

Wildlife at Lough Ree

Due to its rich diversity of wildlife, Lough Ree is a valuable site for nature conservation in Ireland. As an extremely valuable site for wintering birds in Westmeath, it is designated as a Special Protection Area for birds and the lake and its shoreline are included in the designated Special Area of Conservation. Lough Ree has a very long, indented shoreline and hence many sheltered bays, most of which consist of lowland wetland grassland, and are prone to winter flooding. Along the south eastern shoreline, these inner bays are collectively known as the Inner Lakes, and include Cleggen, Doonis, Ross, Killinure and Coosan Loughs. These inner bays form an integral part of the ecosystem of the main lake and their variety of terrestrial and semi aquatic habitats support a rich diversity of flora and fauna. Interestingly, the boundaries of Counties Westmeath, Longford and Roscommon join at this location.

Flora and Habitats

The flora of Lough Ree is as diverse as its fauna due in part to the variety of habitats that it supports. Among certain rare or protected species are the Narrow-leaved Helleborine and Betony, both found on Hare Island. Buckthorn, an uncommon native tree, can be seen along the lake shore.



Narrow-leaved Helleborine



Betony

Lough Ree supports a variety of aquatic plants generally occurring in sheltered bays, where atypical Shannon flora occur. Rare species present include Stoneworts (*Chara* spp., including *C. pedunculata*) and Arrowhead. The latter is a scarce species which is almost confined in its occurrence to the Shannon Basin. Reedbeds such as Common Reed are an extensive habitat in a number of more sheltered places around the lake. Reedmace, Lesser reedmace, Yellow Iris and Sweet Flag, Bur-Reed and Rushes are found along the shoreline.

Lough Ree supports a number of rich and botanically diverse fen habitats, including areas of Cladium fen and Alkaline fen both Annex I priority habitats protected by the EU Habitats Directive. The Alkaline fens along the north eastern shoreline of Lough Ree support rare species such as Pale Buterwort and Round Leaved Wintergreen.



Round Leaved Wintergreen



Arrowhead



Pale Butterwort

Other Wildlife

Otters occur frequently around Lough Ree as there are plenty of fish for them to eat and undisturbed places where they can sleep and raise their cubs. This species is listed in the Red Data Book as being threatened in Europe and is protected under the Wildlife Acts 1976-2012 and Annex II and Annex IV of the European Habitats Directive. Otters are secretive and active at night mostly - your best chance of seeing one is at dawn or dusk.



Otter (*Lutra lutra*)

Birdlife

Lough Ree is a haven for both wintering and breeding birds. The lake supports nationally important populations of seven wintering waterfowl species, as well as other important species including Whooper Swan which are listed on Annex I of E.U. Birds Directive. The site has a range of breeding waterfowl, notably nationally important populations of Common Scoter, Great Crested Grebe, Wigeon, Teal, Goldeneye and Tufted duck.



Mute Swan



Lapwing



Tufted Duck



Teal



Great Crested Grebe



Wigeon

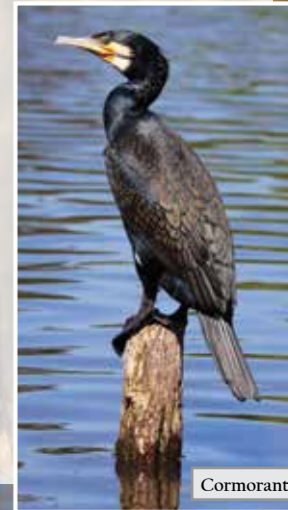
The fifty two islands of Lough Ree are now mainly uninhabited and relatively free from disturbance. They are important wildlife refuges, especially for ground nesting birds. The Common Tern, now a rare species and protected by the EU Birds Directive, nests on some of the Islands.



Whooper Swan



Common Tern



Cormorant

The woodland around the lake is a good habitat for Garden Warbler. This species is confined to the Shannon lakes in Ireland and probably occurs on some of Lough Ree's heavily wooded islands .



Garden Warbler



Common Blue

Butterflies

Butterflies can be seen in the grassland and woodland habitats around Lough Ree.



Meadow Brown



Ringlet



Common Blue Damselfly

Dragonflies and Damselflies



Common Darter Dragonfly



Ruddy Darter Dragonfly

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

The Aquatic Ecosystem of Lough Ree

Although the majority of Lough Ree is less than 10m in depth, it includes six deep troughs running from north to south which reach a maximum depth of about 36m. Overall the lake is classified as mesotrophic. The lake has an intermediate level of productivity due to a medium level of nutrients, and clear water with beds of submerged aquatic plants. Lough Ree has a biodiverse phytoplankton and macrophyte flora, and species indicative of low nutrient (oligotrophic) and high nutrient (eutrophic) lake systems occur due to fluctuations in nutrient status and pH, caused by Lough Ree's large size and the variation in underlying rock.

Fish

Lough Ree is classed as a mixed fishery with good stocks of trout, pike and coarse fish present. The inner lakes particularly Coosan Lough hold Tench along with Rudd, Bream and Perch in the reeded waters. The most ecologically important species of fish that Lough Ree supports is the Red Data Book species Pollan (*Coregonus autumnalis*). Pollan is a freshwater fish that is a member of the salmon family and once thrived in both Lough Ree and Lough Derg to such levels as to support a commercial fishery. Their numbers have dwindled to around 1% of levels recorded a century ago and now Ireland is the only European country that this species is found in. Lough Ree provides important habitat for feeding and development of top predatory fish species like Trout (*Salmo trutta*) and Pike.

The ecological status of the lake is of tantamount importance in sustaining these fish species both from an ecological and angling point of view.



Brown Trout



Amenities:

There are numerous activities and attractions which can be enjoyed in the locality of Lough Ree. The lake has fishing opportunities to be experienced for the Trout, Pike and Coarse angler. The Lough Ree tour provides the opportunity to discover the beautiful scenery and the many heritage sites located around the lake. The area around the lake is tranquil with an abundance of low lying countryside, consisting of woodland, boglands and trails which are ideal for the walking enthusiast to explore the unique environment of Lough Ree and its surrounding landscape. Mooring access is available at Hudson Bay, Coosan Point and Portlick.



Lough Ree A Visitor's Guide

