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Lough Oughter and associated lakes

Occupying much of the lowland drumlin belt in north central Cavan between Belturbet, Killeshandra and Cavan town, Lough Oughter is a complicated system including 70 interdrumlin lakes, and 14 basins in the course of the Erne River. The current Natural Heritage Area (NHA) is a refinement of the old Area of Scientific Interest (ASI). The site includes the open water of the lakes and basins, and often includes the adjacent level fields of the floodplain and sometimes drumlin slopes, particularly on islands and isolated headlands.

Lough Oughter lies only 3m above the very similar Upper Lough Erne complex in Co. Fermanagh, drainage is inefficient and the water levels prone to natural fluctuation as a result. The regularly flooded areas still accommodate a variety of specialist plant species such as Amphibious bistort (*Polygonum amphibium*) and marsh foxtail (*Alopecurus geniculatus*), as well as rarer species such as needle spike-rush (*Eleocharis acicularis*) and lesser marshwort (*Apium inundatum*).

The lakes and basins are shallow, and the water well mixed and nutrient rich (eutrophic). The aquatic flora is more varied than might be expected with several pondweed species such as blunt-leaved pondweed (*Potamogeton obtusifolius*), shining pondweed (*P. lucens*), broad-leaved pondweed (*P. natans*), reddish pondweed (*P. alpinus*) and various-leaved pondweed (*P. gramineus*). Typical in the zone of aquatic plants are also yellow water-lily (*Nuphar lutea*), Canadian pondweed (*Elodea canadensis*) and duckweed species (*Lemna* spp.).

Around much of the shoreline there are well developed swamp and marsh communities, typically with a zone of bulrush (*Schoenoplectus lacustris*) in front of a zone of common reed (*Phragmites australis*) which is in turn backed by a more species rich zone of sedges, grasses and herbs, particularly bottle sedge (*Carex rostrata*), common sedge (*Carex nigra*), creeping bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and wild angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*). Less widespread species also occur on the wet lake margins for example greater water-parsnip, cowbane (*Cicuta virosa*), tufted-sedge (*Carex elata*) and greater spearwort (*Ranunculus lingua*) may be locally prominent. There are many variations on this typical zonation of sheltered shores with species such as reedmace (*Typha* spp.) and reed canary-grass gaining local prominence. More exposed shores lack the extensive swamp zones, here small species such as common spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*) can be found.

Level wet pastures tend to be dominated by creeping bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*) and soft rush (*Juncus effusus*) with a scattering of marshland and wet grassland plants such as cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*) and yellow iris (*Iris pseudacorus*).

Where a general lack of grazing pressure or a particularly steep slope has allowed it, deciduous woodland has re-established itself behind the reedbeds. Two willows (*Salix caprea* and *S. cinerea*) are common constituents along with hazel (*Corylus avellana*), hawthorn (*Crateagus monogyna*) and alder (*Alnus glutinosa*). In drier areas ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), and oak (*Quercus* spp.) also occur while the shrubs include blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), spindle-tree (*Euonymus europaeus*) and

Guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*). The clayey soils have a characteristic flora, including wood avens (*Geum urbanum*), wood sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), and wood sedge (*Carex sylvatica*). In places local estate plantings that have been left as game coverts are also of interest. Here species such as Wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*), silver birch (*Betula pendula*) and aspen (*Populus tremula*) occur with the rare bird cherry (*Prunus padus*) and buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharticus*). Interesting herb species include toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*), thin-spiked wood-sedge (*Carex strigosa*) and birds-nest orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*).

Lough Oughter supports a substantial population of waterbirds including internationally important numbers of whooper swan (average peak 165) and nationally important numbers of tufted duck (average peak 247) and cormorant (average peak 130) as well as important numbers of species such as great crested grebe, wigeon, teal and pochard. Lapwing and golden plover also utilise the wet grassland areas.

The site as a whole is the best inland example of a flooded drumlin landscape and has many rich and varied biological communities. Nowhere else in the Republic of Ireland does such an intimate mixture of land and water occur over a comparable area, and many of the species of wetland plant, some considered quite commonplace in the Oughter system, are infrequent elsewhere. The wintering whooper swan population represents about 3% of the total European population, underlining the international status of the site.