



VERSION 2: 2024

The Grasslands Trail

Showcasing some
Great Irish Grasslands



NPWS An tSeirbhís Páirceanna
Náisiúnta agus Fiadhúlra
National Parks and Wildlife Service

**National
Biodiversity
Data Centre**
Documenting Ireland's Wildlife



What is the 'Grasslands Trail'?

The 'Grasslands Trail' is a network of public and private grasslands spread across the country. All of these sites are managed sensitively, with nature conservation and grassland diversity in mind. This booklet expands the number of trail sites from 9 to 27, and includes a new section featuring Farmland Sites.

The Grasslands Trail allows locals and visitors to gain a better understanding of endangered pasture and meadow habitats. For those sites that are publicly accessible, you can see and experience up close what great Irish grasslands look like. Many of these sites are close to other amenities and attractions, so might be a peaceful place to stop for a walk or a picnic on a busy day.

When to visit

Summer is the best time to visit most grasslands, but at these sites there is lots to see year round. For example, you might see a meadow being mown in late summer, or a grassland full of wild spring flowers in March/April. Autumn is the time that birds feed on seedheads in grasslands, and in mid-winter ponies might be grazing thick grass so that the pastures can be left for biodiversity the rest of the year.

The site profiles

Each site profile in this booklet will give you a flavour of that grassland, from orchids to rare breed cattle, from patches of meadow to vast areas of grassy habitats. All the grasslands on the Grasslands Trail are supported by a range of management actions to ensure that they are in the best condition for wildlife. For those sites that are publicly accessible, there is also information on parking and access, and links to find out more.

Future plans and feedback

The Grasslands Trail began as a pilot initiative in 2023, featuring nine sites. In 2024, an additional eighteen sites have been added. These are just a few examples of great Irish grasslands. Please use the hashtag #GrasslandsTrail to share other locations which might be added in the future! Over time, we will continue to expand the trail, but for now, we hope you enjoy those highlighted.



Share your pictures or ideas on social media using #GrasslandsTrail or #GreatIrishGrasslands



Semi-natural grasslands

All the grasslands on the Grasslands Trail are what ecologists call 'semi-natural grasslands'. They are not fully natural habitats because their existence is dependent on some human management. Without this, most would change to scrub or woodland. Semi-natural grasslands have not been heavily altered by agriculture, but instead, are managed in a less intensive way.

Grassland types

Just as there are different types of woodlands, there are different types of semi-natural grassland on the island of Ireland. Broadly, a grassland can be wet or dry, acidic or calcareous (= lime-rich), and rich or poor in nutrients (e.g. nitrogen, phosphorus). The type of grassland is also influenced by the soil, geology, climate, and past management. All of these factors combine to give us an amazing array of subtly different grassland types in Ireland.

The Grasslands Trail is a tour through the amazing diversity of Ireland's semi-natural grasslands. From dry grasslands managed to balance leisure activities with nature at Ballycastle Golf Course, coastal grasslands on calcareous soil (machair) at Sheskinmore Nature Reserve, and suburban/parkland areas managed as hay meadows at Newbridge House and Farm, Castletown House or Tymon Park. There are diverse farmland pastures managed by grazing, sites within the unique limestone pavement of the Burren, damp grasslands elsewhere in the country, and a pasture within the wooded Glengarriff Nature Reserve.

Accessibility:

Note that while most of the publicly accessible sites have footpaths or relatively even areas for walking, many will not be fully wheelchair accessible. If you have accessibility or other queries, it's best to contact the location directly.



GRASSLAND

any area dominated by grasses

MEADOW

usually a grassland managed by mowing

PASTURE

a grassland managed by grazing



ABOUT US

This booklet has been developed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, with support from the National Biodiversity Data Centre and the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan.

Visit GreatIrishGrasslands.ie for more information

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Why are semi-natural grasslands important?

Semi-natural grasslands are more important than you might think!



Nature

Semi-natural grasslands are hugely important for our native biodiversity, supporting vast arrays of plants and animals, many of which will only thrive in open grassland habitats. This includes many orchids and other wildflower species, many insects (e.g. grasshoppers, butterflies, etc.), and a range of farmland birds, such as Corncrake, Yellowhammer, Barn Owl and Skylark.



Carbon

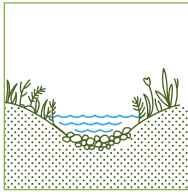
They capture and store great quantities of carbon. Some grassland types, such as floodplain meadows, rival woodlands for carbon capture.



Soils

Diverse grassland plant communities support healthy soils, with thriving ecosystems of their own. There can be up to 1 billion individual microscopic cells and around 10,000 different species in a gram of healthy soil!





Water

Grasslands work hard to filter water through their healthy soils, helping to provide us with clear water in our streams and rivers.



Flooding prevention

They carry out a valuable function in times of flooding, by holding water and slowing its flow downstream. We need more grasslands and other semi-natural habitats to hold water in times of extreme rainfall and to help keep urban areas free from flooding (see page 66).



Health & wellbeing

There is little better than a flowery, buzzing summer meadow. We all derive great pleasure and sustenance from being in nature, and diverse, functioning grasslands help us to feel good and connected to nature.



Tourism

Flourishing grasslands can support tourism, by providing visitors from near and far with beautiful views and experiences.



A disappearing habitat:

Recent data from the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the Republic of Ireland show losses of about 30% for some of our most special grassland types, over a period of just ten years. The main causes of loss are:

- A. conversion to intensive agriculture (e.g. ploughing, re-seeding, fertilising),
- B. planting with forestry,
- C. and perhaps counter-intuitively, abandonment. This is because lack of management quickly leads to decline in quality in most semi-natural grasslands.





Tymon Park

Tallaght, Co. Dublin



Tymon Park boasts a number of great grassland areas. There are large expanses of meadows, and smaller areas of species-rich calcareous grasslands, some of which are on an old esker ridge.

MANAGEMENT

The grasslands in the park are managed to have a mixture of short-flowering and long-flowering meadows. The long-flowering areas are mown in late summer, with the cuttings removed.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.sdcc.ie/en/services/sport-and-recreation/parks/tymon-park.html>

<https://www.sdcc.ie/en/services/environment/pollinators/>

DESCRIPTION

In parts of Tallaght and Greenhills there are unimproved esker soils, and these offer great potential for species-rich grasslands. This potential was realised when the grass cutting management practices in Tymon Park were altered by South Dublin County Council to facilitate flowering species and pollinating insects. Most of these meadows are now cut only once a year, and clippings are removed to continue to decrease fertility and to encourage further wildflower species.



Sawfly on Buttercup

A biodiversity monitoring programme commenced in 2020, with support from NPWS's Local Biodiversity Action Fund. These surveys found that significant areas of the meadows now align with 'Lowland Hay Meadows', and some with 'Species-rich Calcareous Grassland' (both listed for protection on Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive). This botanical restoration supports healthy insect and pollinator populations, offering a critically important green infrastructure resource to a wide range of species in an urban environment in a time of biodiversity and climate challenge. In 2023, a pilot project was undertaken to collect and store seed from some of these meadows, with the potential to use this seed in other appropriate restoration projects in the locality.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round

SIZE:

49 ha

PARKING:

yes, free

CAFÉ:

coming soon

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS:

South Dublin County Council

"Having seen the decline and loss of wonderful species-rich grasslands across Ireland over the course of my career, I jumped at the opportunity to help restore South Dublin County Council's esker grasslands and the invertebrate biodiversity they support. To see such a diversity of plants and insects on my urban doorstep is a pure joy!"

Rosaleen Dwyer, Heritage Officer, South Dublin County Council





Glengarriff Nature Reserve

Glengarriff, Co. Cork



The 'wood pasture' grassland in the Big Meadow features swathes of purple Devil's-bit Scabious in late summer, many ant hills and several stately Oak.

MANAGEMENT

The pasture is grazed from late summer into the winter by a small organic herd of Kerry cattle. If scrub begins to encroach, it is strimmed. Rushy areas are occasionally topped.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.glengarriffnaturereserve.ie/activities/>



DESCRIPTION

'Big Meadow' is an island of grassland in the middle of the almost entirely wooded Glengarriff Nature Reserve (301 ha). It adds to the diversity, and is home to many invertebrates. The area has not been ploughed, reseeded or fertilised in living memory, but has been lightly grazed in autumn by cattle for many years.



Bumblebee on Devil's-bit Scabious

This long history of low intensity management gives the grassland a special character. It has many anthills (see photo on left), which form their own microclimate, their grassy humps slightly warmer and drier than the surrounding vegetation. It is possible that some of these anthills are over 100 years old. Another striking feature is the swathes of Devil's-bit Scabious, with their sea of purple-blue blossoms in late summer. Even in September, the grassland buzzes with life as pollinators of many kinds are attracted to this late source of pollen. Devil's-bit Scabious is also the food plant of the rare Marsh Fritillary, and these pretty butterflies can be seen flying here in June, along with other species such as Meadow Brown and Ringlet. In early summer there are many Heath Spotted-orchids, easily seen from the path that runs along the edge of the meadow. Other parts of the grassland are quite acidic with damp hollows, rushy patches and tussocks of Purple Moor-grass.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round (via the 3km 'Big Meadow Trail', which starts in Nature Reserve main carpark)

SIZE:

5 ha

PARKING:

yes, free

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no (Glengarriff Village, 1 km away)

OWNERS:

National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)





Castletown House

Celbridge, Co. Kildare



In mid-June, this meadow is a mosaic of colour, with Pyramidal Orchids, Common-spotted Orchids, Bee Orchids, Yellow-rattle, Goat's-beard and Hawkbits all providing essential food for bumblebees and solitary bees.

MANAGEMENT

The 25 ha area of long-flowering meadow is mown in September each year, and the cuttings are removed. The 8 ha area of rough grassland which borders the River Liffey is cut every five years.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.castletown.ie/>

DESCRIPTION

Meadows are the centrepiece in this restored 18th century landscape. Flowering from March to September, each month provides a feast for our pollinating insects.

We have managed our meadows for almost 20 years now, cutting in September and removing the biomass, and so reducing the soil fertility and allowing a higher diversity of species to flourish. During that time we have witnessed an amazing transformation. 16 ha are now considered to be the rare habitat type 'Lowland Hay Meadows' (listed for protection on Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive), and a further 8 ha are almost at that level.

Majestic Oaks and Lime trees, dotted through the meadows, enhance the views of the Dublin mountains in the distance. Pathways through the meadows enable visitors to experience the sights, sounds and smells of these species-rich and threatened habitats.



ACCESS:

Usually publicly accessible year-round

SIZE:

33 ha

PARKING:

yes, free

CAFÉ:

yes

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS:

Office of Public Works (OPW)

Collecting meadow seed





Sheskinmore Nature Reserve

near Ardara, Co. Donegal



Sheskinmore (An Seascann Mór, the big marsh) and Magheramore (Machaire Mór, the big sandy plain) perfectly describe what to expect at this site - a fen with wet grassland behind a machair plain, with undulating fixed dunes and saltmarsh meadows, helped by conservation grazing.

MANAGEMENT

The fixed dunes, machair and saltmarsh are grazed from October to May with cattle or horses. Some grassland parcels are cut once for haylage in late summer. The fen area is lightly summer-grazed with horses or Aberdeen Angus bullocks, with the animals being moved around to prevent poaching. The species-rich wet grassland is lightly cattle-grazed at various times of the year. Some of the farmers have Moiled cattle, an old Irish breed.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.npws.ie/nature-reserves/donegal/sheskinmore-nature-reserve;>

<https://sheskinmore.wordpress.com/home>

DESCRIPTION

Winter grazing with cattle on fixed dunes and machair is ideal for floral diversity. After the stock are removed, plants can grow, flower and set seed, resulting in a succession of wildflowers. In May, Early-purple Orchids appear in their 1,000's, followed by a beautiful variety of Early Marsh-orchid in June. In mid-summer, rarer species appear like Dense-flowered Orchid, Bee Orchid and the well-camouflaged Frog Orchid. Showier are the Marsh Helleborine and Fragrant-orchids. And it's not only orchids - Grass-of-Parnassus, Devil's-bit Scabious and Field Gentian flower in August, signalling the end of summer.

As well as dunes and machair, other important grassland types occur, such as 'Species-rich Calcareous Grasslands' and 'Molinia Meadows' (both listed for protection on Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive). The combination of acidic bedrock, with alkaline sand, interspersed with wet peaty hollows, over undulating ground, makes every corner worth exploring for wildlife. For example, the protected invertebrates Marsh Fritillary and marsh snail, *Vertigo geyeri*, are found here, as well as a wealth of breeding waders.

NPWS have recognized the importance of the area since the 1980s, having bought 385 ha of land around the Lough. A number of private farmers are involved in a results-based agri-environment scheme (NPWS Farm Plan Scheme), in which land parcels are scored for floral diversity each summer, with payments linked to habitat quality.



Marsh Fritillary

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round (search for 'Sheskinmore NR car park' on google maps for the northern entrance point)

SIZE:

385 ha (across whole Reserve)

PARKING:

yes, free

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), and some privately owned land



Early Marsh-orchid





Newbridge House and Farm

Donabate, Co. Dublin



This historical house has a working farm with hay meadows. It also has pastures, grazed by rare breeds.

MANAGEMENT

Pastures are grazed by Irish Moiled cows, a herd of Kerry cattle, Irish Draught horses and Jacob's sheep. Hay meadows are cut once a year.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://newbridgehouseandfarm.com>



Hoverfly on Devil's-bit Scabious

DESCRIPTION

Large areas of parkland with sensitively managed meadows provide a nice contrast to the grazed areas at this diverse site. Some meadow areas are distinctly damp (look out for species such as Meadowsweet), and others are much drier (in spring, search for the Cowslips to help you find the dry calcareous grassland).



Meadow Barley

The site supports some unusual species, with rare grasses such as Upright Brome and Meadow Barley to be found. Meadow Barley is listed on the Flora (Protection) Order, 2022. The presence of Upright Brome helps to demarcate the extent of the EU Habitats Directive-listed 'Species-rich Calcareous Grassland'. The beautiful Meadow Barley is found in damper areas of grassland, which are mostly managed as meadow, with one cut late in the season. At this site, not all areas are managed in the same way. Some are grazed, others are allowed to grow taller and wilder, and some areas are managed as shorter-flowering meadows. This ensures that there is a great diversity of grassland types and sward heights to be found.

While the woodland areas here are undoubtedly of value, a recent ecological study noted that the meadow areas are the most important of the semi-natural habitats within the demesne, particularly as they support rare grass species.

ACCESS:

Main park grasslands publicly accessible year-round (some facilities closed Mondays from Oct to Mar). Charge applies to visit Farm Discovery Trail

SIZE:

100 ha

PARKING:

yes, free

CAFÉ:

yes

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS:

Fingal County Council



Cowslip





Slieve Carran/ Keelhilla Nature Reserve

part of Burren National Park, Co. Clare



Against a dramatic wooded cliff backdrop, this site boasts limestone pavement, orchid-rich calcareous grassland, woodland and scrub. It is an excellent place to see a wide range of Burren-speciality plants.

MANAGEMENT

This site is winter grazed by cattle, via agreement with a local farmer.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.nationalparks.ie/burren/>



Mountain Avens

DESCRIPTION

Slieve Carran is also known by two other names - Keelhilla and Eagle's Rock. It's easy to see why it has the latter name, due to its dramatic limestone cliffs. Today Peregrine Falcons nest here, as do Ravens. At the base of the cliffs there are large areas of scrub and woodland, and the ruins of an old church and holy well. There is a magical air about the place, and a number of legends are known to locals. Come in spring to experience a veritable sea of Wild Garlic.

The more open areas are mostly a mix of limestone pavement, grassland and scrub. In some areas, however, there are pockets of deeper soils, and here there are areas of permanent grassland. They are very species-rich, and need to be kept open by grazing (and occasional sensitive scrub removal).

The grasslands support a range of orchid species, and a wide variety of other flowers, grasses and sedges. Among the rarer orchids are the Dark-red Helleborine and the Frog Orchid. An experimental grazing enclosure stands in one of the grassland pockets, and can be seen from one of the walking trails. This has been surveyed for its plants and snails a number of times since its erection in 2005, providing invaluable scientific data on how important grazing management is for maintaining the diversity of such habitats.



Lady's Bedstraw with
Bloody Crane's-bill

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round

SIZE:

c.5 ha of permanent grassland, much more scattered through the limestone pavement

PARKING:

yes, free

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)



Harebell





Doneraile Estate

Doneraile, Co. Cork



This semi-natural damp grassland is beautiful in high summer, with lots of colour, and plenty of orchids. It is also an excellent place to see some uncommon grass species.

MANAGEMENT

The meadow is found in the north-east of the estate, and has paths cut through to allow public access. It is cut late in the summer each year, with local farmers typically taking the hay.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://doneraileestate.ie/>



7-Spot Ladybird

DESCRIPTION

In total, there are over 160 ha of parkland to roam and explore at Doneraile. So as well as the grasslands, you can spot the Deer, Squirrels, Otters, and Heron, and explore the majestic ancient trees, fishponds, tracks and trails.



Irish Marsh-orchid

At the north-east there is a large (22 ha) and diverse semi-natural grassland, which is managed as a meadow. A visit by the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) in 2021 recorded numerous vascular plant species growing there, including some uncommon species such as Common Spotted-orchid, Irish Marsh-orchid and the grass, Smooth Brome.

This meadow has been used as a donor site for a 'green hay' project on a nearby farm. This is where hay is cut from a species-rich site, and on the same day, it is strewn at a species-poor site. Thus seeds from a range of species can be introduced to the recipient site. Detailed botanical data have been collected as part of this project, and show that the vegetation in the meadow in Doneraile has a good species-richness, with a range of typical grass and herb species found, such as bent grasses, meadow-grasses, Meadow Foxtail grass, Sweet Vernal-grass, clovers, Yarrow and Cat's-ear.



ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round

SIZE:

22 ha, set in wider parkland area

PARKING:

yes, free

CAFÉ:

yes

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS:

Office of Public Works (OPW)



Doneraile House, OPW



Common Spotted-orchid



Ballycastle Golf Course

Ballycastle, Co. Antrim



This golf club has lovely areas of meadow throughout, which also act as 'roughs' for the course.

MANAGEMENT

The management regime that creates the best 'rough' areas also helps maintain a flower-rich meadow habitat. This involves one late cut (Sept/Oct) for hay, which is paid for and used by a local farmer.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.ballycastlegolfclub.com/>

DESCRIPTION

The meadows developed at Ballycastle Golf Club were created with golf in mind, but they also support a species-rich grassland habitat. The fact that these meadows are great to look at in the summer, are full of wildlife, and are free to maintain (a local farmer takes the species-rich grass to feed to his cattle), is a bonus.

The sandy, nutrient-poor soils on the course create ideal conditions for many wildflowers, and have allowed the meadows to develop quickly. There are wonderful displays of wildflowers throughout the season from the early Dandelions to the late flowering Devil's-bit Scabious (larval food plant for Ireland's only legally protected butterfly species, the Marsh Fritillary), Eyebright and Harebell.



Red Clover

ACCESS:

Limited access – priority for golfers

SIZE:

2.4 ha in the managed 'roughs'

PARKING:

yes, free

CAFÉ:

yes

TOILETS:

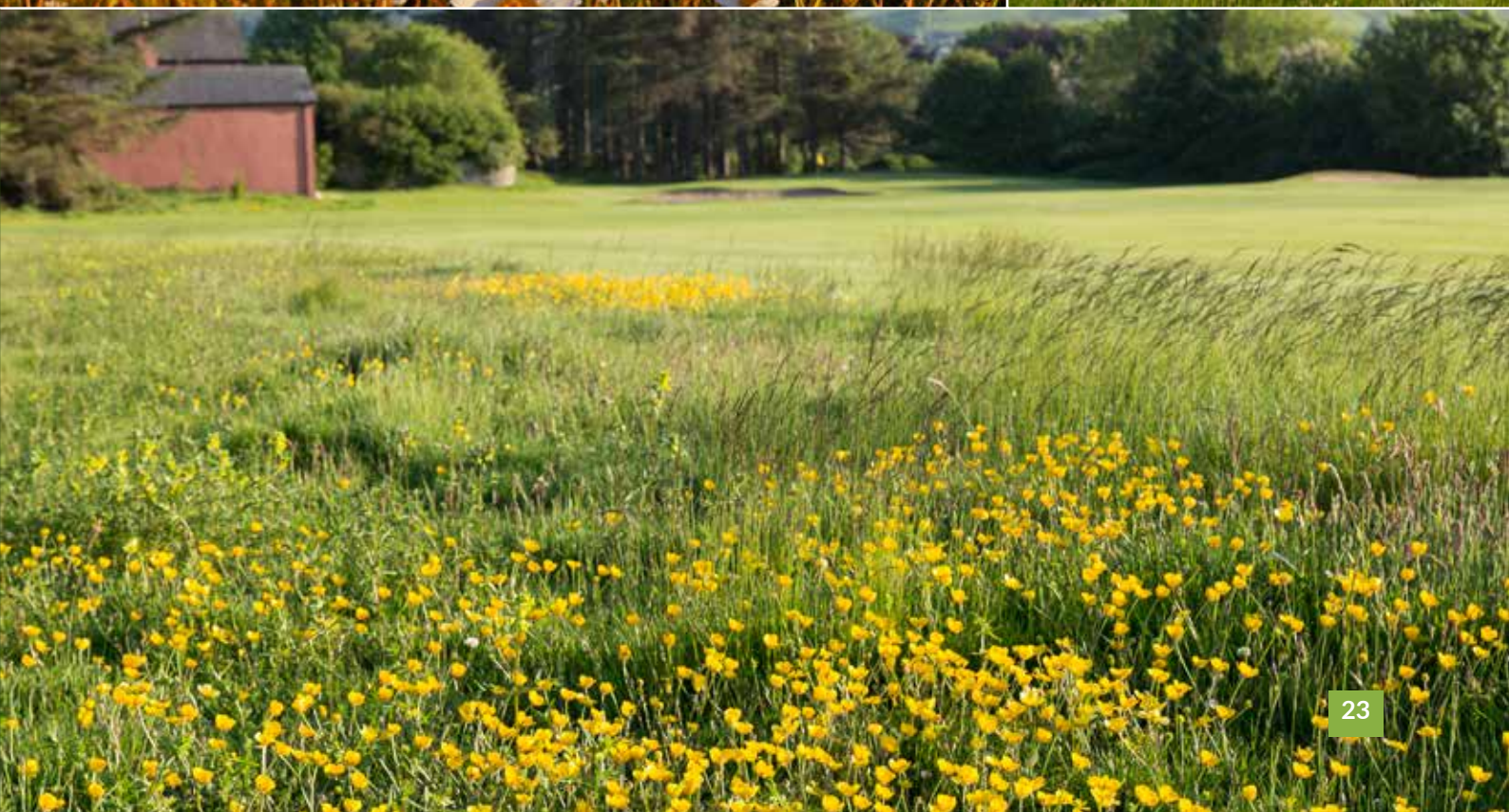
yes

OWNERS:

Ballycastle Golf Club



Oxeye Daisy





Birr Castle Demesne

Townparks, Birr, Co. Offaly



The meadow in Birr Castle Demesne provides an opportunity to view a rare example of a semi-natural, species-rich grassland that shelters thriving flora and fauna!

MANAGEMENT

The grassland is allowed to grow until July/August of each year, ensuring native biodiversity blooms and thrives. It is then cut and baled by a local farmer.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

www.birrcastle.com

A book has been written about this meadow: 'A Microcosmic Jungle, the Meadow in Birr Castle' by John Feehan, 2023.

DESCRIPTION

The meadow has been managed in a traditional way ever since the arrival of the Parsons family in Birr, preserving a rare example of a once-common agricultural ecosystem. This allows for the study of the unique characteristics of such grasslands. The meadow hosts over ninety plant species, including many different grasses - Crested Dog's-tail, Meadow Fescue, Quaking-grass, Meadow Foxtail and Yorkshire-fog. Year-round, the meadow is vibrant with colour, featuring blooms like buttercups, Primroses, Cuckooflower/ Lady's Smock, Red Clover, White Clover, Hedge Woundwort, and many other flower species. For the most stunning display of the meadow in full bloom, it is highly recommended to visit Birr Castle Demesne in mid to late June, when the landscape is awash with flowers and teeming with butterflies, other insects and wildlife. Rather than agricultural production, the meadow's main purpose today is to contribute to the aesthetic beauty of the demesne landscape and to support biodiversity.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round.
Admission costs apply (see website)

SIZE:

8 ha, within overall demesne of 50 ha

PARKING:

no parking on-site, public car park nearby

CAFÉ:

yes (seasonal)

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS

Birr Castle Estate



Oxeye Daisy and Quaking-grass



Drumnaph Nature Reserve

near Maghera, Co. Derry



Nestled on the edge of the Sperrin Mountains, Drumnaph Nature Reserve (Droim nDamh, 'ridge of the stag') is a haven for wildlife and exists as a special remnant of the ancient Irish landscape, including its fantastic meadows.

MANAGEMENT

The reserve is managed through low-intensity seasonal grazing, primarily using traditional Irish Moiled cattle. This grazing practice has been maintained throughout the site's history up to the present day, allowing its rich biodiversity to be preserved and enhanced.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://drumnaph.org/>

DESCRIPTION

This community owned and managed nature reserve is part of the greater Droim nDamh reserve which covers 85 ha of ancient woodland, planted native woodland, wetlands and meadows. The reserve is open for the public to enjoy. The meadows are spectacular examples of how the countryside once was, before the advent of herbicides and artificial fertilizers. Winter grazing is used to manage the fields which have a wide range of plant species including Yellow-rattle, lady's-mantle and Devil's-bit Scabious.

The meadows are part of a woodland, wetland and grassland mosaic of habitats, supporting large numbers of insects and amphibians. Indeed, in early summer, the meadows can appear to be alive with thousands of froglets, which are on their first foray onto land after emerging from the many ponds on the reserve. The Droim nDamh is a wonderful site to be enjoyed by wildlife and people. The meadows are open for the public to enjoy all year around, but spring and summer are best if you want to enjoy its feast of flowers.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round

SIZE:

40 ha, within reserve of 85 ha

PARKING:

yes, two car parks available - at Halfgayne Road & Grillagh Road

CAFÉ:

1 mile away at An Carn:

<https://ancarn.org/>

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS

Carntogher Community Association & The Woodland Trust





Derrynane House and Demesne

Derrynane, Co. Kerry



At the southern tip of the Iveragh Peninsula, Derrynane Demesne has over 120 ha of lands rich in natural and cultural heritage, including beautiful areas of semi-natural grassland.

MANAGEMENT

The fixed dunes are managed through winter grazing by cattle, and monitored to ensure there is enough suitable habitat to support the protected Narrow-mouthed Whorl Snail. The dry meadows behind the dunes are cut twice a year, in spring and September. Areas of wet grassland near the car park are managed with an early cut to reduce rush growth, and a cut later in summer when conditions allow.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://heritageireland.ie/places-to-visit/daniel-oconnell-house-derrynane-house>



Narrow-mouthed Whorl Snail

DESCRIPTION

At the southern tip of the Iveragh Peninsula is Derrynane House, the family home of Daniel O'Connell. The demesne landscape is now included in Derrynane National Historic Park with over 120 ha of lands rich in natural and cultural heritage with a plethora of archaeological, horticultural, botanical and ecological treasures all in the ownership of the State and managed by the OPW. Under the direct influence of the moist, warm climate gifted by the North Atlantic Drift, Derrynane supports a significant number of threatened and near threatened flora and fauna.

The various meadows contain abundant flowering plant species and are orchid-rich. Bee Orchids are especially frequent in some years. The areas of wet grassland include Common Knapweed, Yellow Iris and Meadowsweet. Of note is the Kerry Lily, present at a few optimal locations and protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 2022. The wider grassland habitats also support important populations of the endangered Natterjack Toad, which is protected under the Irish Wildlife Act, and is also listed on Annex IV of the EU Habitats Directive. The grassland management programme at Derrynane is an action under the OPW Biodiversity Action Strategy 2022-2026.

ACCESS:

Free public access year-round to open coastal grasslands

SIZE:

40 ha, in estate of 120 ha

PARKING:

yes, at Derrynane House

CAFÉ:

yes

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS

Office of Public Works (OPW)





Belvedere House, Gardens & Park

south of Mullingar, Co. Westmeath



Large areas of meadow that are stunning in high summer, when the flowers provide a blaze of colour.

MANAGEMENT

The 18 ha of meadows are mown in September, with the cuttings removed.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://belvedere-house.ie/>

DESCRIPTION

In total, there are 65 ha of grassland and woodland trails at Belvedere Estate. The estate has incorporated sustainable land management practices, with a focus on enhancing nature and supporting native species. The grassland meadows are actively managed for biodiversity. This includes promoting the growth of wildflowers by replicating traditional hay meadow management, with one cut seasonally.

The meadows at Belvedere House and Gardens are home to a rich variety of native plant species. Among the most prominent are wildflowers such as Oxeye Daisy, buttercups, Red Clover, Common Knapweed, Yellow-rattle, Meadow Vetchling and Common Spotted-orchid, which create vibrant bursts of colour and provide essential resources for pollinators. The meadows also support a diversity of grasses, including species like Meadow Fescue, Sweet Vernal-grass, Quaking-grass, Yorkshire-fog, which create the foundational structure of the habitat. Together, these plants attract a variety of wildlife, including bees, butterflies, hoverflies, dragonflies and moths, contributing to pollination and overall ecosystem health. The meadows also support Foxes, Red Squirrel, bats, Irish Hare, Badger, Pygmy Shrew, Wood Mouse, many species of bird life, and macro and micro invertebrates. Together, they create a balanced, thriving ecosystem that changes with the seasons, offering year-round interest and ecological benefits.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round.
Admission costs apply (see website)

SIZE:

18 ha

PARKING:

yes

CAFÉ:

yes

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS

Westmeath County Council





The Boathouse with Crom Castle in the background at Crom, County Fermanagh.
©National Trust Images/Chris Lacey

Crom

Newtownbutler, Co. Fermanagh



Located on the shores of Upper Lough Erne, the flower-rich parkland grasslands at Crom are surrounded by tranquil islands, ancient woodlands and historical ruins.

MANAGEMENT

The grasslands are predominantly grazed by cattle, but some areas are grazed by sheep, ponies and fallow deer. Grazing is at a low enough intensity to prevent bark stripping or poaching damage to tree roots. Approximately half of the parkland grassland (25 ha) is managed under a late season hay cutting regime, with aftermath grazing by cattle or sheep depending on compartment and degree of public access.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/northern-ireland/crom>

DESCRIPTION

Crom Estate is located in South Fermanagh on the shores of Upper Lough Erne and is host to an amazing range of semi-natural habitats spanning across wetland, grassland, parkland and woodland. The estate straddles both sides of the lough covering an area of around 788 ha. The quality and diversity of the habitats means Crom is an important conservation site, a fact recognised by both national and international designations. Crom has some of the best examples of parkland habitat in Northern Ireland, the underlying grassland habitat varies from semi-improved grassland to purple moor-grass and rush pasture, and lowland meadow with Common Spotted-orchid, eyebright, Cat's-ear, Common Knapweed, Yellow-rattle, Red Clover and Ribwort Plantain.

Species-rich wet grassland is extensive, often forming complex transitions with fen, reedbed and swamp habitat. These grasslands are characterised by Creeping Bent and Jointed Rush, with a range of herbs such as Creeping-Jenny, Ragged-Robin, Marsh Pennywort and Lesser Spearwort. Fen 'meadows' are characterised by both Yellow and Purple-loosestrife, with Marsh Cinquefoil and Meadowsweet in abundance. The quality of the grassland communities found at Crom is reflected in the large number of rare and notable plants found there including Cowbane, Marsh Pea, Greater Water-parsnip, and Blue-eyed-grass.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round with entrance fee (free to National Trust members)

SIZE:

215 ha of fen, wet pasture, meadows and parkland

PARKING:

yes, beside the visitor centre

CAFÉ:

yes (seasonal)

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS

National Trust



Child with a butterfly net at Crom, County Fermanagh.
©National Trust Images/Chris Lacey



Castle Ward

near Downpatrick, Co. Down



Parkland site with species-rich grassland situated on the shores of Strangford Lough, within a landscape of rolling drumlin hills.

MANAGEMENT

Tullyratty Area of Special Scientific Interest is an important area of semi-natural grassland within the wider estate which is managed in a traditional way. The area has thin soils with rocky outcrops and therefore does not lend itself to cutting for hay. Instead, conservation grazing by Dexter cattle over the winter months maintains the floral diversity on site.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/northern-ireland/castle-ward>

DESCRIPTION

Herbs typical of traditionally managed grassland are found throughout Tullyratty and include eyebright, Common Knapweed and Common Spotted-orchid. The grasses Red Fescue, Crested Dog's-tail, Common Bent and Sweet Vernal-grass are common in the sward. Other herbs such as Yellow-rattle and Wild Carrot have a more localised distribution. Burnet-saxifrage is locally frequent on the site; this is frequent in south-east Down and the basalt hills around Belfast, but is rare and localised elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Further diversity is provided through the presence of scrub which is a valuable habitat for insects, birds and mammals. The lowland setting on a south-west facing slope provides great insect habitat; during the summer months, the area is buzzing with pollinating insects such as the Red-tailed Bumblebee, Dark-green Fritillary and Small Copper butterflies.

The wider parkland at Castle Ward has a range of grassland types and management approaches. In the past, huge swathes of grassland were mown for amenity and aesthetic value. In recent years, mowing has been reduced, allowing more areas for native plants to grow, flower and set seed. This has enabled the natural restoration of meadows across the estate. Some areas have been sown with local provenance seed from Tullyratty to boost restoration efforts. Signage and interpretation are used to raise awareness of management regimes for nature restoration.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round with entrance fee (free to National Trust members)

SIZE:

23 ha in Tullyratty, 15.5 ha of meadows in parkland

PARKING:

yes, near the stableyard

CAFÉ:

yes (seasonal)

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS

National Trust



Dexter cattle grazing at Tullyratty, County Down. ©National Trust Images/Sarah Burch





Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park

Belfast, Co. Antrim



The juxtaposition of lowland meadow and an international rose garden ensures an interesting visit.

MANAGEMENT

Meadows are mown for hay in summer.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/things-to-do/parks-and-open-spaces/a-z-parks/sir-thomas-and-lady-dixon-park>

DESCRIPTION

Originally formed in the mid-18th century, as part of the Wilmont estate, the site was farmed for crops and bleaching linen. The estate, which also included a walled garden, informal planting areas and gate lodges, attracted a number of different owners before it was taken over by the Dixons in 1919. The site was donated to the people of Belfast by Lady Dixon in 1959, in memory of her late husband, Sir Thomas. In the 1980s, Belfast City Council adopted a policy of meadow restoration. Fields that were once mown regularly were left uncut over the summer and managed for hay. The result was a series of species-rich grasslands containing plants and animals not seen in the parks for a long time.

The meadows in the park contain many plants including Common Knapweed, Yellow-rattle, Autumn Hawkbit and Lesser Stitchwort. Other species took several years to make an appearance, such as orchids. At first, Common Spotted-orchid were recorded only in small, isolated groups, but are now widespread across the site. Other orchids recorded include both Greater and Lesser Butterfly-orchid. The site is also important for fungi, including the elegant Pink Waxcap.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible year-round

SIZE:

c.4.5 ha

PARKING:

yes

CAFÉ:

yes

TOILETS:

yes

OWNERS

Belfast City Council



Common Knapweed



Greater Butterfly-orchid



Red-tailed Bumblebees



Pink Waxcap



Ballyteige Nature Reserve

near Lisdoonvarna, Co. Clare



Sloping down to a river valley, this lovely site is almost entirely made up of a rare and protected wet grassland type known as Molinia Meadows.

MANAGEMENT

The grassland is lightly grazed by cattle from April to November. Light grazing opens up the sward, reduces the build-up of leaf-litter and breaks up dense clumps of rushes. No fertiliser is applied to the land.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.npws.ie/protected-sites/sac/000994>

DESCRIPTION

This site is NPWS-owned and managed as a Nature Reserve. It slopes towards the Aille River and has an underlying bedrock of shale. The main semi-natural habitat is wet grassland, much of which corresponds to the habitat Molinia Meadows, which is listed for protection on the EU habitats Directive. This habitat can be very rich in species, and wet flushes (wet areas fed by rainwater and groundwater) occur throughout the area. The site also contains some areas of heath which are confined to the western edge.

Within the areas of wet grassland, dominant species are Meadow Thistle, Sharp-flowered Rush, Purple Moor-grass, Meadow Foxtail and Devil's-bit Scabious. Other species include Tormentil, Lesser Spearwort, Sweet Vernal-grass, Cuckooflower and there is an abundance of marsh-orchids. The flushes are dominated by sedges, Marsh-marigold and Soft Rush, while the heath areas are dominated by Purple Moor-grass, Heather and lousewort. The site is also rich in bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) and invertebrates, and is home to a small colony of the Marsh Fritillary butterfly.

ACCESS:

Access by arrangement with NPWS, or via occasional walks/talks on-site

SIZE:

5.6 ha

PARKING:

no

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS

National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)



Bog Asphodel



Bumblebee on Meadow Thistle





Farmland Sites



Of course many stunning examples of semi-natural grassland occur on private farmland. These remain thanks to the management actions of the farmers over many years. They form part of a vital network of sites for biodiversity across the island.

POEM

'Grass'

by Grace Wells
.....

Grass, I've been watching you,
so slow to turn from winter to spring,

then growth green and low,
pushing up your language
of spikelet and seed-head,

soft, blowsy, tufted,
florets and anthers and awns.

A plenitude. A beatitude.
Some old religious word
for abundance and beauty combined,

but nothing lofty,
just grass,

fescue, scutch, timothy,
dog's tail, fox tail,
hard-grass, hair-grass, heath.

Where grain begins.
Where it all begins,

down in the grass.

This poem is written by Grace Wells, a poet and writer based in Ennistymon, Co. Clare. Her poetry and prose are strongly informed by nature, the environment, and spirit of place. This poem was spotted in 'Windfall - Irish nature poems to inspire and connect', a collection by Jane Clarke. Grace can be contacted at: wellsgem68@gmail.com



Farmland on the shores of Lough Ree

north of Athlone, Co. Westmeath



Beautiful species-rich grassland meadow running down to Lough Ree, near the Shannon Callows

MANAGEMENT

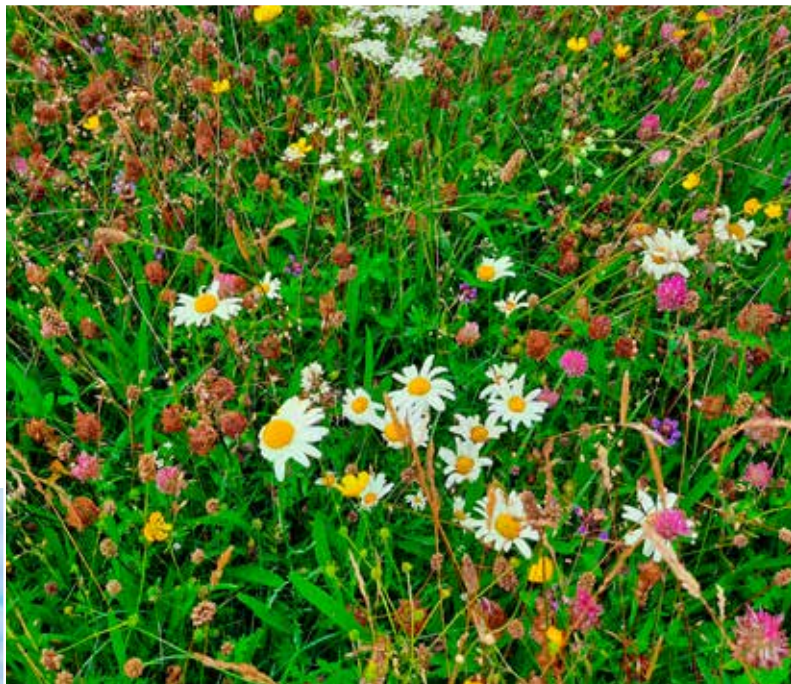
Grazed in winter with a small number of sheep. These are taken off in May and the meadow is closed up. It is cut for hay in late July to August.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

No website or public access

DESCRIPTION

Fantastic traditionally managed hay meadow that is enclosed by mature hedgerows. It runs into botanically diverse areas at the edge of Lough Ree. The meadow is a riot of colour in summer, being full of Quaking-grass, Crested Dog's-tail, Red Clover, Meadow Buttercup, Yellow-rattle, Selfheal, Oxeye Daisy and a range of orchid species.



ACCESS:

No public access

SIZE:

2 ha

PARKING:

no

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland





Farmland at 'The Rocks'

near Taughmaconnell, Co. Roscommon



This farm has a large area of semi-natural grassland on well-drained calcareous soil. There is an array of wildflowers, helped by conservation grazing. Like a mini-Burren!

MANAGEMENT

Grazed in winter by Hereford cattle.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.facebook.com/Walk theRocks>



Lesser Butterfly-orchid

DESCRIPTION

Large areas of species-rich calcareous grassland are found in this area. Many orchid species have been recorded including - Common Spotted-orchid, Frog Orchid, Heath Fragrant-orchid, Heath Spotted-orchid and Lesser Butterfly-orchid. A succession of flowers bloom from early spring until autumn, including Primroses, Mouse-ear-hawkweed, Lady's Bedstraw, Wild Thyme, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil and Common Knapweed. Rarer species like Mountain Everlasting, Kidney Vetch, Carline Thistle, Rough Hawkbit, Burnet-saxifrage and Fairy Flax are also found. It is thus not surprising that it is a haven for wildlife, with insects, birds and mammals found throughout.



Kidney Vetch and
Mouse-ear-hawkweed

The landscape is like a time capsule, a glimpse of what was once widespread in South Roscommon. This is directly linked to the sensitive management and traditional farming practices of the local farming families over many generations, and it is worth protecting for the generations that come next. Cattle are allowed to graze the land through the winter months, and are taken off in early spring. In late August, some light grazing takes places with daily monitoring of the herd. This landscape supplies fresh drinking water to a large catchment area in Roscommon.

ACCESS:

Private, but walks with farmer possible by request
(liamkildea@gmail.com)

SIZE:

20 ha, set within a wider area known as 'The Rocks'.

PARKING:

by arrangement only

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland



Ant hill





Farmland at Calverstown House

near Kilcullen, Co. Kildare



This farm has lovely areas of dry and wet grassland that have persisted for decades through sympathetic management. It is situated on a long south-facing glacial bank.

MANAGEMENT

The meadow has been managed sympathetically for the last 60 years. Within that period, it has had different grazing regimes. In the last four years, it has been strip grazed by Aubrac cows from November to February when it is then allowed to grow, flower and set seed until the following November. Previous to that it had been cut for hay in July, then grazed by Aubrac cows until the end of the season.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.farmingfornature.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/FFN-Leaflet-WEB.pdf>

DESCRIPTION

This grassland is on a sheltered south-facing site with a tall multi-species hedgerow at the top, sloping down to a reedbed and stream at the bottom. The meadow encompasses a large diversity of flowers and grasses, including Yorkshire-fog, Crested Dog's-tail, Sweet Vernal-grass, Yellow-rattle, Red Clover, Black Medick, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Hogweed, Lady's Bedstraw and orchids. Meadowsweet, Purple-loosestrife, Common Valerian and Wild Angelica occur in the damper areas. This provides continuous habitat for a wide range of insects and invertebrates throughout the growing season.

Many different species of butterflies, bumblebees, solitary bees, hoverflies and moths have been recorded. It is also home to the rare Large Carder Bumblebee. The diversity of insects and invertebrates encourages bird species such as Stonechat, Reed Bunting, occasional Grasshopper Warbler and in winter, Snipe, Woodcock and other visiting migrants.

ACCESS:

Private, but walks with farmer possible by request

SIZE:

5 ha, within larger organic farm

PARKING:

by arrangement only

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland



Yellow-rattle



Large Carder Bee on Common Knapweed





Clomantagh Hill

near Johnstown, Co. Kilkenny



Clomantagh Hill is part of a low escarpment of limestone rising from the Irish central plain, creating unique and important grassland habitats. The site is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) selected for species-rich calcareous grassland.

MANAGEMENT

Approximately half of the limestone grassland is managed under the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme and is grazed from October to April with Dexter cattle, an old Irish breed. The other half is mostly spring/summer grazed with Friesian calves.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.npws.ie/protected-sites/sac/000849>

DESCRIPTION

This site is rich in floral diversity as a result of winter grazing with cattle on the limestone hill grassland. Exposed small ledges or flat sheets occur and are often weathered into a pavement pattern, similar to that found in the Burren, Co. Clare. After the stock are removed, plants can grow, flower and set seed, resulting in a succession of grasses and wildflowers such as Crested Dog's-tail, Smooth Meadow-grass, Yellow Oat-grass, Quaking-grass, Wild Thyme, Mouse-ear-hawkweed, Burnet-saxifrage, eyebright, Fairy Flax and Oxeye Daisy. Rare Green-winged Orchids grow sparingly through this community, along with Frog Orchids and Common Spotted-orchids. Some cliffs occur on the south side of Clomantagh where Southern Polypody is common, along with Hairy Rock-cress. Parts of this site are also rich in fungi, particularly waxcaps.

Woodland occurs on the north-western slope, dominated by Hazel and Downy Birch, with a good range of herb species in the ground layer. In seepage areas Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage, Bugle and Remote Sedge are characteristic, and there is a little Water Avens, Woodruff and Tufted Hair-grass at the base of the slope. The site also has a population of Marsh Fritillary butterfly, supported by Devil's-bit Scabious.

ACCESS:

No public access

SIZE:

c.100 ha

PARKING:

limited and by arrangement

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

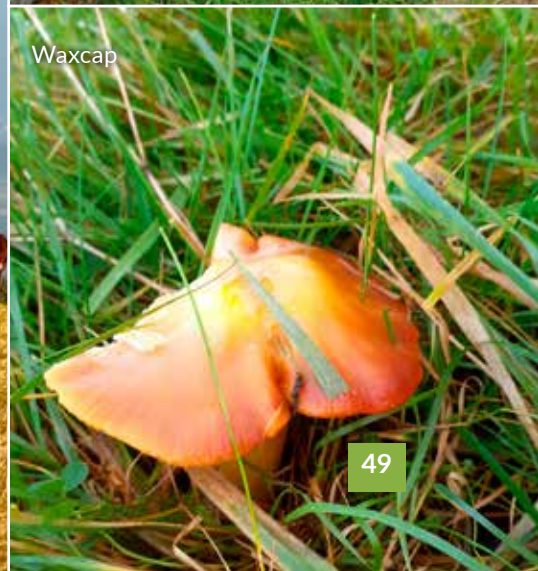
no

OWNERS:

The hill is privately owned by three separate landowners



Dexter cattle



Waxcap



Farmland at Derreenatloghtan

near Boston, Co. Clare



Located in the east Burren lowlands, these fields are home to a stunning array of plants including those once common throughout Ireland, as well as rarer grassland flowers.

MANAGEMENT

Part of a commercial suckler farm, this land is mainly winter grazed by continental, crossbreed cows, some of which calve here in spring. Light grazing in late spring or May/June helps keep the Purple Moor-grass and Bracken from becoming dominant in places. Targeted scrub control is carried out when needed to protect the grassland.



Spring Gentian

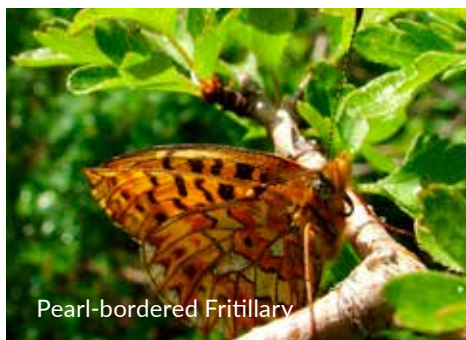
WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.npws.ie/protected-sites/sac/001926>

DESCRIPTION

Extensive areas of species-rich calcareous grassland grade into neutral grassland, limestone heath, limestone pavement, Hazel scrub and turlough. A floral journey through the seasons as spring flowers - including swathes of Early-purple Orchids and the Burren 'specialities', Spring Gentian, Mountain Avens and Blue Moor-grass, give way to those of summer - Quaking-grass, Dropwort, Bloody Crane's-bill, and orchids galore such as Common Spotted, Pyramidal, Bee, Fly, Lesser Butterfly and Marsh. High summer and autumn bring Field Scabious, Greater Knapweed, Harebell, Grass-of-Parnassus, Field and Autumn Gentian, and a haze of Devil's-bit Scabious. The rare and hard to spot fern, Moonwort, grows here also.

The long flowering season and sheer abundance of wildflowers makes this a pollinators paradise. Shrill Carder Bee thrives here, as do many of our uncommon butterflies - Dingy Skipper, Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Grayling, and moths such as Speckled Yellow, Dew, Transparent Burnet, and Burren Green. Large ant hills are a feature with many built on outcropping limestone or along the low, linear stone divisions of the southern section - ants with underfloor heating! The resident birds like Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and Bullfinch, are joined in spring by migrants - Willow Warbler, Whitethroat, Blackcap and Cuckoo, coming to feed their young on the bountiful invertebrates or in the case of the Cuckoo, to freeloard in the nests of residents.



Pearl-bordered Fritillary

ACCESS:

No public access

SIZE:

c.33 ha set amongst a mosaic of habitats totalling c.60 ha

PARKING:

by arrangement only

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

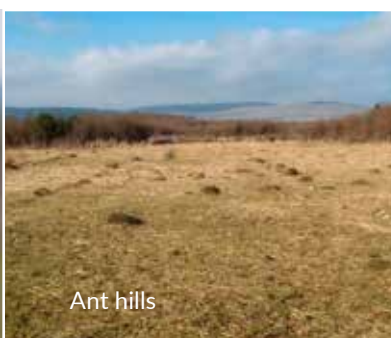
no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland



Greater Knapweed



Ant hills



Dropwort



Kilranelagh Lodge Country House and Farm

Kiltegan, Co. Wicklow



Carberry's farm has diverse semi-natural grasslands bounded by wetlands, wet woodland and heath.

MANAGEMENT

The grassland is managed by winter grazing with sheep, starting in November and proceeding through a series of fenced paddocks. Grazing is timed to allow some paddocks to be free of grazing as early as December. They are left to grow, and cut between July and September, allowing a continuous flowering canopy for pollinators. The wet grassland is grazed from September to late November with horses.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://kilranelaghlodge.ie/>

DESCRIPTION

The grasslands have been surveyed as part of the ACRES agri-environment scheme and have proven to have a diverse range of plant species. Those recorded to date include Yellow-rattle, Goat's-beard, Lady's Bedstraw, Primrose, Cowslip, Common Sorrel, Sheep's Sorrel, Kidney Vetch, hawk's-beard, Cat's-ear, Meadow Vetchling, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Oxeye Daisy, Pignut, hawkweeds, Meadowsweet, Yarrow, Wild Angelica, White Clover, eyebright, Hogweed, stitchworts, Curled Dock, Ribwort Plantain, forget-me-nots, Selfheal, Bugle, Field Scabious, violets, Tufted Vetch, Devil's-bit Scabious, Marsh Thistle, Meadow Thistle, Red Clover, Common Knapweed, Spear Thistle, Ragged-Robin, Bee Orchid, Wild Thyme and Cuckooflower. Species recorded in the wet grassland include Grass-of-Parnassus, Marsh-marigold, Marsh Pennywort, woodrush, mints, lousewort and Hemp-agrimony. These areas also support a breeding population of the protected Marsh Fritillary butterfly.

The meadows are a hive of activity from early summer with lots of bees, butterflies, grasshoppers and moths, including the Six-spot Burnet and the Hummingbird Hawk-moth. Many species of birds have also been recorded including Curlew, Barn Owl, Woodpecker, Goldfinch and Skylark.

ACCESS:

Private, but visits can be arranged by contacting Kilranelagh Lodge Country House

SIZE:

c.12.5 ha

PARKING:

by arrangement only

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland



Marsh Fritillary





Farmland at Lakeview

Mullagh, Co. Cavan



Located on the Cavan/Meath border, this organic farm has a wide diversity of habitats including rare traditionally-managed hay meadows which contain a diverse range of plant species.

MANAGEMENT

The meadows are cut once annually for hay and then grazed with a herd of organic cattle in the autumn.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<http://www.lakevieworganic.com/>

DESCRIPTION

The hay meadows are located on a farm which has been certified organic since 1998. With sensitive management, including late cutting for hay, light autumn grazing and no artificial fertiliser, these meadows have been preserved and maintained with plant diversity as the main focus. Both flora and fauna have been monitored on the farm over the past 30 years by Jonathan Shackleton. They contain a huge diversity of plant species including Bugle, lady's-mantle, Meadow Foxtail, Sweet Vernal-grass, Cuckooflower, Common Knapweed, Pignut, Crested Dog's-tail, Common Spotted-orchid, Meadowsweet, Wild Strawberry, Cat's-ear, Meadow Vetchling, Autumn Hawkbit, Oxeye Daisy, Cowslip, Selfheal, Yellow-rattle, sorrel, Red Champion, Tufted Vetch and Bush Vetch.

ACCESS:

Private, but walks with farmer possible by request

SIZE:

c.3.5 ha, set within a larger organic farm

PARKING:

by arrangement only

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland

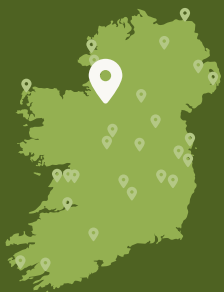


Selfheal



Farmland at Mountallen

Mountallen, Co. Roscommon



This farm on the western shores of Lough Allen has been organic since 1996. It has a wonderful mix of habitats including species-rich acid grassland and wet grassland.

MANAGEMENT

The grass is cut and lifted, usually at the end of August. It is made into hay or haylage depending on the weather.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.mountallenecotours.com/>

DESCRIPTION

The whole farm is managed in a nature-friendly way. The areas of species-rich wet grassland by Lough Allen flood naturally in the winter. The month of July is usually the best time of year to see the grassland. There are several rare plants including Irish Lady's-tresses and Mudwort. The site is also used by breeding and wintering wildfowl and waders, including Curlew. At the edge of the lowland raised bog there is an area of grassland with Devil's-bit Scabious, the food plant of the Marsh Fritillary butterfly. Large Heath butterflies are also found on the farm. The whole area is of high natural heritage value because of its variety of habitats which include lowland raised bog, semi-natural grassland, lake shore, woodland, and river.

ACCESS:

Private, but walks with farmer possible by request

SIZE:

c.1 ha

PARKING:

by arrangement only

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland



Irish Lady's-tresses





Farmland at Morgan's North

near Askeaton, Co. Limerick



Extremely diverse and unique high value grassland habitats on two adjoining farms on the Shannon estuary, consisting mainly of calcareous grassland and salt marsh.

MANAGEMENT

Shorthorn & Droimeann cross cattle graze the extensive grassland. It is closed off on 15th April and until the meadow is mown for hay after 15th August.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.farmingfornature.ie/nominees/michael-tom-keane/>

DESCRIPTION

The species-rich grasslands are lightly grazed and cut annually, with no fertiliser inputs. They have not been reseeded in more than a decade and are in organic production since 2002. Species of note include Bee Orchid, Carline Thistle, Common Spotted-orchid, Dense-flowered Orchid, Devil's-bit Scabious, Dodder, eyebright, Fairy Flax, Frog Orchid, Goldenrod, Hairy Violet, Lady's Bedstraw, Heather, Mountain Everlasting, Pyramidal Orchid, Salad Burnet, Square-stalked St John's-wort, Quaking-grass and Tormantil. There is an area of unique dry grassland and salt marsh on the farm, that is also rich in flora and fauna. Management of this area is by grazing. Parts of this site are managed as part of the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme.

ACCESS:

Private, but group walks with farmer possible by request

SIZE:

141 ha in total across two farms, including calcareous grassland and salt marsh

PARKING:

no

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland





Cross Loop Walk

Mullet Peninsula, Co. Mayo

.....



This loop walk brings you through an area of machair grassland alongside grey dunes. These support an array of flora, which in turn supports insects including the rare Great Yellow Bumblebee and Red-shanked Bumblebee.

MANAGEMENT

The fields adjoining the Cross Loop Walk are managed by grazing, mostly cattle but some sheep. Traditionally managed fields are grazed in the winter months only by cattle, though today some fields can be grazed at any time. There is some regular maintenance of the verges, though ideally these would be left and only cut once a year. The lake edges are not grazed.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://mayotrails.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Cross-Loops-map.pdf>

DESCRIPTION

The walk goes through an area of machair grassland. Machairs are coastal plains derived from wind-blown sand, and are known in some areas as sandybanks. The soil underpinning these grasslands has a significant percentage of shell-derived material, and while generally flat, they can have undulations and wet hollows too. The habitat has developed in close association with farming, with winter grazing allowing flowers to thrive.

Flora species vary from field to field and over the seasons. In spring, drier areas include species like Common Bird's-foot-trefoil and Kidney Vetch. By summer these areas support Wild Thyme, Lady's Bedstraw, eyebrights, Cat's-ear, Yellow-Rattle and Red Bartsia, and toward late summer some sites have Harebell and many support Common Knapweed. Clovers are also important, with Red Clover providing splashes of colour in late spring. Orchids can be found in the damper patches.

The abundance of flowers supports a wide range of insects, including the rare Great Yellow Bumblebee and the Red-shanked Bumblebee. Machair also supports breeding waders such as Lapwing. There are good populations of Irish Hare. Some farmers in the area are currently working with Life on Machair, an EU-funded project which works with farmers, landowners and local communities with a view to protecting and restoring machair systems.

ACCESS:

Publicly accessible loop walk - note requirement to stay on path

SIZE:

The Green Loop is just over 5 km long

PARKING:

yes, small car park beside Cross Abbey Graveyard at the north end of the beach

CAFÉ:

no

TOILETS:

portaloo

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland

Great Yellow Bumblebee





Farmland at St. John's Point

near Killybegs, Co. Donegal



St. John's Point occurs at the end of a long peninsula and boasts calcareous grassland, limestone pavement and Molinia Meadows. You might spot Marsh Fritillary butterflies - this is a great place to see them!

MANAGEMENT

The site is lightly grazed by a small herd of cattle. There has been no fertiliser applied to the site.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.npws.ie/protected-sites/sac/000191>



Bee Orchid

DESCRIPTION

St. John's Point is a 10 km-long, narrow peninsula running south-west from Dunkineely into Donegal Bay. Grassland occurs on limestone on low ridges with outcropping rocks and 'V' shaped valleys with peaty formations. The exposed limestone forms pavement where some unusual plants are found including Bloody Crane's-bill, Northern Bedstraw, Stone Bramble and Blue Moor-grass. More abundant plants on the thin soils and rocky clefts include Mountain Everlasting, marsh-orchids, Burnet Rose, Common Knapweed and Heath Spotted-orchid. The wet valley bottoms contain flushes rich in Bogbean, Common Cottongrass, Marsh-marigold, Lesser Spearwort, Grass-of-Parnassus and Common Scurvygrass. Heathy areas have developed on thin, peaty soils near the end of St. John's Point.

Areas of the EU Habitats Directive-listed 'Molinia Meadow' also exist, with Purple Moor-grass dominating, along with Common Spotted-orchid, Early Marsh-orchid and Heath Spotted-orchid.

Thanks to the abundance of Devil's-bit Scabious, St. John's Point is a great site to see the Marsh Fritillary butterfly.

ACCESS:

Currently publicly accessible, with caution around cattle

SIZE:

16.7 ha of calcareous grassland and 13.6 ha of Molinia Meadows within the SAC

PARKING:

park at the beach, and access site on foot from there

CAFÉ:

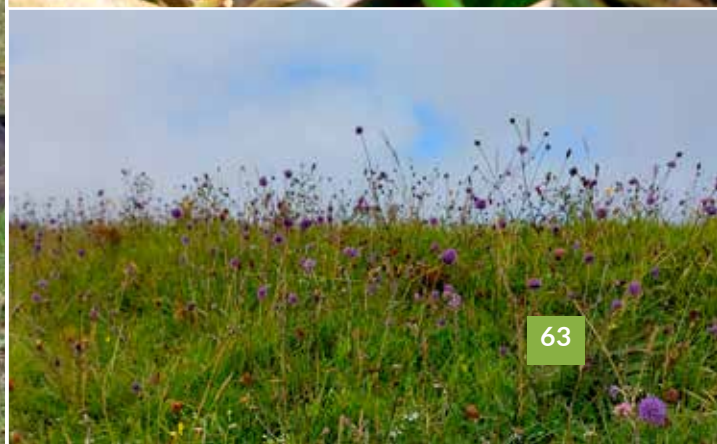
no

TOILETS:

no

OWNERS:

Privately owned farmland



Some key principles for managing semi-natural grasslands:

Nutrients

On sites with high nutrient levels (e.g. heavily fertilised grasslands), a small number of grass species will dominate, along with plants like thistles and docks. These species thrive when nutrient levels are high, and squeeze out many other species. If you want floral diversity, nutrient levels must be lowered.

- Avoid or reduce fertiliser.
- Remove all cuttings if the area is mown. The cuttings are like a layer of compost if left on site.

Timing

If grasslands are mown or grazed at the height of summer, then many species don't get to flower or set seed.

- Winter-grazing is ideal for dry sites but may not always be practical.
- Mowing in late summer allows many plants and invertebrates to have completed their life cycle. But like many things, a diversity of mowing times is also beneficial – having an earlier cut the odd year is no harm!
- Using a combination of mowing and grazing can be very beneficial.

Grazing

If the grassland is pasture, rather than meadow, then the species and breed of grazer will have an impact.

- Sheep graze grasslands tight. Cattle and horses create more diversity of structure. Goats are great for managing scrub but can be hard work to fence in!
- Traditional breeds of stock can have many benefits such as being lighter (less poaching), hardier (less vet bills, less need to house in winter), and some even thrive on rough vegetation (less need to supplementary feed).

Advice

Always get appropriate advice – this is likely to come from more than one source. Depending on your starting point (e.g. abandoned scrubby area, intensive agricultural grassland), management needs will differ, at least initially, making relevant advice even more important.

- Consider speaking to an ecologist.
- Find a nearby farmer who already does what you'd like to do and ask them for advice. 'Farming for Nature' has lists of such farmers, along with farm visits which are highly recommended.
- Explore some of the resources provided at the end of this booklet.





Expectations

When managing or restoring a semi-natural grassland, the aim should always be a diverse and well-functioning grassland, rather than a showy sward. A typical and healthy grassland is, perhaps unsurprisingly, grassy!

- Rest assured, a healthy grassland will be excellent for pollinators, other invertebrates, and a range of other biodiversity, and it will be humming with life, especially in summer.
- There will be a good mix of native grass and other plant species, but it may look green, brown or messy, rather than flowery all the time.
- It may look a little 'boring' to some eyes (but not the creatures that use it), and it may look untidy, particularly at certain times of the year - hence managing expectations is key.
- We all need to re-calibrate a little, and appreciate the beauty and wonder in the ordinary.



"I just love species-rich grasslands! There are so many colours, smells and sounds even in the smallest corner of these deceptively diverse and fascinating habitats. I also love that they provide so many functions, above and below ground, not least supporting the diet of the lucky livestock who graze them, or who get to eat the meadowed hay later that winter. The Burren really got me hooked on this habitat, but it's always thrilling to find them elsewhere, like a surprise encounter with a familiar friend. This booklet is like a taster menu for some of Ireland's great remnant grasslands, I hope you get to enjoy at least some of them as much as I still do - and if you happen to meet the farmer when visiting, do congratulate them on their custodianship of these very special places."

Brendan Dunford
Burrenbeo Trust



In winter the floodplain meadows of the Shannon Callows are fully submerged, but these will be productive and flower-rich grasslands in summer, after the waters recede.

POEM

'Time Cycle Repeat'

by Jeff Coles (@jeffcolesart)

River water rain, flood plain
Silt soil seed, knapweed
Flood river rise dragonflies
Seed soil roots, muddy boots
Flower birds honeybee, biodiversity
Horse sheep cattle, yellow rattle
Mow crop hay, sunny day
Time cycle repeat, meadow sweet

This poem featured in a calendar produced by Alice Walker and the Floodplain Meadows Partnership in 2022, and was 'inspired by a day sketching and a lecture at Long Mead Meadow'. It beautifully captures the many elements that make up floodplain meadows, or as they are often known in Ireland, 'callows' grasslands.

Where to find further information:



1. GREAT IRISH GRASSLANDS WEBSITE

Information on semi-natural grasslands in Ireland

<https://www.greatirishgrasslands.ie/>



2. BSBI 'IRISH GRASSLANDS PROJECT'

Excellent training videos for plant identification

<https://bsbi.org/irish-grasslands-project>



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3. NPWS GRASSLANDS PAGE

Scientific surveys and grassland map viewer

<https://www.npws.ie/research-projects/grasslands>



4. ALL-IRELAND POLLINATOR PLAN

Resources and information on pollinators and their habitats

<https://pollinators.ie/>



5. FARMING FOR NATURE

Showcasing nature-friendly farmers, including frequent farm walks

<https://www.farmingfornature.ie/>

Text: Maria Long, Phoebe O'Brien, Ruth Wilson & Úna FitzPatrick.

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