

Wildlife Survey

Tyrrellspass Development Association

Prepared : 2009

Overview – see Map attached

According to the Audit of Biological Datasets for County Westmeath, undertaken in order to prepare a Local Biodiversity Plan as part of international legislation in order to conserve Ireland's biodiversity, there is a low level of knowledge in relation to FW: Watercourses and G: Grassland and marsh and species of conservation importance i.e. otters, bats and the Irish hare; freshwater macroinvertebrates and non-marine molluscs; freshwater fish of conservation importance and alien and non-native species.

Most information relates to the SCAs, NHAs and SPAs, with good information on peatlands, woodlands and vascular plants. Information in relation to birds, including wetland birds, is apparently high.

The main weaknesses stem from lack of funding for biodiversity research and study and a lack of information on the ecology of important habitats.

Some of the available information in relation to habitats may be inaccurate. In Schedule 8.1.10 of Westmeath County Development Plan (2008-14), some of the data is puzzling, at least. For instance, a kettlehole (No. 13; N380 415): Tyrrellspass when searched for turned out to be quite a distance from Tyrrellspass but perhaps the location was merely an identifier. Also, the Swallow Lough mentioned in the same schedule was drained over thirty years ago, by a local farmer.

The EIS for the N6 appears to confuse the Swallow Lough with Cornaher Lough.

There is much detail, therefore, to be checked out in the existing records, so that an accurate database relating to habitats and geological features may be obtained for Tyrrellspass and the surrounding area.

The Village Design Statement contains local information on areas of importance to the residents of Tyrrellspass. 'The Flash' is one such which is mentioned; also landscapes, views into the village and stone walls.

Introduction

Tyrrellspass takes its origin from the only available, dry pass through the bog which was 'policed' by the Tyrrell's. Later, a toll gate was erected and a charge for passage was made.

The area is still characterised by bogland (see aerial photograph), with Cloncrow Bog to the North and the area known as The Flash (a turlough?) on the South. Within a few kilometres of the village, Raheenmore Bog is a cSAC and proposed NHA.

Eskers are abundant around the village, with Rahugh Ridge, pNHA and the Split Hill and Long Hill Esker, an SAC (Code 1831). Both Rahugh Ridge and the Split Hill and Long Hill Esker are important habitats, having species listed in the RPDB. However, Rahugh Ridge is being mined for gravel since 2008.

Strengths

Tyrrellspass is graced with a variety of interesting and important habitats in its environs. Cloncrow Bog is the closest of these to the village and provides an important local amenity for its residents who regularly walk there. The site comprises a raised bog and areas of cutover with vegetation typical of a Midlands Raised Bog. There is a good diversity of raised bog microhabitats, including pools, quaking areas, hummock and hollow complexes, a swallow hole and a small flush, plus some scarce plant species.

Tyrrellspass Development Association (aka Tidy Towns Committee), in conjunction with Westmeath County Council and the Rural Development Fund hope to expand this amenity by providing an accessible, all-weather walkway to and across the bog. A discrete 'hide' for viewing wildlife would possibly form part of this amenity.

Weaknesses

- a) Japanese Knotweed is on the march here. This will be eradicated over time in the manner recommended as 'best practice' by the IWT.
- b) Some damaging activities continue at Cloncrow – peat-cutting, grazing and impacts from drainage and gravel extraction will continue to have an impact on the area.

The Village

The village itself has a good selection of (potentially) important wildlife habitats:

- graveyards
- a small wooded area in front of the restored Belvedere Orphanage
- 'The Flash'
- hedgerows, walls and green spaces with trees
- small, designated 'wildlife area' beside the village hall

Walls

Fortunately, no one has had the energy to 'clean up' the walls in the village and they remain an important habitat for plants, including ferns, mosses, lichens.

Weaknesses

Where restoration of walls and stone gate piers has taken place in the past, cement has been used rather than lime mortar.

Hedgerows

Hedgerows contain many species of plants common to the area – hawthorn, elder, honeysuckle, ash. Hedges are, of course, left uncut during the nesting season.

Grassed areas

There is a considerable acreage of grass in the village. It takes significant resources to keep it looking ‘neat and tidy’ and it is a much admired feature of the village, especially The Green. The latter is a Protected Structure and ‘owned’ by the residents in The Crescent. It is an important amenity for visitors to the village who regularly picnic. It has a number of trees, some of which are non-native. Its main threat is from litter.

In the past, the edges of The Green have had to be ‘edged’ in either railway sleepers or (from Westmeath County Council) granite sets to overcome erosion and damage due to car parking. However, in the process, the Green has lost its natural ‘fall’. Railway sleepers create a more habitat-friendly resolution for wildlife but they rot in time and have to be replaced.

Graveyards

The graveyards at St Stephen’s and St Sinian’s are ‘too’ well kept from the point of view of wildlife. St Sinian’s is regularly cut during the year, giving a ‘neat’ appearance much admired by Tidy Towns adjudicators. However, it would be interesting to leave a small area uncut from spring to autumn to see what plants emerge.

Approximately three miles west of the village, on the Galway road, the Church of Christ the King, Newtown has a wonderful stand of yew.

Watercourses

Tyrrellspass is a ‘watershed’, draining to the Boyne catchment on the south/east and to the Shannon on the north/west. As can be seen from the aerial map, there are series of drainage channels on the east of the village. Water is channelled beneath the road at the Emo garage and proceeds from there to the County Council water treatment plant at No. 4 on the aerial map. There is an outflow pipe from this works whose load goes towards Cloncrow Bog. Flooding of the fields beyond the Emo garage occurs when water levels are high.

At the eastern entrance (from Dublin) into the village, on the left, there is an area known as The Flash - a turlough - which floods regularly (photo from 2007 attached).

There is also Daly’s Lough – No. 1 on aerial map - wet grassland, described as AEC 31 in the EIS (for the N6). “A good area of wet grassland; rushes, marsh marigold and water mint are common,

with bogbean common in wetter areas. Alder dominates the hedgerows. Evaluation: As a good example of this habitat type the site is of Local Importance”.

Between both of these – No. 2 on aerial map – was Ballykilmore Lough, which was filled in at the request of the landowner by Messrs Ascon when the motorway was being constructed (see photograph). This has resulted not only in loss of biodiversity but has worsened a serious flooding problem downstream.

Mammals

Bats: The information available from the EIS for the N6 said Pipistrelles could be present at the Clay Bird Shoot as it ‘offered potential’ but none seem to have been found.

Table 7.5 of the EIS for the N6 indicates a site at a farm in Templeoran South, 1km from the village, for Soprano Pipistrelles.

Hares: As mentioned, data on hares is scarce. However, at least two adults and two juveniles live approximately 2.5 miles from Tyrrellspass.

Otters: At least one otter was spotted two miles from the village, in the vicinity of a drainage ditch.

Impacts on the Natural Environment of the Village

N6 dual-carriageway/motorway (opened in April 2007)

The impact of the N6 on the natural environment of the village has been severe. There has been loss of hedgerows and trees, as well as the infill of Ballykilmore Lake which has caused flooding where none previously existed downstream.

Habitats have been disturbed and anecdotally, there has been an increase in roadkill of hedgehogs.

For a while, there was an increase in the rat population in the village.

On the outskirts of the village, in the route of the motorway, curlews have been disturbed and are no longer heard. The same with lapwing. The EIS for the motorway understated the impacts to the natural environment. For instance, Cornaher Lough (3 miles from Tyrrellspass), described as an area of ‘at least High Local Importance’ and a suitable habitat for the mollusc ‘*vertigo geyeri*’ and ‘*vertigo moulinsiana*’, not to mention being a ‘rich fen’ a ‘scarce habitat within the area’ and ‘the largest area of open water within grid square N33’, is all but destroyed.

The EIS contained at least one inaccuracy: the woodlands were deemed to be ‘too small’ to contain the Jay. This species continues to nest at a one-acre woodland at Cornaher, within earshot of the N6.

However, the absence of constant traffic through the village has resulted in cleaner air in the village and a notable absence of pollution on hedgerows, shrubs and trees. Birdsong is easier to hear; thrushes and blackbirds feed on the Green.

'Development'

The Local Area Plan, adopted in Jan 09, was initially put on public display in August 08 and went through a series of 'members recommendations' before being finally adopted, without the support of most residents in the village who signed a petition against many of its alterations.

One of these related to rezoning of the floodplain at The Flash for both residential and commercial development which would have resulted in loss of biodiversity, visual amenity, as well as being detrimental to the commercial core of the village.

Approximately 17 acres in all were rezoned 'residential' in the village which, if proceeded with, will have serious repercussions for the natural environment. One of the largest areas, for instance, is alongside the NHA of Cloncrow Bog, with mention being made of a 'buffer zone' but no details as to what this would look like.

Tyrrellspass is enclosed by agricultural land and there is much open space at the edge of the village, and on all approach roads. These provide not only a valued amenity but an important habitat for wildlife. In the village itself, The Green enjoys the status of a Protected Structure. Opposite the restored Belvedere Orphanage, the area in front (designed to mirror the shape of The Green), is a potentially valuable habitat for wildlife when the problem of dumping is resolved. On all approach roads also, there are mature hedgerows.

Detailed data is beyond the expertise of the Tyrrellspass Tidy Towns Committee, and professional help will be sought for its collection as part of its Wildlife Plan for the village over the next three/five years.

Sources consulted:

- EIS – N6 Kinnegad to Athlone Dual Carriageway: Disk 1 and 2
- Site Synopsis, Cloncrow Bog: NHA 000677 (attached)
- Site Synopsis, Split Hills and Long Hill Esker: Site Code 001831 (attached)
- OS Aerial Photographs (2003) (attached)
- Local Area Plan
- Village Design Statement (VDS)
- Audit of Biological Datasets, Co Westmeath (2006)
- Westmeath County Development Plan 2008-2014