

# Introduction

Lough Ennell is a wonderful site for nature conservation in Westmeath, and is designated a Special Area of Conservation, a Special Protection Area for birds and a Ramsar Site. Lough Ennell is a haven for wildlife and the Lake, Fringing Wetland, Woodland and Calcareous Grassland habitats support high biodiversity.

Lough Ennell was lowered in the 1950s as part of the Brosna drainage scheme so its present water line is backed first by the old lake bed, grassland or calcareous fen, and then by the former shore which often has a line of trees. Overall Lough Ennell is characterised by a low-lying western shore on which fen, and sometimes bog occur and a more hilly eastern side where woodland and pasture predominate. Reeds swamp occurs in many places, including Lilliput, Dysart, Tudenham and Ladestown. Lough Ennell lakeshore habitats are vitally important in sustaining the entire ecosystem, providing important refuges for waterbirds, as well as supporting a diversity of plant life.

Alkaline fen is found along Lough Ennells shoreline, supporting species including Grass-of-Parnassus, Early Marsh Orchid, Marsh Pennywort and Bottle Sedge. The alkaline fens to the south of the lake contain a white form of the early marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnata*. Fens are peat forming wetlands that receive mineral nutrients from sources other than rainfall, usually groundwater or flowing surface waters that are at least mildly calcareous, and are usually found over areas of limestone bedrock.



Marsh Marigold



Grass of Parnassus



Early Marsh Orchid

Calcareous grasslands develop on shallow, lime-rich soils generally overlying limestone rocks, including chalk. Much of Lough Ennells lakeshore is dry, stony ground, which was formerly part of the lake bed but is now exposed by drainage, and colonised by calcareous grassland. This grassland habitat is typically species rich with diverse plant communities, supporting a whole range of wildlife from beautiful butterflies and wildflowers, to fascinating insects and birds.

Calcareous grassland can be found along the eastern shoreline at Ladestown. Species such as Devil's-bit scabious, Bird's-foot trefoil, Mountain Everlasting, Quaking Grass, Hairy Lady's-mantle, Fairy Flax and Yellow-wort occur here. These common species can be seen alongside many rarer plants such as Frog Orchid and Fragrant Orchid.



Frog Orchid



Six-Spot Burnet Moth



Yellow-Wort



Devils Bit Scabious



Bird's-Foot Trefoil



Fragrant Orchid

Lough Ennell is fringed by native woodland on its northern shoreline. The wood is predominantly Birch, with pockets of Rowan, Holly, Bilberry and a lush understory of mosses and ferns. A small section of the wood is dominated by Ash and Grey Willow. Mixed woodland of Beech, Ash and Downy Birch fringes the lakeshore to the northwest. Bluebell and Lords-and-ladies are among the woodland ground flora.



Tufted Duck



Coot



Pochard

## Birdlife

Lough Ennell is a haven for birds and is noted for its waders and wildfowl. It is an important lake for wintering waterfowl, with nationally important populations of Mute Swan, Pochard, Tufted Duck and Coot. The occurrence of the Golden Plover and Lapwing, feeding in Lough Ennells surrounding farmlands is of particular note as these species are red listed in the Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (BoCCI) and listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Lough Ennell is designated as a Special Protection Area for Birds and is also designated a Ramsar site, in view of its role as a wetland of international conservation importance.



Lapwing



Moorhen



Little Grebe



Mute Swan



Golden Plover



Great Crested Grebe



Whooper Swan



Peregrine Falcon

Whooper Swans will often feed on the fields surrounding the lake during the day, grazing on grass, before coming in to roost on open water. Whooper Swans arrive from Iceland in late autumn and return north again in the spring.

Lough Ennell is a great place to see starling murmurations in the evening. Starlings will form huge flocks in the winter, estimates of half a million birds have been claimed. Huge roosts are a spectacular sight in the winter, when at dusk massive swirling flocks form prior to settling down for the night in the reedbeds along the lake shore.



Starling

# Limestone Lake

Lough Ennell is of major conservation significance as one of the most important examples of a limestone lake in the Midlands. This lake is characterised by low nutrient status and crystal clear waters. Lough Ennell supports a diverse aquatic flora including a rich and rare stonewort (charophyte) flora. Seven Stonewort species have been identified including two Red Data Book species, Naked Stonewort (*Chara denudata*) and Coral Stonewort (*C. tomentosa*). These are simple plants of conservation importance because of their relative rarity. Stoneworts gain their name from the lime that encrusts them: most, instead of using cellulose for structural support, build an external skeleton made of calcium carbonate.

Stoneworts in Lough Ennell form dense underwater 'meadows'. These underwater meadows are a rich refuge for large numbers of aquatic fauna and such Chara-lakes, as they are termed, are highly productive and ecologically important ecosystems. Stoneworts are a welcome food source for birds such as Gadwall, Goldeneye, Pochard, Coot and Mute Swan. Snails are attracted to the chalky encrustation which provides them with calcium to make their shells.



Stoneworts

The presence of these underwater Chara meadows makes Lough Ennell brown trout very fast growing and although the fish fauna is dominated by coarse fish species, Lough Ennell is a nationally renowned wild trout fishery. The conformation and colour of Ennell trout is considered by anglers to be remarkable. The trout are shaped more like a grilse than a trout and coloured like a seatrout and they are renowned for being a very hard fighting fish. For this reason they are highly sought after. The most common coarse fish in the lake appears to be the perch. Two Irish species of stickleback are present in the lake, namely the three-spined stickleback *Gasterosteus aculeatus* and the nine/ten spined stickleback, *Pungitius pungitius*.



Orange Tip Butterfly

Beautiful butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies are conspicuous during the summer months. Butterflies can be spotted in the woodlands, fens and grasslands fringing Lough Ennell.

Dingy Skipper is a species typical of limestone grassland and has been recorded at Ladestown. Living up to its name, the Dingy Skipper it is a dull speckled brown moth-like species. Its main food source is Birds-Foot Trefoil. It is uncommon in Ireland, especially outside of the midwest.



Birds-Foot Trefoil



Ringlet



Common Blue Butterfly



Dingy Skipper Butterfly



## Activities and Amenities

Belvedere House Gardens and Park is a magnificent parkland estate on the shores of Lough Ennell. The house, built originally as a hunting and fishing lodge, is set in the midst of 160 acres of parkland on the lake shore. A day visitor to Belvedere gets to explore the restored Belvedere House, Victorian Walled Garden and rolling parkland with its numerous follies. Located on the shores of Lough Ennell is the Lilliput Adventure Centre, where there are a range of activities to suit all. These activities include kayaking, rock climbing, abseiling, archery, canoeing, hill walking, raft building and gorge walking, where the family can have a fun day out. There is also a 9 hole Par 3 Golf Course located at Lilliput on the shores of Lough Ennell. Lough Ennell is a location well regarded for its fishing opportunities, with good Trout, Perch and Pike fishing to be had for the keen angler. Public piers and jetties are located at Butlersbridge, Whitesbridge Bay, Ladestown and Lilliput.



# Lough Ennell

## A Visitor's Guide



Large Red Damselfly

## Dragonflies and Damselflies



These adaptable insects lord over wetlands, moorland and woodland glades, feeding on flies, midges and even each other. Species commonly spotted at Lough Ennell during the summer months include Common Blue Damselfly, Brown Hawker Dragonfly and Common Darter Dragonfly.



Brown Hawker Dragonfly

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