

# BLACKSLEE

## A SPECIAL PLACE...



*Blackslee*

Blackslee has been declared as an ASSI because of its species-rich grassland and semi-natural woodland. Such habitats tend to occur where land management is not intensive, usually where traditional farming practices are maintained.

The site is flanked by coniferous forestry between the townlands of Blackslee and Bohevny and is composed of a steeply sloping field that grades into Ash woodland on the lower slopes. The underlying geology of the area is Carboniferous age limestone and shale of the Glencar Formation. These rocks formed in shallow water and are base rich having a significant calcium carbonate content.

A special type of species-rich wet grassland known as Purple Moor-grass and rush pastures occurs on the upper slopes of Blackslee. These grasslands are dominated by Sharp-flowered Rush, with abundant sedges and herbs typical of traditionally managed rush pastures, including Devil's-bit Scabious, Lesser Spearwort,

Carnation Sedge and Tawny Sedge. Where there is increased water movement on the steeper slopes, a particular type of rush pasture occurs, called fen meadow, characterised by the presence of Meadow Thistle.



*Meadow Thistle*

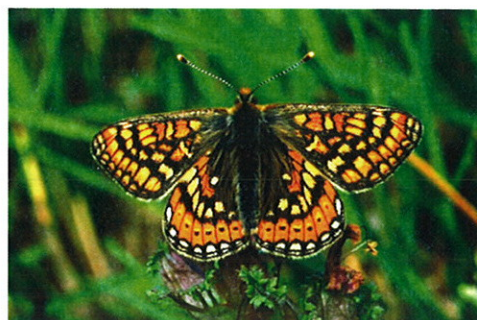
Many of these plants are only found in grasslands where traditional forms of land management are used. The use of artificial fertilisers, herbicides or the application of manure or slurry would cause a reduction in plant numbers on the site. When soils become more fertile, grasses tend to thrive, growing faster and taller. Smaller plants such as orchids are not able to compete with the tougher grasses and as a result are lost.

SITES OF BIOLOGICAL AND EARTH SCIENCE IMPORTANCE HAVE BEEN SURVEYED BY NORTHERN IRELAND ENVIRONMENT AGENCY TO ASSESS THEIR SCIENTIFIC INTEREST. THE BEST SITES ARE NOW BEING DECLARED AS AREAS OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST (ASSIs). IN DOING SO WE AIM TO SAFEGUARD THESE IMPORTANT SITES FOR THE BENEFIT OF PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.



*Devil's-bit Scabious at Blackslee*

In addition to the diversity of plant species that occur, Blackslee is also an important site for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly. Devil's-bit Scabious, the foodplant of the Marsh Fritillary caterpillars, thrives on the wet grasslands at Blackslee.



*Marsh Fritillary butterfly*



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The Ash woodland extends over the lower south and easterly slopes of Blackslee, bisected by a small stream. The woodland is base-rich, with small pockets of wet, flushed woodland. In the past, most of Ireland was covered by forest. As agriculture spread, woodlands declined in extent. Today, less than 1% of Ireland has a semi-natural woodland cover, making it one of the least wooded areas in Europe. Woods are more than collections of trees. They also include all the species that live on and underneath the trees, making woodland one of the most important habitats for our native plants and animals.

Woodlands are comprised of different layers; canopy, shrub and ground layer. Each provides a wide range of



*Woodland canopy and floor*

food sources and places for wildlife to inhabit. These woodland layers are home to birds, flowering plants and to a range of less conspicuous inhabitants such as mosses, liverworts and lichens. These are collectively known as lower plants and are well adapted to the moist conditions of the woodland. Fungi also commonly occur in woods and are of particular importance because they recycle nutrients from fallen leaves and dead wood. Invertebrates such as insects and spiders are often present in abundance due to a combination

of the layered structure, the accumulation of deep humus-rich soils, moist leaf litter and dead wood, all of which provide both shelter and food.

The woodlands at Blackslee are dominated by Ash and Hazel with pockets of wetter Birch woodland along the stream. The shrub layer is dominated by Holly and Hazel, with



*Goldilocks Buttercup*

occasional Rowan and Hawthorn. The field layer is sparse with scattered ferns, including Soft Shield-fern and Hard-fern and occasional dense patches of Bramble. The herb layer is a mosaic of more base-rich and flushed woodland species. Typical species include Bluebell, Wood-sorrel, Primrose, Wood Anemone and Wood Avens. Less frequently recorded species include Early-purple Orchid and Goldilocks Buttercup.

Within the wetter pockets of the woodland, plant species such as Remote Sedge, Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage and Yellow Pimpernel can be found. Mosses are wide ranging in their occurrence throughout the wood. Dominant species include Big Shaggy-moss and Greater Fork-moss.

Woods take a very long time to develop into mature systems because they have a complex structure and many of the plants are slow to grow and spread. It is therefore vitally



*Early-purple Orchid*

important that all remaining areas of woodland are retained and new areas are encouraged to regenerate.

Correct management is essential for special places like Blackslee. Traditional agricultural practices will ensure the survival of the rich range of plants. Northern Ireland Environment Agency aims to work with landowners to ensure Blackslee is protected for the future.