ireland is presented in Table 2.

Raised bog is unsuitable habitat for many vertebrates due to the lack of available foraging and suitable breeding places. The Irish hare is the only mammal commonly occurring. The common frog is the most common vertebrate predator.

Although 18 species of birds have been reported breeding on raised bogs (Wilson 1990) many of these species utilise the bog as a nesting habitat only. They are dependent on other neighbouring habitats such as open water bodies, callows and wet grassland particularly for feeding. Just a few species of bird, including meadow pipit (*Anthus pratensis*), skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) and curlew (*Numenius arquata*) complete their full breeding cycle on the bog and the first two species are the commonest species occurring (Bracken *et al.* 2008). Red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus*) must also be included as a typical bog species, occurring year round as a resident. Red grouse and curlew have declined significantly on raised bogs in recent times. BirdWatch Ireland published an Action Plan for Raised Bog Birds in Ireland which lists 13 species of conservation concern that are associated with raised bogs (O'Connell 2011). Recent nationwide reviews (Colhoun & Cummins 2013; Gilbert *et al.* 2021) have since added several species, including meadow pipit and curlew to the red (most endangered) list of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BoCCI).

Our knowledge of the invertebrate assemblages associated with Irish raised bogs remains incomplete (particularly micro-invertebrate species) with few studies undertaken (Reynolds 1984a; Reynolds 1984b; Reynolds 1985; De Leeuw 1986; O'Connor *et al.* 2001; Crushell *et al.* 2008; Hannigan & Kelly-Quinn 2011; Wisdom & Bolger 2011, Nolan 2013). Van Duinen (2013) highlights the importance of structural diversity at various spatial scales (e.g. micro-scale of hummock hollow topography to macro-scale which would include the landscape setting of the bog, see Schouten (2002)) as a prerequisite for hosting the full species diversity of raised bog landscapes.

A study of Lepidoptera associated with raised bogs identified two species that appear to be characteristic of higher quality raised bog habitat, namely bordered grey (*Selidosema brunnearia* (Villers, 1789)) and light knot grass (*Acronicta menyanthidis* (Esper, 1789)) (Flynn 2014).

Recent research on spiders has revealed that a number of species are known to occur in Ireland only on raised bog habitats, all of which are considered local/uncommon or rare across Europe (Myles Nolan pers. comm.). Five of these species that can be considered useful indicators of ARB include: *Glyphesis cottonae* (La Touche 1945), *Walckenaeria alticeps* (Denis 1952), *Satilatlas britteni* (Jackson 1913), *Pirata piscatorius* (Clerck 1757), and *Minicia marginella* (Wider 1834) (Myles Nolan pers. comm.).

The information currently available on other invertebrate groups of peatland systems in Ireland is not sufficient to allow a determination of many species that are typically associated with or may be characteristic of higher quality ARB. A selection of invertebrate species and species groups that are known to be typically associated with raised bogs are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Fauna species typically associated with raised bog ecosystems in Ireland (after O’Connell 1987; Cross 1990; Renou-Wilson *et al.* 2011; Bracken & Smiddy 2012).

Common name	Scientific name
Mammal species	
Irish hare	<i>Lepus timidus hibernicus</i>
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
Pygmy shrew	<i>Sorex minutes</i>
Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
Bird species	
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Greenland white-fronted goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>
Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Red grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Reptiles and amphibians	
Common lizard	<i>Lacerta vivipara</i>
Common frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>
Typical invertebrates	
Black slug	<i>Arion ater</i>
Large heath butterfly	<i>Coenonympha tullia</i>
Marsh fritillary butterfly	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>
Bog-pool spider	<i>Dolomedes fimbriatus</i>
Water striders	<i>Gerris</i> and <i>Velia</i> species
Oak eggar moth	<i>Lasiocampa quercus</i>
Four-spotted chaser dragonfly	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>
Fox moth	<i>Macrothylacia rubi</i>
Ant	<i>Myrmica ruginodis</i>
Emperor moth	<i>Saturnia pavonia</i>
Great green bog grasshopper	<i>Stethophyma grossa</i>
Other species groups that are well represented on raised bogs include:	Araneae (spiders and mites)
	Ceratopogonidae (biting-midges)
	Chironomids (non-biting midges)
	Coleoptera (beetles)
	Collembola (springtails)
	Diptera (true flies)
	Dytiscidae (water beetles)
	Hemiptera (true bugs)
	Hymenoptera (bees, wasps, ants and sawflies)
	Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths)
	Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies)
	Orthoptera (grasshoppers)
	Syrphidae (hoverflies)
Tipulidae (craneflies)	
Tabanidae (horseflies)	

1.2 Habitats Directive Raised Bog Habitats in Ireland

Four habitat types listed on Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive are typically associated with raised bogs in Ireland, two of which are priority habitats (*):

- 7110 Active raised bogs (ARB)*
- 7120 Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration (DRB)
- 7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the *Rhynchosporion*
- 91D0 Bog woodland*

The interpretation manual of EU habitats gives the following description for 'active raised bogs': "*Acid bogs, ombrotrophic, poor in mineral nutrients, sustained mainly by rainwater, with a water level generally higher than the surrounding water table, with perennial vegetation dominated by colourful Sphagna hummocks allowing for the growth of the bog (Erico-Sphagnetalia magellanici, Scheuchzerietalia palustris p., Utricularietalia intermedio-minoris p., Caricetalia fuscae p.). The term "active" must be taken to mean still supporting a significant area of vegetation that is normally peat forming, but bogs where active peat formation is temporarily at a standstill, such as after a fire or during a natural climatic cycle e.g., a period of drought, are also included.*" (CEC 2013).

DRB is described in the interpretation manual as "*raised bogs where there has been disruption (usually anthropogenic) to the natural hydrology of the peat body, leading to surface desiccation and/or species change or loss. Vegetation on these sites usually contains species typical of active raised bog as the main component, but the relative abundance of individual species is different. Sites judged to be still capable of natural regeneration will include those areas where the hydrology can be repaired and where, with appropriate rehabilitation management, there is a reasonable expectation of re-establishing vegetation with peat-forming capability within 30 years....*" (CEC 2013).

In Ireland, the identification of ARB is made at ecotope level based on the vegetation classification developed by Kelly (1993) and Kelly & Schouten (2002).

Raised bog vegetation communities are grouped into a series of community complexes and these complexes are then amalgamated into a series of ecotopes characterised by different physical characteristics using the approach outlined by Kelly & Schouten (2002).

The main ecotopes that community complexes are grouped into include:

- Central ecotope
- Sub - central ecotope
- Active flushes and soaks
- Sub - marginal ecotope
- Marginal ecotope
- Inactive flushes
- Face - bank ecotope

Actively accumulating peat conditions occur within the sub-central and central ecotopes, which are the wettest on the bog and an indication of good quality ARB. Active flushes and soaks are also dominated by *Sphagnum* mosses and typically have wet conditions. These features are associated with ARB and contribute to the overall diversity of the habitat.

The adjacent surrounding marginal, sub-marginal, and face-bank bog areas typically have a supporting function for the central and sub-central communities but are not peat accumulating. These drier ecotopes may or may not correspond to the Annex I habitat DRB, as it depends on whether they are capable of regeneration to ARB. Other drier ecotopes recorded on the high bog that do not correspond to ARB include 'inactive flushes' which typically have a low *Sphagnum* cover.

The Annex I habitat Rhynchosporion depressions (7150) typically occurs along pool edges and on flats underlain by deep, wet and quaking peat. Typical plant species include *Rhynchospora alba*, *Drosera anglica*, *Narthecium ossifragum*, *Sphagnum cuspidatum*, *S. denticulatum*, *S. magellanicum*, *S. papillosum*, *Menyanthes trifoliata*, and *Eriophorum angustifolium*.

The priority Annex I habitat bog woodland is also actively peat-forming and overlaps with the ARB habitat. Such woodlands are usually dominated by *Betula pubescens* with a characteristic ground cover of *Sphagnum* moss species which often form deep carpets, usually with *Polytrichum* mosses and occasional lichens. Woodland areas are occasionally found on raised bogs that have an absence of the characteristic moss layer and are not regarded as peat forming. Such areas do not correspond to the Annex I habitat.

1.2.1 Restoration of Active Raised Bog in Ireland

As already mentioned in the section 1.1, ARB is currently considered to be in Unfavourable - Bad conservation status in Ireland. In addition, according to its definition, DRB should be capable of regeneration to ARB in a 30-year timescale. Thus, it follows that restoration measures are required in order to halt further losses and increase the area of ARB as well as to improve the condition of existing areas of the Annex I habitats.

Most of the restoration works undertaken in Ireland in the past concentrated on the high bog (e.g. Clara Bog, Mongan Bog, Sharavogue Bog and Raheenmore Bog) to prevent further losses as well as to restore areas to ARB. However, restoration works now focus on both high bog and cutover land since the commencement of the NPWS-led Raised Bog Restoration Project (LIFE14 NAT/IE/000032) in 2016. Such work aims to do one or more of the following (depending on the bog in question): restore ARB on the high bog; reduce further ARB and DRB loss on the high bog; restore peat-forming habitats (such as ARB, bog woodland, poor fen) and lagg vegetation on the cutover.

Works undertaken by NPWS have indicated that there are significant differences, both ecological and economic, when comparing the effectiveness of works carried out on the cutover with those carried out on the high bog. Positive and significant results (i.e. expansion or development of ARB) can be achieved over a relatively short timeframe (10 years) on suitable areas of high bog by blocking high bog drains. In contrast, a longer time period (30 years+) is required to achieve active peat formation on cutover areas, and even then the results are generally confined to smaller areas; i.e. flat areas ($\leq 0.3\%$ surface slope) or enclosed depressions that have sufficient water flow (minimum catchment 0.5ha) to maintain wet conditions throughout the year. A longer time period (minimum 50-100 years) is likely to be required for high quality ARB habitat (vegetation structure and species diversity) to develop on such cutover areas. In addition, costs of restoration measures on cutover areas are typically significantly higher than those on high bog areas.

1.3 Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC

The SAC has been selected for two Annex I habitats. The raised bog habitats for which the site has been selected are:

- [7110] Active raised bogs
- [7120] Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration

Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog is situated 2.0km northwest of Ballygar in the townland of Aghrane, in Co. Galway. The SAC is 28ha in size, and consists of high bog (11.7ha) and cutover bog (16.2ha).

A wide variety of vegetation/habitat types occur within the site. The main ones are open high bog, cleared forestry on high bog and cutover bog, and a lagg-type woodland. The site is bordered by open high bog on its eastern and south-eastern margins, by forestry on cutover bog on its northern margin and by agricultural grassland on its western and south-western side.

Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog was part of the Coillte EU LIFE-funded project 'Demonstration Best Practice in Raised Bog Restoration' project in the period 2011-2015. Under this project, 27ha of conifer plantation (both on the high bog (10.4ha) and cutover (16.3ha) (Coillte 2016)) were commercially cleared and the associated intensive drainage system blocked in an attempt to raise the water table and maintain and restore ARB.

Monitoring surveys as part of the Coillte project concluded that the restoration potential was excellent with the possibility of ARB development over time and with the additional potential of the development of an excellent lagg zone on parts of the northern re-wetted cutover (Conaghan & Derwin 2015). Red grouse was recorded in the clear felled areas. Lagg-type woodland has developed to the north of the high bog. Lagg habitat is relatively rare in Irish raised bogs, having been largely destroyed at most sites. The prospects for developing wet bog woodland along the margins of this raised bog are of particular interest and add greatly to the ecological and hydrological interest of the site (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog is of high conservation importance as it contains examples of both ARB and DRB. ARB, which covers 0.8ha, comprises areas of high bog that are wet and actively peat-forming, where the percentage cover of bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.) is high, and where some of the following features occur: hummocks, pools, wet flats, *Sphagnum* lawns and active flushes. In addition, 1.8ha of the high bog are deemed to support DRB.

Current landuse on the site consists of nature conservation management with the removal of conifer plantations, the blocking of drainage associated with these plantations and control of invasive/non-native species.

1.3.1 Flora of Ballygar Bog

This site was surveyed by Douglas & Mooney (1984) and was subsequently given a *Bii* rating (Cross 1990) indicating that it was a moderate quality site with the hydrology seriously damaged but with restoration possible. Derwin & MacGowan (2000) surveyed the site in January 2000. The most recent survey of the bog was undertaken in 2018 (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

At Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC ARB includes sub-central ecotope (0.6ha) and active flush (0.2ha).

The unafforested areas of Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog to the east of the site have vegetation typical of a western raised bog, with the open high bog consisting of heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), hare's tail cotton-grass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*), cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*), bog asphodel

(*Narthecium ossifragum*), carnation sedge (*Carex panicea*), white-beaked sedge (*Rhynchospora alba*) and the lichen *Cladonia portentosa*. Characteristic raised bog species such as bog rosemary (*Andromeda polifolia*), cranberry (*Vaccinium oxycoccos*) and the liverwort *Pleurozia purpurea* are also frequent. Bog mosses are common and include *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *S. magellanicum* and *S. papillosum*. Hummocks/ hollows and pools are found on the bog. In the wettest areas the hummocks are colonised by bog mosses, including *S. fuscum* and *S. austinii*; the hollows are colonised by the bog mosses *S. papillosum* and *S. capillifolium*, with *S. cuspidatum* the aquatic bog moss in the pools. Great sundew (*Drosera anglica*) is also found in the wetter hollows. There is a good diversity of lichens present because, unlike many other bogs, Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog has not been burnt recently.

On the cleared lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) areas on the high bog there has been natural regeneration of raised bog species, dominated by a mixture of heather and hare's tail cotton-grass with purple moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and soft rush (*Juncus effusus*) also locally frequent. Bog moss (*Sphagnum* spp.) cover is locally good and is best developed in the flat, waterlogged drains between lines of conifer stumps. The natural regeneration of downy birch (*Betula pubescens*) and lodgepole pine is occurring on this recently cleared area; however, the seedlings are generally not abundant at present and their regrowth is being controlled. The south-eastern corner of the high bog area which adjoins the open intact high bog is very wet with a high cover of hare's tail cotton-grass and *Sphagnum* species evident. The vegetation composition in this area suggests that ARB conditions are rapidly developing.

The cutover bog to the north of the site was afforested and recently clear felled. These areas had supported closed canopy plantations with little vegetation beneath. The ground conditions are drier and bog species are absent. The natural regeneration of vegetation in these areas has been slow with scattered conifer brash and common mosses (*Hypnum cupressiforme* and *Thuidium tamariscinum*) generally dominating. There are scattered patches of the bog moss *Sphagnum capillifolium*, soft rush and purple moor-grass occurring in areas where waterlogged conditions exist and birch seedlings are starting to become locally frequent.

A band of mixed woodland, dominated by downy birch and alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) with lodgepole pine, occurs along the northern margin of the site. Other frequent tree species include willow (*Salix* spp.), beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) and sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*). Parts of this woodland are flooded and soft rush is present. This marginal wooded area displays features typical of wet lagg habitat which is relatively rare in Irish raised bogs. The prospects for developing wet bog woodland along the margins of this raised bog are of particular interest and add greatly to the ecological and hydrological interest of the site. Another smaller section of wet birch woodland is developing along the very north section of the site.

Overall, it is estimated that restoration works carried out on the SAC will benefit the restoration of 3.5ha of ARB.

1.3.2 Fauna of Ballygar Bog

Only limited faunal observations have been reported from Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog as part of the 2018 survey of the site (Crushell *et al.* 2019), although it is likely that the bog supports some of the species listed in section 1.1.3 above.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) (amber listed on the BoCCI) has been recorded at this site, along with the Irish hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*), a species protected under the Wildlife Act (1976) and listed in Annex V of the Habitats Directive. In addition, Crushell *et al.* (2019) recorded a pine marten (*Martes martes*) scat along the western high bog margin and snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) (red listed on BoCCI) were frequently flushed from the high the bog

during the 2018 survey.

2 Conservation objectives

A site-specific conservation objective aims to define the Favourable conservation condition of a habitat or species at site level. The maintenance of habitats and species within sites at Favourable condition will contribute to the maintenance of Favourable conservation status of those habitats and species at a national level.

Conservation objectives for habitats are defined using attributes and targets that are based on parameters as set out in the Habitats Directive for defining Favourable status, namely area, range, and structure and functions. Attributes and targets may change or become more refined as further information becomes available.

National Conservation Objectives for the raised bog network of sites (SACs and NHAs) have been published in the National Raised Bog SAC Management Plan (NPWS 2017). The various attributes and the justification of appropriate targets used to define Favourable conservation condition for raised bog habitat relevant to Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC are discussed in the following sections.

As the long-term aim for DRB is that its peat-forming capability is re-established, the conservation objective for this habitat is inherently linked to that of ARB (7110), thus the attributes and targets set for DRB are the same as those for ARB.

2.1 Area

NPWS has commissioned a number of raised bog surveys between 1990 and the present, including Derwin & MacGowan (2000) and Crushell *et al.* (2019). Mapping from these surveys has been used to derive the Annex I habitat areas the bog as shown in Table 3. More recent surveys have been able to employ more precise and detailed mapping techniques and more standardised ecotope descriptions.

The national SAC target for the attribute 'habitat area' has been set at 2,590ha (NPWS 2014). This target is based on the estimated area of ARB (1,940ha) and DRB (650ha) present within the SAC network in 1994 (when the Habitats Directive came into effect).

The area of ARB and DRB at Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog in 1994 is not known as the bog was first surveyed in detail in 2000. The area of ARB at Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog in 2000 is estimated to have been 0.2ha (see Table 3). Due to lack of data it is not possible to use the same approach that has been adopted in setting the national SAC target (sum of ARB and DRB in 1994). However, it can be assumed (based on the known trend at other sites) that a proportion of ARB was likely to have been also lost from the site during the period 1994 – 2000.

In setting the site-specific target the current hydro-ecological conditions on the bog (including cutover) have been considered in order to ensure that the target being set is based on a realistic appraisal of what is achievable as set out below.

The most recent survey of the bog (Crushell *et al.* 2019) has indicated that there is 0.8ha of ARB within the SAC. The current extent of DRB is 1.8ha. This represents the area of the high bog, which does not currently contain ARB but has topographical conditions deemed suitable to support ARB (see Map 1 which shows the total area of current and modelled potential ARB). This represents the area that could be restored by blocking drains on the high bog.

Based on the current assessment of the bog, it is therefore concluded that the maximum achievable target for ARB on the high bog is 2.6ha. However, it is important to note that this assumes no further decline of ARB due to impacting activities. Similarly, should the bog be significantly dependent on regional groundwater levels then any deepening of drains in the

cutover could further impact the potential restoration of ARB on the high bog.

Table 3 Area of ARB and DRB recorded on the high bog at Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog in 2000 and 2018 (Source: Derwin & MacGowan. 20006; Crushell *et al.* 2019).

2000 ²		2018	
ARB (ha)	DRB (ha)	ARB (ha)	DRB (ha)
0.2	Unknown	0.9	1.8

A recent eco-hydrological assessment of the cutover surrounding the high bog undertaken as part of the restoration planning process estimates that, by implementing appropriate management, an additional 0.9ha of ARB could be restored in this area. The long term achievable target for ARB on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog is therefore set at 3.5ha.

In conclusion, the site-specific target for the attribute habitat area is: **Restore area of active raised bog to 3.5ha, subject to natural processes.**

2.2 Range

At a national scale, range represents the geographic range that encompasses all significant ecological variations of the ARB habitat. The national target for the attribute ‘range’ has been set as ‘range increasing from current situation’ (NPWS 2017). In the NHA review the bog was classed as being moderately important in contributing to the national range of the habitat (NPWS 2014).

However, range, in the form of habitat distribution, may also be important at the site level, particularly within larger SACs, including those containing a number of individual bogs (i.e. complexes). The attribute therefore under the parameter of range is ‘Habitat distribution’. At the local level, it is important to conserve the variability and distribution of ARB across a raised bog SAC. This will help to ensure the diversity of the habitat is maintained while lessening the impact of localised damaging activities such as fire.

The restoration of ARB within Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog as set out in Section 2 above will contribute to safeguarding the national range of the habitat.

A map showing the distribution of ecotopes throughout Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog is presented in Map 2.

The site-specific target for the attribute habitat distribution is: **Restore the distribution and variability of active raised bog across the SAC.**

2.3 Structure and functions

Structure and functions relates to the physical components of a habitat (“structure”) and the ecological processes that drive it (“functions”). For ARB these include attributes such as the hydrological regime, water quality, habitat quality, species occurrence, elements of local distinctiveness, marginal habitats, negative physical indicators, and negative species occurrence. As several of these attributes are inter-connected, they are all included in order to better define habitat quality in a meaningful way. In some cases, attribute targets are not quantified; however, as more detailed information becomes available (for example through further research), more measurable site-specific targets may be developed. Structure and functions attributes are expanded on in the sections below.

² Original map digitized by Fernandez *et al.* 2006

2.3.1 High bog area

On individual raised bogs adequate high bog is required to support the development and maintenance of ARB. Raised bog habitat that is classified as neither ARB nor DRB capable of regeneration is still important particularly as a supporting habitat for those listed in Annex I of the Habitats Directive. It is an essential part of the hydrological unit which supports the ARB and DRB habitats. High bog is of value in its own right as a refuge for species characteristic of drier bog conditions as well as for providing a transitional zone between the Annex I habitats of the high bog and surrounding areas. Additional values for the maintenance of high bog include the preservation of its record of past environmental conditions and carbon storage.

The national target for the attribute 'high bog' habitat is to ensure no decline in extent of high bog to support the development and maintenance of ARB.

The area of high bog within Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC in 2005 was mapped as 11.8ha, the corresponding area in 2014 was 11.7ha (based on field survey in 2018 and interpretation of aerial photography (flown in 2014), indicating minimal high bog losses within the period. The extent of high bog within the SAC in 2018 is illustrated on Map 1.

The site-specific target for the attribute high bog is: **No decline in extent of high bog, necessary to support the development and maintenance of active raised bog.**

2.3.2 Hydrological regime: water levels

Hydrological processes are key drivers of raised bog ecology. The different raised bog communities, assemblages and species are affected by various hydrological attributes. For ARB, mean water levels need to be near or above the surface of bog lawns for most of the year. Seasonal fluctuations should not exceed 20cm, and water level should be within 10cm of the surface, except for very short periods of time (Kelly & Schouten 2002). Gentle slopes that limit intermittent lateral losses of water (through surface runoff) and encourage sustained water logging are the most favourable to achieve these conditions. These conditions may be maintained on steeper slopes in areas of focused flow (flushes).

The traditional view of water flowing across the bog laterally has been recently refined to also consider that water flows vertically through peat into the underlying substrate. Water loss, by this route, depends on the permeability of the material through which the water must flow and the difference in head (water level elevation) in the bog and underlying mineral substrate; larger differences encountered in higher permeability materials will result in greater losses. Although the proportion of water lost in this manner may be small, the sustained loss during prolonged dry periods may be sufficient to impact bog ecotopes. Drains extending into the mineral substrate in marginal areas surrounding the bog can lead to an increased gradient between the head in the peat and the head in the underlying substrate resulting in increased vertical water losses from the bog.

The most recent hydrological survey undertaken in 2019 noted reduced functional drains in the SAC. Most drains within the drainage network associated with clear felled forestry were blocked as part of the EU LIFE-funded project 'Demonstration Best Practice in Raised Bog Restoration'. However, some remain, though with reduced functionality, and more dams are likely to be required.

The site-specific target for the attribute hydrological regime – water levels is: **Restore appropriate water levels throughout the site.**

2.3.3 Hydrological regime: flow patterns

As outlined above, ARB depends on water levels being near or above the surface of bog lawns for most of the year. Long and gentle slopes are the most favourable to achieve these conditions. Changes to flow directions due to subsidence of bogs can radically change water regimes and cause drying out of high quality ARB areas and soak systems.

A map illustrating the slopes and drainage patterns on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC based on a digital elevation model generated from LiDAR imagery flown in 2012 is presented in Map 3.

This map shows that Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC has a domed topography, as would be typically associated with raised bogs, with a flat central dome that slopes more steeply towards the margins. However the map illustrates that flow patterns on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC have been impacted as a result of subsidence and drainage on the high bog surface. In general the highest point on the bog is located within the north-western half of the bog. It should be noted that any dredging or deepening of drains has the potential to result in subsidence and further alter flow patterns across the site, which is likely to result in a decline in ARB.

The site-specific target for the attribute hydrological regime – flow patterns is: **Restore, where possible, appropriate high bog topography, flow directions and slopes.**

2.3.4 Transitional areas between high bog and adjacent mineral soils (including cutover areas)

Transitional zones between raised bogs and surrounding mineral soils are typically cutover bog and drained lagg zones. The maintenance / restoration of these areas will help to maintain hydrological integrity of the high bog and support a diversity of other wetland habitats (e.g. wet woodland, swamp and fen) as well as species that they sustain. In some cases, these areas may assist in reducing further losses of ARB / DRB on the high bog and in time could develop into active peat forming habitats (including ARB - see Section 2.1 above). These transitional zones, once restored, can provide ecosystem services through flood attenuation and water purification to downstream areas and potentially increase the carbon storage / sink function of the bog. The national target for these transitional areas is to maintain / restore semi-natural habitats with high water levels around as much of the bog margins as necessary.

The transitional areas at Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog include a range of different habitat types, such as high bog, scrub, woodland and forestry). Since the area of conifer plantations on the cutover in the north and north-west of the high bog were removed and the associated drainage networks blocked as part of the LIFE project there has been a positive impact in raising the water table levels. Wet alder and downy birch (0.8ha) and wet birch (0.2ha) lagg-type woodland has developed along the very north of the site and there is excellent potential for further development of this type of rare woodland in the wetter parts of the northern margin (Conaghan and Derwin 2015). The development of transitional habitats depends on a number of factors including prevailing land-use, topography, up-welling regional groundwater, and drainage.

The site-specific target for the attribute transitional areas is: **Restore adequate transitional areas to support / protect active raised bog and the services it provides.**

2.3.5 Vegetation quality: central ecotope, active flush, soaks, bog woodland

A diverse good quality microtopography on raised bogs consists of *Sphagnum* dominated pools, hollows, lawns and hummocks, which support the highest diversity of species including hummock indicators: *Sphagnum fuscum* and *S. austinii*; pool indicators: *S. cuspidatum*, *S.*

denticulatum, and indicators of lack of burning events e.g. some lichen species (*Cladonia* spp.) (Cross 1990).

The national target for the attribute vegetation quality has been set as “to maintain / restore sufficient high quality bog vegetation (i.e. central ecotope and / or flushes / soaks). At least 50% of ARB habitat should be central ecotope and / or flush / soaks.” Bog woodland is also regarded as a desirable variant of ARB as it adds species and structural diversity to the habitat and therefore, where relevant, also contributes to the 50% target at site level.

A summary description of the vegetation of Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog is presented in Section 1.3.1 above. The vegetation and habitats of the bog have been described in more detail by Derwin & MacGowan (2000) and Crushell *et al.* (2019).

The extent of the different ecotopes that correspond with ARB based on the most recent surveys (Crushell *et al.* 2019) is presented in Table 4 and on Map 2. During the most recent surveys the entire area of ARB comprised sub-central ecotope and active flush. The target for this attribute is 1.8ha of high quality ARB (50% of ARB target area (3.5ha)).

Table 4 Extent of ecotopes classified as ARB in 2000 (Derwin & MacGowan 2000) and 2018 (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

Ecotope	2000		2018	
	ha	% of total ARB	ha	% of total ARB
Sub-central ecotope	0.2	100.0	0.6	73.8
Central ecotope	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Soaks / active flush	0.0	0.0	0.2	26.2
Total ARB	0.2		0.8	

The site-specific target for the attribute vegetation quality is: **Restore 1.8ha of central ecotope/active flush/soaks/bog woodland as appropriate.**

2.3.6 Vegetation quality: microtopographical features

The characteristic microtopographical features of raised bogs are described in Section 1.1.1 above.

Low hummock and hollow, lawn and pool microtopography are well developed on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

The site-specific target for the attribute microtopographical features is: **Restore adequate cover of high quality microtopographical features.**

2.3.7 Vegetation quality: bog moss (*Sphagnum*) species

Bog mosses, which have unique properties, are the principal component of peat, and are largely responsible for the typical microtopographical features as described in Section 2.3.6 above.

The vegetation of a typical raised bog that is still hydrologically intact is characterised by the dominance of several species of *Sphagna* and dwarf ericoid shrubs. The most abundant species are *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *S. austinii* and *S. papillosum* which form hummocks or low ridges. *Sphagnum fuscum* may also form hummocks (Cross 1990). On the flats *Sphagnum magellanicum*, *S. papillosum*, *S. tenellum*, and *S. subnitens* are the key species. *Sphagnum pulchrum* may also be dominant in flats on western raised bogs. In permanently waterlogged hollows *Sphagnum cuspidatum* and *S. denticulatum* (western bogs) occur. *Sphagnum fallax* is common where there is slight flushing (Cross 1990). The most commonly occurring *Sphagnum* moss species that occur on raised bogs in Ireland are presented in Table 5 along with a summary of their ecology and typical contribution to peat formation.

Derwin & MacGowan (2000) and Crushell *et al.* (2019) provide detailed information on the occurrence of *Sphagnum* species throughout Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog.

Table 5 *Sphagnum* species typically associated with raised bog ecosystems in Ireland. Ecology as described by Laine *et al.* (2009) with minor modifications.

Species	Ecology	Peat forming capacity
<i>Sphagnum austinii</i>	Hummock species	High
<i>Sphagnum capillifolium</i>	Forms small hummocks and carpets	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum cuspidatum</i>	Pool and hollow species	Low
<i>Sphagnum denticulatum</i>	Pool and hollow species	Low
<i>Sphagnum fallax</i>	Occurs in lawns and carpets, shade tolerant. Indicative of some nutrient enrichment (soaks and active flushes)	Low
<i>Sphagnum fuscum</i>	Forms dense low and wide, and occasionally high hummocks	High
<i>Sphagnum magellanicum</i>	Lawn species forming carpets and low hummocks	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum palustre</i>	Forms hummocks and dense carpets, often in shaded conditions. Indicative of nutrient enrichment (soaks and active flushes)	Low
<i>Sphagnum papillosum</i>	Lawn, hollow, and low hummock species	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum pulchrum</i>	Grows in lawns and hollows, more typical of western bogs	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum squarrosum</i>	Forms carpets and small mounds. Indicative of nutrient enrichment (soaks and active flushes)	Low
<i>Sphagnum subnitens</i>	Occurs as individual shoots or small cushions and lawns. Tolerant of minerotrophic conditions	Moderate
<i>Sphagnum tenellum</i>	Occurs as single shoots or weak cushions, typically in disturbed patches of the bog surface	Low

The site-specific target for the attribute bog moss (*Sphagnum*) species is: **Restore adequate cover of bog moss (*Sphagnum*) species to ensure peat-forming capacity.**

2.3.8 Typical ARB species: flora

Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC supports a large proportion of the full complement of plant species typically associated with a western raised bog (see Section 1.1.2 & 1.3.1 above). The key typical species that are indicative of high quality raised bog include *Sphagnum fuscum* and *S. austinii* which are associated with hummocks and *S. cuspidatum* and *S. denticulatum* which are associated with pools and hollows.

All of the above *Sphagnum* species except *S. denticulatum* have been reported from Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog (Derwin & MacGowan 2000; Crushell *et al.* 2019).

The site-specific target for the attribute typical bog flora is: **Restore, where appropriate, typical active raised bog flora.**

2.3.9 Typical ARB species: fauna

As mentioned in Section 1.1.3, a list of typical fauna specific to ARB has not been developed and the table contains species that use the wider raised bog habitat. This may be refined as more information becomes available.

Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog is likely to support a wide range of fauna species that are typically associated with raised bog habitat (see Section 1.1.3 above). Crushell *et al.* (2019) provides a

brief list of faunal species recorded during the 2018 survey of the site.

The site-specific target for the attribute typical bog fauna is: **Restore, where appropriate, typical active raised bog fauna.**

2.3.10 Elements of local distinctiveness

A range of features may be associated with raised bogs which add to the scientific, historical, or conservation value of a bog. These can include geological, topographical, archaeological and hydrological features (e.g. soaks, lakes, flushes) and noteworthy species of flora and fauna (Cross 1990). Notable species of flora and fauna include those listed in the Habitats and Birds Directives, Red-listed species and other rare or localised species. For this attribute, features that are particularly associated with ARB are relevant.

Most of the SAC was until recently covered by coniferous plantation forestry which was planted in 1973-75 and covered 95% of the site. The plantation was clear-felled by 2012 and the intensive drainage system associated with the plantation blocked in 2013 as part of an EU funded LIFE project so as to raise the water table and maintain and restore ARB on the site.

2.3.10.1 Site features

Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog features active flush and a developing lagg woodland area in the Coillte LIFE project site.

2.3.10.2 Rare flora

Although not a rare species, the abundance of the uncommon species fir clubmoss (*Huperzia selago*) in places is notable.

2.3.10.3 Rare fauna

As mentioned above, there is a lack of documented site-specific data relating to the fauna of the bog. It is probable that the bog is utilised by a number of faunal species of conservation concern.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) (amber listed on the BoCCI) has been recorded at this site, along with the Irish hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*), a species protected under the Wildlife Act (1976) and Annex V of the Habitats Directive. Signs of pine marten (*Martes martes*), a species listed under the Habitats Directive, were recorded on the western high bog margin during the 2018 survey (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

In conclusion, the site-specific target for the attribute elements of local distinctiveness is: **Maintain features of local distinctiveness, subject to natural processes.**

2.3.11 Negative physical indicators

Raised bogs that have been damaged by marginal cutting and drainage, reclamation for agriculture, forestry activities, fire, surface drainage, or the lowering of regional water tables show a range of negative physical indicators (Cross 1990). Such negative physical features of ARB include: bare peat, algae dominated pools and hollows, marginal cracks, tear patterns, subsidence features such as dry peat and / or mineral mounds / ridges emerging or expanding, and burning evidence.

No peat cutting was noted during the 2018 survey and neither was there any cutting in 2017 according to NPWS records (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

All the drains on the high bog are very old and none appear to have been maintained for a long time. The newest drains on the high bog appear to be those that were inserted for the

conifer plantation in the north-west of the site, which was planted in 1973-75 (NPWS 2017). These drains were blocked as part of the Coillte LIFE (LIFE09 NAT/IE/000222) raised bog restoration project in the period 2011-2015 (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

The site-specific target for the attribute negative physical indicators is: **Negative physical features absent or insignificant.**

2.3.12 Vegetation composition: native negative indicator species

Indicators of disturbance on a raised bog include species indicative of drying out conditions such as abundant *Narthecium ossifragum* and *Trichophorum germanicum*; *Eriophorum vaginatum* forming tussocks; abundant *Sphagnum magellanicum* in pools previously dominated by species typical of very wet conditions (e.g. *Sphagnum cuspidatum*). Indicators of frequent burning events include abundant *Cladonia floerkeana* and high cover of *Carex panicea* (particularly in the true midlands raised bog type).

At Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog, *Pinus sylvestris* is widespread across the high bog. It was also classed as 'scattered but frequent' adjacent to the area of the former plantation.

The natural regeneration of downy birch is occurring on the high bog in and adjacent to the recently cleared area of plantation. However, their regrowth is being controlled as part of the Coillte LIFE programme (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

The site-specific target for the attribute native negative indicator species is: **Native negative indicator species at insignificant levels.**

2.3.13 Vegetation composition: non-native invasive species

Non-native invasive species that can commonly occur on raised bog habitats include: *Pinus contorta*, *Rhododendron ponticum*, and *Sarracenia purpurea* (Cross 1990).

The natural regeneration of *Pinus contorta* is occurring on the high bog in the area within and adjacent to the recently cleared area of plantation. Their regrowth is being controlled as part of the Coillte LIFE programme. However, in parts, for example south of the newly developed active flush, the regeneration of *Pinus contorta* is significant. The spread of *Pinus contorta* needs to be monitored and possibly controlled (Crushell *et al.* 2019).

The site-specific target for the attribute non-native invasive species: **Non-native invasive species at insignificant levels and not more than 1% cover.**

2.3.14 Air quality: nitrogen deposition

Peatlands are highly sensitive to air pollution, particularly nitrogen deposition. Reactive nitrogen from fossil fuel combustion or intensive agriculture can contaminate rain and snow, causing soil acidification, nutrient enrichment, and a decline in species that are sensitive to these conditions. There is evidence that the combined impact of elevated nitrogen deposition and a warming climate could exceed the sum of the individual stressors and lead to a dramatic decline in the biodiversity of mosses, sensitive vascular plants, and microbes, potentially leading to catastrophic peat loss (PEATBOG project - <http://www.sste.mmu.ac.uk>).

Air pollution can change both the species composition and the functioning of peatlands. The primary atmospheric pollutant from the Industrial Revolution to the mid 1970s was sulphur deposition, but levels have since greatly declined. Reactive nitrogen (N) deposition (primarily NO₃⁻ and NH₄⁺), which can both acidify and eutrophy, became significantly elevated over a widespread area in the early to mid-20th century and is now the major pollutant in atmospheric deposition across most of Europe (Fowler *et al.* 2005).

Nitrogen is commonly a limiting terrestrial nutrient and in un-impacted peatlands it is tightly cycled. With long-term elevated N deposition, vegetation composition typically shifts toward species adapted to higher nutrient levels, with an overall loss of diversity (Malmer & Wallén 2005). In peatlands, field experiments with N additions within the current European range have shown significant declines in bryophyte species-richness and productivity, and shifts in composition toward vascular plants (Bobbink *et al.* 1998; Bubier *et al.* 2007). Community shifts toward more nitrophilous bryophytes in N-enriched regions such as parts of the Netherlands are also well documented (Greven 1992). In the UK, both a general survey of peatlands across the country (Smart *et al.* 2003), and a targeted study of *Calluna* moorland (Caporn *et al.* 2007) showed significant inverse relationships between levels of nitrogen deposition and species richness, with bryophytes particularly impacted. Changes in the vegetation also impact below-ground communities and biogeochemical processes.

Moderate increases in N deposition from a low level may increase *Sphagnum* and vascular plant productivity without an equal increase in decomposition rates, leading to enhanced carbon accumulation (Turunen *et al.* 2004). However, shifts in species composition from bryophytes to vascular plants may increase the production of easily-decomposable plant material, leading to higher rates of decomposition, and reduced carbon accumulation (Lamers *et al.* 2000; Bubier *et al.* 2007).

The particular sensitivity of nutrient-poor ombrotrophic peatlands to nitrogen enrichment is reflected in the low critical load threshold of between 5 and 10kg N/ha/yr for these ecosystems (Bobbink & Hettelingh 2011), a level which is exceeded over a significant portion of their range. An Irish study during the late 1990s undertaken by Aherne & Farrell (2000) concluded that total N deposition shows a strong east-west gradient, with lowest deposition in the west at 2kg N/ha/yr and highest in the east and south-east at 20kg N/ha/yr. Average N deposition over the Republic of Ireland was estimated to be approximately 12kg N/ha/yr. The study also concluded that the Critical Load Threshold for N was exceeded in at least 15% of ecosystems studied. The critical load applied to peatland ecosystems by Aherne & Farrell (2000) was 10kg N/ha/yr. This is in line with the recommendation by Bobbink & Hettelingh (2011) that the critical load should be set at the high end of the range in areas of high precipitation and at the low end of the range in areas of low precipitation assuming that Ireland represents a high precipitation area.

It is recommended in the case of Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog that the level of N deposition should not exceed the low end of the range i.e. 5kg N/ha/yr. This recommendation is based on a precautionary approach, as the evidential basis for setting a higher level is not particularly strong as alluded to by Payne (2014). Total N deposition in the vicinity of Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog as reported by Henry & Aherne (2014) is 13.1kg N/ha/yr.

The site-specific target for the attribute air quality is: **Air quality surrounding bog close to natural reference conditions. The total N deposition should not exceed 5kg N/ha/yr.**

2.3.15 Water quality

Ombrotrophic peat waters found on the surface of raised bogs are characterised by low pH values (pH < 4.5) (Moore & Bellamy 1974) and also have low values of electrical conductivity. This is due to the fact that the raised bog system derives its mineral supply from precipitation, which is usually acidic and low in nutrients. Raised bog vegetation exchanges cations with protons to further reduce the pH.

Hydrochemistry varies in the areas surrounding a raised bog. Locally, conditions may be similar to the high bog due to a dominance of water originating from the bog. However, elsewhere in the marginal areas, there may be increased mineral and nutrient content of the

water due to regional groundwater influences, runoff from surrounding mineral soils, and the release of nutrients through oxidation of peat resulting from reduced water levels.

The hydrochemistry of Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog has not been studied in any detail.

The site-specific target for the attribute water quality is: **Water quality on the high bog and in transitional areas close to natural reference conditions.**

3 References

Aherne, J. & Farrell, E.P. (2000) Final Report: Determination and mapping of critical loads for sulphur and nitrogen and critical levels for ozone in Ireland. Environmental Protection Agency, Dublin, 212pp.

Bobbink, R. & Hettelingh, J.P. (2011) Review and revision of empirical critical loads and dose-response relationships. Proceedings of an expert workshop, Noordwijkerhout, 23-25 June 2010. RIVM report 680359002, Coordination Centre for Effects, National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM).

Bobbink, R., Hornung, M. & Roelofs, J.G.M. (1998) The effects of air-borne nitrogen pollutants on species diversity and semi-natural European vegetation. *Journal of Ecology* 86: 717–738.

Bracken, F. & Smiddy, P. (2012) Lowland bogs, fens and reedswamps, pp. 73-89. In: Nairn, R., & O'Halloran, J. (eds.) *Bird Habitats in Ireland*. The Collins Press, Cork.

Bracken, F., McMahon, B. & Whelan, J. (2008) Breeding bird populations of Irish Peatlands: capsule peatlands are very important habitats for birds despite low species diversity. *Bird Study* 55 (2): 169-178.

Bubier, J., Moore, T. & Bledzki, L.A. (2007) Effects of nutrient addition on vegetation and carbon cycling in an ombrotrophic bog. *Global Change Biology* 13: 1168–1186.

Caporn, S.J.M., Edmondson, J., Carroll, J.A., Pilkington, M. & Ray, N. (2007) Long-term impacts of enhanced and reduced nitrogen deposition on semi-natural vegetation. Report to Defra. Terrestrial Umbrella. Work Package 2: Impacts, Recovery and Processes. Task 4. Defra London.

CEC (2013) Interpretation Manual of European Union Habitats. Version EUR 28. European Commission, DG Environment, Brussels. Nature and Biodiversity.

Coillte (2016) LIFE09 NAT/IE/000222 Final Report. Covering the project activities from 01/01/2011 to 31/12/2015. Coillte, Harbour Building, Lough Key Forest Park, Boyle, Co. Roscommon.

Colhoun, K. & Cummins, S. (2013) Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2014–2019. *Irish Birds* 9: 523-544.

Conaghan, J and Derwin, J. (2015) Annex I. Final Monitoring Report for EU LIFE project No. LIFE09 NAT/IE/000222 Demonstrating Best Practice in Raised Bog Restoration in Ireland. Hydrological and Vegetation Monitoring.

Cross, J. (1990) The Raised Bogs of Ireland, their ecology, status and conservation. Report to the Minister of State at the Department of Finance. The Stationery Office, Dublin.

Crushell, P.H., Crowley, W., Denyer, J., Foss, P., Gallagher, M.C., MacGowan, F. & Smith, G. (2019) NHA Raised Bog Monitoring Project 2018 - Ballygar Bog (NHA 000229), County Galway - Site Report. National Parks & Wildlife Service, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin.

Crushell, P.H., Foss, P., Duff, K., Wilson, F., MacGowan, F. and John Conaghan, J. (2016) NHA Review Survey of Raised Bogs 2013. Scientific Basis for Raised Bog Conservation in Ireland. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

Crushell, P.H., Schouten, M.G.C., Robroak, B.J.M. & van Duinan, G-J. (2008) The contribution of soak lakes to macroinvertebrate diversity of raised bogs in Ireland. In: Crushell, P.H. (2008). *Soak Systems of an Irish Raised Bog: a multidisciplinary study of their origin, ecology, conservation and restoration*. PhD thesis, Wageningen University, with a summary in Dutch and Irish.

- De Leeuw, J.P.M. (1986) Een onderzoek naar het voorkomen en de verspreiding van aquatische macro- en mirofauna in de Ierse hoogvenen. Deel 1: Macrofauna. *Aquatische Oecologie*, Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
- Derwin, J. & MacGowan, F. (2000) Raised bog restoration project: a continuation of the investigation into the conservation and restoration of selected raised bog sites in Ireland. Unpublished report, Dúchas the Heritage Service, Dublin.
- Fernandez, F., MacGowan, F., Crowley, W., Farrell, M., Croal, Y., Fanning, M. & McKee M. (2006) Assessment of the impacts of turf cutting on designated raised bogs 2003-06. Unpublished report, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Dublin.
- Flynn, C. (2014) Nocturnal Lepidoptera of Midland Raised Bogs. A thesis submitted to the National University of Ireland, Maynooth for the Degree of Master of Science (MSc.).
- Fossitt, J. (2000) A Guide to Habitats in Ireland. The Heritage Council, Ireland.
- Fowler, D., Smith, R.I., Muller, J.B.A., Hayman, G. & Vincent, K.J. (2005) Changes in the atmospheric deposition of acidifying compounds in the UK between 1986 and 2001. *Environmental Pollution*, 137: 15-25.
- Gilbert G., Stanbury A. & Lewis L. (2021), Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2020–2026. *Irish Birds* 9: 523–544.
- Gore, A.J.P. (ed.) (1983) *Ecosystems of the world 4A. Mires: Swamp, bog, fen and moor. General studies.* Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, Amsterdam.
- Greven, H.C. (1992) Changes in the moss flora of the Netherlands. *Biological Conservation* 59: 133-137.
- Hannigan, E. & Kelly-Quinn, M. (2011) Chapter 2.6 - Aquatic macro-invertebrate diversity. pp. 140-157 In: Renou-Wilson, F. (ed.) *BOGLAND: Sustainable Management of Peatlands in Ireland.* Environmental Protection Agency, Wexford.
- Henry, J. & Aherne, J. (2014) Nitrogen deposition and exceedance of critical loads for nutrient nitrogen in Irish grasslands. *Science of the Total Environment* 470–471: 216–223.
- Kelly, L. & Schouten, M.G.C. (2002) Vegetation. In: Schouten, M.G.C. (ed.), *Conservation and restoration of raised bogs: geological, hydrological and ecological Studies.* Dúchas – The Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment and Local Government, Ireland; Staatsbosbeheer, the Netherlands; Geological Survey of Ireland, Dublin. pp. 110-169.
- Kelly, L., Doak, M. & Dromey, M. (1995) Raised Bog Restoration Project: An Investigation into the Conservation and Restoration of Selected Raised Bog Sites in Ireland. Part 1 Summary Reports. National Parks & Wildlife Service, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Dublin.
- Kelly, M.L. (1993) Hydrology, hydrochemistry and vegetation of two raised bogs in county Offaly. PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin.
- Laine, J., Harju, P., Timonen, T., Laine, A., Tuittila, E.S, Minkkinen, K. & Vasander, H. (2009) The intricate beauty of Sphagnum mosses - A Finnish guide to identification. University of Helsinki Department of Forest Ecology Publications, 39: 1–190.
- Lamers, L.P.M., Bobbink, R. & Roelofs, J.G.M. (2000) Natural nitrogen filter fails in polluted raised bogs. *Global Change Biology*, 6: 583–586.
- Malmer, N. & Wallén, B. (2005) Nitrogen and phosphorus in mire plants: variation during 50 years in relation to supply rate and vegetation type. *Oikos*, 109: 539–554.

- Moore, P.D. & Bellamy, D.J. (1974) Peatlands. Elek Science. London.
- Nolan, M. (2013) Spiders (Araneae) of Irish raised bogs: Clara bog, Co. Offaly and Carrowbehy bog, Co. Roscommon. *Bulletin of the Irish Biogeographical Society* 37: 172-203.
- NPWS (2008) The Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Ireland.
- NPWS (2013) The Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland. Version 1.0. Unpublished Report, National Parks and Wildlife Services. Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, Ireland.
- NPWS (2014) Review of Raised Bog Natural Heritage Area Network. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.
- NPWS (2017) National Raised Bog Special Areas of Conservation Management Plan 2017-2022. Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin, Ireland.
- NPWS (2017c) Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC 002199 Natura 2000 Form. National Parks & Wildlife, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin.
- O'Connell C. (ed.) (1987) The IPCC Guide to Irish Peatlands. Irish Peatland Conservation Council, Dublin.
- O'Connell, P. (2011) Action Plan for Raised Bog Birds in Ireland 2011-2020. BirdWatch Ireland, Kilcoole, Co Wicklow.
- O'Connor, Á., Reynolds, J.D. & Kavanagh, B. (2001) Aquatic macroinvertebrate colonisation of artificial water bodies in cutaway oceanic raised bog in Ireland. In: Rochfort, L. and Daigle, J.Y. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 11th International Peat Congress*. pp. 742-750.
- Payne, R.J. (2014) The exposure of British peatlands to nitrogen deposition, 1900–2030. *Mires and Peat* 14: Art. 4.
- Renou-Wilson, F., Bolger, T., Bullock, C., Convery, F., Curry, J., Ward, S., Wilson, D. & Müller, C. (2011) BOGLAND: Sustainable Management of Peatlands in Ireland. STRIVE Report Series No.75. Prepared for the Environmental Protection Agency. pp. 181.
- Reynolds, J.D. (1984a) Invertebrate survey of Irish midlands raised bogs. *Bulletin of the British Ecological Society* 15: 81-82.
- Reynolds, J.D. (1984b) Invertebrate fauna of Irish raised bogs. Part II: Odonata, aquatic Hemiptera and Trichoptera. *Bulletin of the Irish Biogeographical Society* 8: 98-102.
- Reynolds, J.D. (1985) Invertebrates of Lough Roe, Co. Offaly; a rare and endangered bogland habitat. *Bulletin of the Irish Biogeographical Society* 9: 41-45.
- Schouten, M.G.C. (1984) Some aspects of the ecogeographical gradient in the Irish ombrotrophic bogs, paper presented to 7th Int. Peat Congress, Dublin, vol. 1, pp. 414-432, The International Peat Society, Helsinki.
- Schouten, M.G.C. (ed.) (2002) Conservation and Restoration of Raised Bogs – geological, hydrological and ecological studies. *Dúchas – The Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment and Local Government, Ireland; Staatsbosheheer, The Netherlands; and The Geological Survey of Ireland*. pp. 220.
- Smart, S.M., Robertson, J., Shield, E.J. & van de Poll, M.H. (2003) Locating eutrophication effects across British vegetation between 1990 and 1998. *Global Change Biology* 9: 1763-1774.
- Turunen, J., Roulet, N.T., Moore, T.R. & Richard, P.J.H. (2004) Nitrogen deposition and increased carbon accumulation in ombrotrophic peatlands in eastern Canada. *Global*

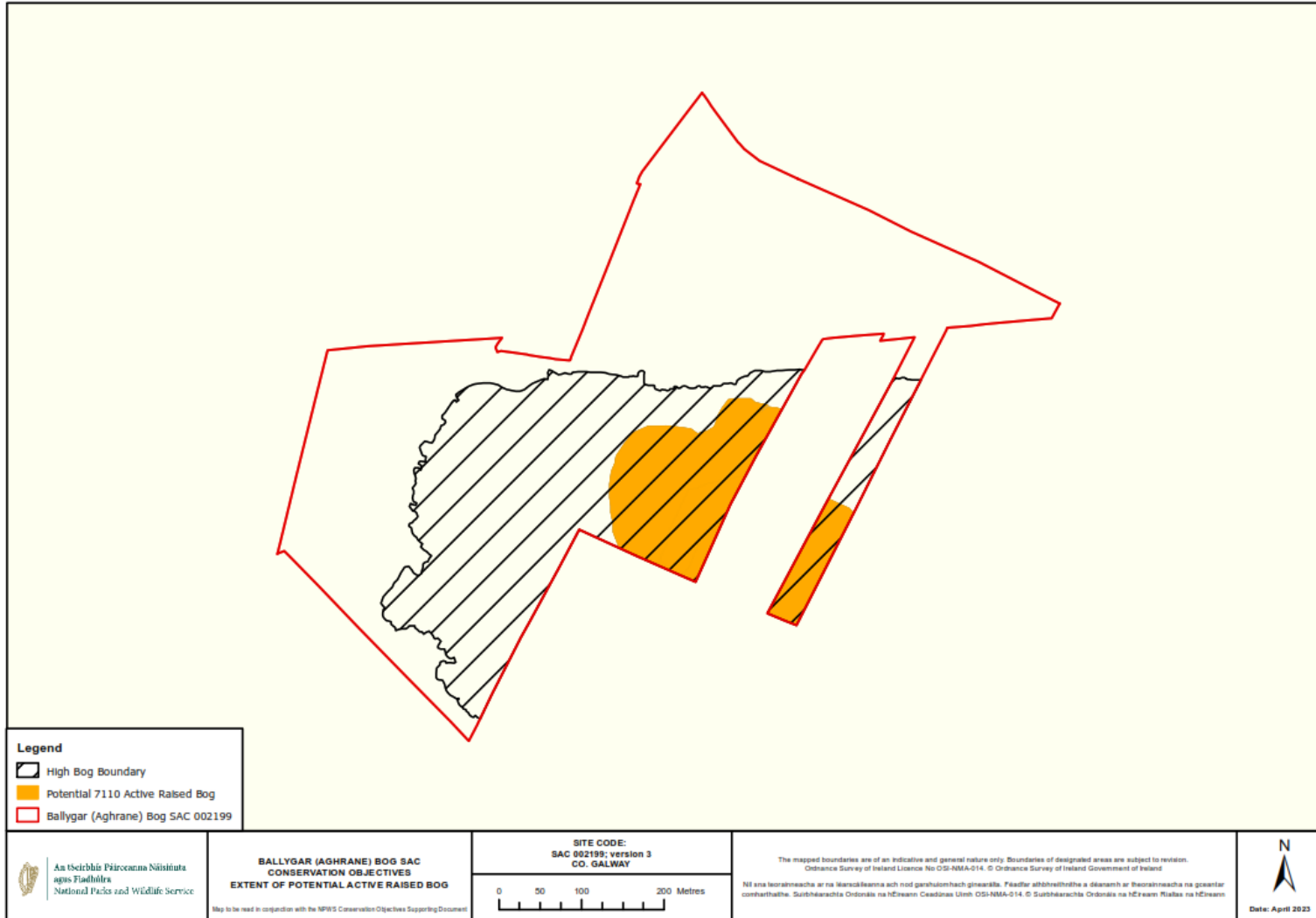
Biogeochemical Cycles. 18 (3): GB3002.

Van Duinen G.A. (2013) Rehabilitation of aquatic invertebrate communities in raised bog landscapes. PhD thesis, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

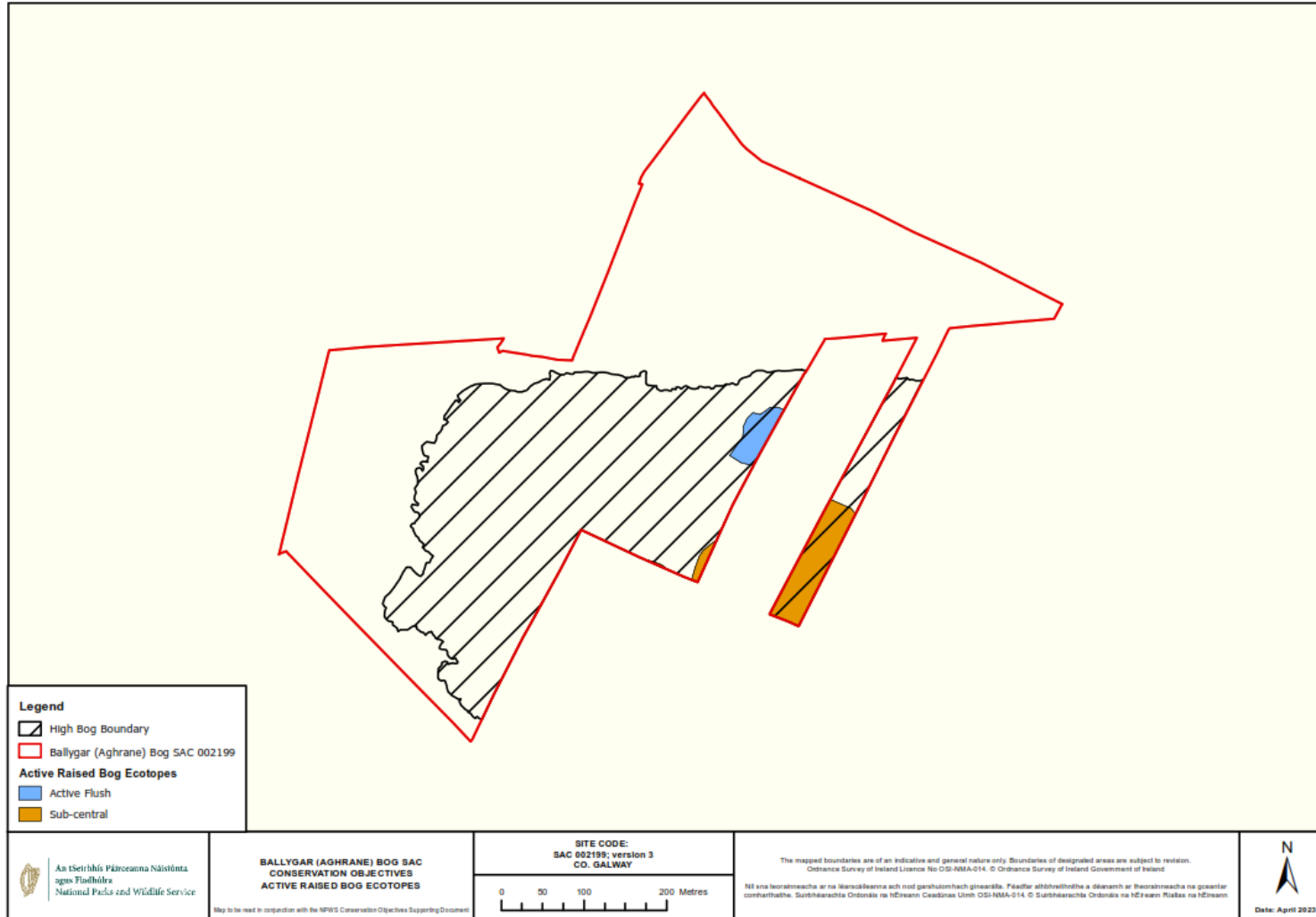
Wilson, H.J. (1990) Birds of raised bogs. pp. 29-36. In: Cross, J. (ed.) The Raised Bogs of Ireland, their ecology, status and conservation. Report to the Minister of State at the Department of Finance. The Stationery Office, Dublin.

Wisdom, R. & Bolger, T. (2011) Chapter 2.4 - Terrestrial invertebrate biodiversity. pp. 103-121 In: Renou-Wilson, F. (ed.) BOGLAND: Sustainable Management of Peatlands in Ireland. Environmental Protection Agency, Wexford.

Map 1: Extent of potential active raised bog on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC



Map 2: Active raised bog vegetation on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC



Map 3: Digital elevation model and drainage patterns on Ballygar (Aghrane) Bog SAC

