

SHIMNA RIVER

A SPECIAL PLACE...



The Shimna River

Rivers change as they flow downstream from the mountains to the sea. The river channel gets wider, the speed of the water varies and the river bed and banks change in shape. All these features affect the environmental conditions for plants and animals, so that each part of the river hosts its own distinctive wildlife community. The river channel is home to aquatic flowering plants, mosses, liverworts and lichens, adapted to survive in waters which are often very turbulent and which vary in depth and flow. Good water quality is essential to maintain healthy populations of riverine plants and animals. Invertebrates, such as insects, are important indicators of water quality.



Claw-brook moss - a common riverine moss.



Shimna Waterfall

Rivers support a range of fish species, such as Salmon, which generally need a natural riverbed and clean water to spawn and maintain healthy populations. Salmon are migratory fish, which begin their lives in rivers, but spend much of their adult lives at sea. They return to rivers to breed. One of the wonders of nature is how they manage to navigate back to the exact river from which they were spawned.

Riverbanks are important for a wide variety of habitats, from fringing wetland vegetation to mature woodland. Associated with the woodland are flowering plants, ferns, mosses, birds, mammals and invertebrates.

SITES OF GEOLOGICAL AND BIOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE HAVE BEEN SURVEYED BY THE 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 GUARANTEE THE SURVIVAL OF THESE IMPORTANT SITES FOR THE USE AND ENJOYMENT OF FUTURE GENERATIONS.

The Shimna River ASSI is a special place because of the rich variety of plants and animals it supports. This is a consequence of the naturalness of the riverbanks and channels and the physical diversity displayed along its length. The Shimna River is a short fast flowing, spate river which rises on the slopes of Ott mountain in the Mourne and enters the Irish Sea at Newcastle. It is one of the best examples in Northern Ireland of an upland, oligotrophic (base-poor) river of particular note for the naturalness of the river channel.



Dipper

Where the gradient is shallow the river is characterised by sequences of riffles, runs and pools and the riverbeds are composed of cobbles



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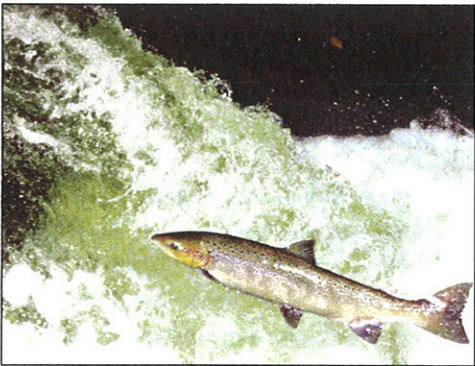
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and scattered boulders with sandy margins. Where the gradient is steep and the bed is composed of bedrock and boulder the flow is much more dramatic with rapids, cascades and waterfalls. Aquatic plants within the river reflect the highly acidic character of the water and are dominated by mosses and liverworts including the rare Holt's Mouse-tail Moss which is very common along the banks on the bottom half of the river. Where the Trassey River meets the Shimna River there is a marked increase in diversity but again mosses and liverworts predominate.



Salmon

Brown Trout, Sea Trout and Salmon all spawn in the river and birds such as Dipper and Grey Wagtail feed along its length, all of which are indicators of the health of the invertebrate population.

Some sections of the Shimna River are fringed by semi-natural woodland, adding further diversity to the system. Marginal woodland is very important because the trees provide shade and cover for birds, mammals and aquatic fauna. This riparian vegetation helps to stabilise the riverbanks and the submerged roots provide a refuge for fish. It also helps to slow and dissipate flood waters, preventing erosion which may damage fish spawning areas and aquatic insect habitats.

The woodland is mainly confined to the riverbank and adjacent slopes and is dominated by Sessile Oak, Downy

Birch, Hazel, Ash, Alder and Willow. Below the woodland canopy the woodland floor can be carpeted by a rich assortment of colourful flowers such as Bluebell, Wood Anemone and Greater Wood-rush. As with rivers these areas of woodland form important wildlife corridors. They provide a means of physically linking habitats and allow species to move between otherwise isolated areas.

Rivers and the wildlife that depend on them take a considerable time to evolve. Similarly, bank-side vegetation takes a long time to develop because of its complexity and the fact that many plants are slow to grow and spread. However, these river habitats are very fragile and can be quickly and easily damaged by human activity. Drainage works can alter the channel and the bed, making the river and its banks an unsuitable environment for many of its inhabitants. Pollution can cause fish kills, and can also have long term effects on invertebrates and plants. Apart from the presence of Fofanny Dam, the Shimna River is in a highly natural state due to limited human impact.



Woodland on the Shimna River

It is therefore vitally important to maintain our rivers in as natural a state as possible, in order to safeguard the wealth of wildlife, which depends on them. Northern Ireland Environment Agency aims to work with landowners to ensure that special rivers like the Shimna River are protected for the future.



Main View