



## Brief 1

# Ballycroy National Park

## Introduction

### Geology

Ballycroy National Park was established in November, 1998. It was Ireland's sixth National Park and is located on the western seaboard in northwest Mayo. It comprises over 11,000 hectares of Atlantic Blanket Bog and mountainous terrain, covering a vast uninhabited and unspoilt wilderness, dominated by the Nephin Beg mountain range.



Slieve Carr is the highest mountain in the range at 721 m above sea level. The Scardaun Loughs lie between Nephin Beg and Slieve Carr. To the west of the mountains is the Owenduff bog. This one of the last intact active Blanket Bog systems in Western Europe and is an important scientific and scenic feature of the Park. The Park also protects a variety of other important habitats and species. These include alpine heath, upland grassland, lakes and river catchments. Greenland white-fronted geese, golden plover, red grouse and otters are among the important fauna found within the Park.



North Mayo is formed partly of rock from the Precambrian period, laid down over 600 million years ago. The Dalradian group from this period, which underlies the National Park, was laid down in a marine environment of current-swept shallows with sandy shoals, calcareous lagoons and deeps with muddy floors. The western side of the Park is underlain by schist and gneiss rocks, hardened and crystallised by burial and folding. Quartzite is dominant to the east and southern ends of the Park. Glacial activity over the past 2.5 million years has created some of the most scenic features of the Park. These include the many corrie lakes such as Corryloughaphuill Lough. Glacial boulder clay, found at the southern edge of the Nephin Beg mountain range, is further evidence of glacial activity.



**Owenduff**

The National Park is itself part of the Owenduff/Nephin Complex, a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA). These European designations are part of the **Natura 2000 Network**, which protects rare and important habitats and species under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives. The National Park Visitor Centre is located in the village of Ballycroy just off the N59 road between Mulranny and Bangor Erris. Ballycroy National Park is managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government.



### **History**

Prior to purchase by the State, the National Park lands were used for turbary, agriculture and recreation - such as fishing, shooting, and hill-walking. There is evidence of previous human habitation along the Bangor Trail, near the Owenduff and Tarsaghaun rivers, where the remains of stone buildings and traditional cultivation ridges can be seen. Native Red Deer, which once roamed the Nephin Beg Mountains, would have been one of the species hunted.

### **Habitats**

There is a wide diversity of habitats within the Park. On the highest peak, Slieve Carr, alpine heath is found. Other habitats include upland grassland, wet and dry heath, lakes. The two main rivers - the Owenduff and Tarsaghaun - flow into the sea northwest of Ballycroy. However, with as much as 2,000 mm of rainfall per year, the predominant habitat is the active Atlantic Blanket Bog.



*St. Patrick's Cabbage*

### **Flora**

A variety of interesting plants is found in the bog habitat. These include sphagnum mosses, Black Bog Rush (a notable component of Atlantic Blanket Bog), Purple-moor Grass, bog cotton, Deer-grass, Cross-leaved Heath, Bell Heather, White-beaked Sedge, Bog Asphodel, Bog Myrtle, Orchids, Lousewort, Milkwort, Lichens, Sundew and Butterwort. Sundew and Butterwort are insectivorous plants. They have adapted to the nutrient-poor bog environment. They trap and digest insects caught on their leaves. Bog lakes are poor in nutrients. They are important habitats for Bog Bean. [This an aquatic or bog plant. The three shiny, smooth-edged leaflets on the plant look like the leaves of a bean plant.]

The diversity of plants in lakes is low. However, there is well-developed flora on the margins, including Water Lobelia, Pipewort, Common Spike-rush and Bulbous Rush. Rare plants found in the Park include the Ivy-leaved Bellflower. It flowers during July and August.



Marsh Saxifrage

**Marsh Saxifrage** is found on wet grassland along the banks of the Tarsaghaun and Owenduff rivers. Another rare plant, it is protected under the Flora Protection Order (1999). The plant occurs in flushes on the Blanket Bog, where there is an upwelling of nutrients to the surface. **Purple Saxifrage**, Alpine Meadow Rue, Least Willow and Stiff Sedge are examples of rare Alpine Heath plant species recorded in the mountains. These plants are more commonly found at higher altitude, in colder areas of Europe. The dominant plants also found in the mountains include Bell and Ling Heather, Crowberry and Bilberry.

## Fauna

Mammal species found in the Park include the fox, badger, mountain hare, otter, feral American Mink, Pygmy Shrew and bat species, including one of the most common, the Soprano Pipistrelle. Non-native Red Deer, of farmed origin, were introduced into the wild in the area of Bellacorick in 2000. They can now be found on the margins of the Park. Pine martens inhabit the conifer plantations on the boundary of the Park.

### Irish Mountain Hare



**Atlantic Salmon**

The Owenduff and Tarsaghaun rivers are renowned for the Atlantic salmon and sea trout, whilst the rivers and lakes contain brown trout. Otters feed in the rivers on eels and salmon and can occasionally be seen on the Blanket Bog amongst bog pools. These are an important habitat for much of the invertebrate life in the Park. The predatory larval stages of dragonflies and damselflies feed on waterborne insects, before metamorphosing into winged adults. The colourful and distinctive insects are good indicators of the diversity of the Park's ecosystem. Species found include the Moorland Hawker, Heathland Skimmer, Four-spotted Chaser, Common Darter, Black Darter, Banded Jewelwing, Common Bluet, Common Bluetip, Spring Redtail and Common Spreadwing. The adult dragonflies and damselflies prey on other insects. Some species lay their eggs directly onto stems of vegetation in bog pools, while others scatter their eggs over the water.



The National Park supports a variety of bird species including Dippers, Common Sandpipers, Woodcock,

Dunlin, Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Ravens, Hooded Crows and Whooper Swans. Birds of prey found include Kestrels and Sparrowhawks. Rare species such as the Merlin and Peregrine falcons are also resident. Hen Harriers are winter visitors. Red Grouse are resident in the Park. They rely on a mix of different heights of heather. High heather provides cover from predators, whilst young shoots are necessary for the chicks to feed on. Rarer species use the area either as winter feeding grounds or as summer breeding grounds. Greenland White-fronted Geese are winter visitors from Greenland and are present in the Park from October to April. They feed on the roots of Bog Cotton and white-beaked sedge. Golden Plover are common winter visitors to Ireland. Only a small population breed, in the summer, in the upland areas of the West of Ireland like parts of the Ballycroy National Park.



**Red Grouse**