

## DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

## DECLARATION OF AREA OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AT RATHSHERRY, COUNTY ANTRIM. ARTICLE 28 OF THE ENVIRONMENT (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 2002.

The Department of the Environment (the Department), having consulted the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside and being satisfied that the area described and delineated on the attached map (the area) is of special scientific interest by reason of the flora and fauna and accordingly needs to be specially protected, hereby declares the area to be an area of special scientific interest to be known as the 'Rathsherry Area of Special Scientific Interest'.

This area is of special scientific interest because of its species-rich grassland. Species-rich grassland tends to occur only where land management is not intensive, in particular where traditional farming practices have been maintained. As a result, it is not a widespread habitat in Northern Ireland and is often fragmented, consisting of individual fields, parts of fields or banks. Species-rich grasslands, like those found at Rathsherry, are a particularly scarce resource in Northern Ireland.

Rathsherry is situated on the lower eastern slopes of Carncormick and the Glenariff Glen. It forms part of the valley of Legnagooly Burn which flows into the Clogh River approximately 7.5km north-east of Ballymena. The soils on the majority of the area are humic rankers, a thin primitive soil derived from the underlying parent material of basic igneous rock. Lying to the south of the site close to the river, the soils have developed into wetter gleys. The grassland comprises seven field parcels sloping from south to north. Linear features dividing the fields consist of occasional hedgrows but are mostly well-maintained traditional dry stone walls. The combination of topography and the related soil hydrology has resulted in a relatively complex range of grassland communities. These vary from dry to wet, and from moderately base-rich to acid grassland types. Often these differences in type are evident over quite small areas and locally form mosaics with other semi-natural vegetation types, for example, fen meadow, rush pasture in the central flush and on drier sides of fields and gentle slopes, lowland meadow.

The drier fields are typically grass dominated with a wide range of associated herbs. The grass Crested Dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* is a constant component of the sward along with Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*, Common Bent *Agrostis capillaris*, Sweet Vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and Heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*. Sedges are also constant in the sward and include Glaucous Sedge *Carex flacca*, Carnation Sedge *C. panicea* and Spring-sedge *C. caryophyllea*. Herbs typical of traditionally managed grasslands are frequent throughout the sward and include Devil's-bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis*, Cat's-ear *Hypochaeris radicata*, Selfheal *Prunella vulgaris*, Tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, Common Knapweed *Centaurea nigra* and Meadow Buttercup *Ranunculus acris*.



Less frequent are Meadow Vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*, Oxeye Daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare* and Lady's Bedstraw *Galium verum*. Where soils are thinner Common Bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus* is found with a range of other small herbs including Eyebright *Euphrasia officinalis* agg. and Lady's-mantle *Alchemilla glabra*.

There is a large flushed area of wet grassland running down through the centre of the area where increased water movement through the soil and local waterlogging has allowed species reflecting the wetter conditions to predominate. Sharp-flowered Rush *Juncus acutiflorus* and Purple Moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* dominate in these wetter areas, located through the central basin of the field system. Associated plants reflecting the wetter soil conditions include Marsh Hawk's-beard *Crepis paludosa*, Devil's-bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis*, Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, Marsh Willowherb *Epilobium palustre* and Lesser Spearwort *Ranunculus flammula*. Sedges are frequent throughout the wet grassland with Tawny Sedge *Carex hostiana*, Carnation Sedge *C. panicea*, Flea Sedge *C. pulicaris* and the more infrequent Dioecious Sedge *C. dioica*.

The variation in hydrology and related topography, and past and present management has resulted in a considerable range of species present in a relatively small area. In addition to the species already mentioned several orchids were recorded including Common Spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, Early Marsh-orchid *D. incarnata*, Northern Marsh-orchid *D. purpurella*, Common Twayblade *Listera ovata*, Greater Butterfly-orchid *Platanthera chlorantha*, Lesser Butterfly-orchid *P. bifolia* and Frog Orchid *Coeloglossum viride*.

Rathsherry is a significant area of semi-natural grassland that has been managed in a traditional way. As such, it provides valuable feeding and roosting sites for a range of animals, including birds and invertebrates.

## SCHEDULE

**The following operations and activities appear to the Department to be likely to damage the flora and fauna of the area:**

1. Any activity or operation which involves the damage or disturbance by any means of the surface and subsurface of the land, including ploughing, rotovating, harrowing, reclamation and extraction of minerals, including sand, gravel and peat.
2. Any change in the present annual pattern and intensity of grazing, including any change in the type of livestock used or in supplementary feeding practice.
3. Any change in the established method or frequency of rolling, mowing or cutting.
4. The application of manure, slurry or artificial fertiliser.
5. The application of herbicides, fungicides or other chemicals deployed to kill any form of wild plant, other than plants listed as being noxious in the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977.

6. The storage or dumping, spreading or discharge of any material not specified under paragraph 5 above.
7. The destruction, displacement, removal or cutting of any plant, seed or plant remains, other than for:
  - (i) plants listed as noxious in the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977;
  - (ii) normal cutting or mowing regimes for which consent is not required under paragraph 3 above.
8. The release into the area of any animal (other than in connection with normal grazing practice) or plant. 'Animal' includes birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates; 'Plant' includes seed, fruit or spore.
9. Burning.
10. Changes in tree or woodland management, including afforestation, planting, clearing, selective felling and coppicing.
11. Construction, removal or disturbance of any permanent or temporary structure including building, engineering or other operations.
12. Alteration of natural or man-made features, the clearance of boulders or large stones and grading of rock faces.
13. Operations or activities, which would affect wetlands (include marsh, fen, bog, rivers, streams and open water), e.g.
  - (i) change in the methods or frequency of routine drainage maintenance;
  - (ii) modification of the structure of any watercourse;
  - (iii) lowering of the water table, permanently or temporarily;
  - (iv) change in the management of bank-side vegetation.
14. The killing or taking of any wild animal except where such killing or taking is treated as an exception in Articles 5, 6, 11, 17, 20, 21 and 22 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.
15. The following activities undertaken in a manner likely to damage or disturb the wildlife of the area:
  - (i) Educational activities;
  - (ii) Research activities;
  - (iii) Recreational activities;
  - (iv) Exercising of animals.

16. Changes in game, waterfowl or fisheries management or fishing or hunting practices.
17. Use of vehicles or craft likely to damage or disturb the wildlife of the area.

#### **FOOTNOTES**

- (a) Please note that consent by the Department to any of the operations or activities listed in the Schedule does not constitute planning permission. Where required, planning permission must be applied for in the usual manner to the Department under Part IV of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.
- (b) Also note that many of the operations and activities listed in the Schedule are capable of being carried out either on a large scale or in a very small way. While it is impossible to define exactly what is large and what is small, the Department would intend to approach each case in a common sense and practical way. It is very unlikely that small scale operations would give rise for concern and if this was the case the Department would normally give consent, particularly if there is a long history of the operation being undertaken in that precise location.