

# Natural Habitats

**Glenveagh supports a number of important habitat types ranging from pristine rivers and lakes to some of the highest peaks in Ireland.**

## Uplands

The rocky precipices have always remained free of peat and many of the hilltops have been laid bare by peat erosion and weathering. As a result, the summits and crags resemble parts of the Arctic and lower Alps, and are sparsely vegetated with shrubs, mosses and liverworts.

The uplands are home to a range of arctic alpines, which were amongst the first species to colonise Glenveagh after the ice age – examples include alpine club-moss, silvery moss and dwarf willow. Arctic alpines are adapted to a short cool summer. Many lie prostrate or hug the ground to avoid damage and many need several growing seasons before they can flower or bear fruit.

The hilltops support a meagre and specialised wildlife. Look for the hare, which may jump from under your feet. This hardy mammal can survive on a diet of mountain grasses and sedges. It is a race of arctic mountain hare, but unlike the race found in Scotland, its coat seldom turns white in winter.

No bird captures the character of the Glenveagh hilltops more evocatively than the golden plover. The bird's sweet, melancholy call follows the hill walker as it watches from a stone or peat hummock. As a breeding bird, this beautiful plover is now quite rare in Ireland, where it is confined to the north and west.

One of the main predators on the hilltops is the peregrine falcon, which ranges widely in search of food, particularly wood pigeons. Peregrines nest on the cliffs, choosing their inaccessible nesting ledges and favouring south-facing cliffs for warmth and light. Every suitable cliff is occupied annually by a pair, though it is difficult to pinpoint their eyries on the cliff faces.

Ravens, which also nest on the cliffs, are the scavengers of the mountains. They nest as early as February, a time of year when hard weather and scarcity of grazing claims the lives of many deer and carrion is at its most plentiful. The raven's loud croaking call is unmistakable and a visit to Glenveagh should be rewarded with a sighting.

## Peatlands

Ireland has some of the most significant areas of blanket bog in the world, and has international obligations to protect this habitat and its species. These areas are a key part of Ireland's natural history and heritage and are rich in wildlife.

The dry patches of boglands in Glenveagh are favoured by ling heather, bell heather, crowberry and blaeberry. The latter shrub, which has edible blue berries, is also known as bilberry or frochan.

The damper patches of bog support wet grassland containing fescue, deer grass, rushes and purple moor grass or molinia. Purple moor grass is avoided by deer who seek out the sweeter grasses and sedges. This favours the growth of molinia, which is particularly abundant in Glenveagh.

Other plants have become specially adapted to life in the nutrient poor bog. These include the sundew and butterwort, which trap insects on their sticky leaves. The remains of the insect are digested by the plant extracting much-needed nutrients.

The lower slopes of the bog take on a different character as it reaches the lower ground of the sheltered valley floor. Bog cotton, whose snow-white cotton tufts are often identified with Irish bogs, makes a bold statement on the wetter patches. Bog asphodel is probably the most visible flower; once it flowers its stems turn a dark saffron colour which catches the eye.

Red deer, the largest animal in the park, is to be found grazing on the grasses and sedges of the bog. Though enclosed by the deer fence the Glenveagh herd of red deer remain completely wild and as with most wild animals can be difficult to approach. The best time for watching red deer is during the mating season or 'rut' which takes place each year between mid-September and mid-November.

The sheer abundance of meadow pipits in Glenveagh is noteworthy. Most depart for the winter, although no one knows whether they move to low lying ground in Ireland or migrate to Spain and Portugal. This in turn provides a food source for many of our keen-eyed birds of prey including the peregrine and kestrel. These birds also feed on the other small animals to be found in the bog including mice, shrews and lizards.

Other bog species are the common frog, dragonflies and damselflies, a variety of butterflies and moths, skylarks, red grouse, golden plover, curlew and snipe.

## Woodlands

The park contains about 100 hectares of natural and semi natural woodlands and they are amongst the few native stands left in Co. Donegal.

The largest stretch is Mullangore Wood on the southeastern shore of Lough Veagh, although several remnants are to be found on the steep slopes of Glenveagh where the terrain is too precipitous for blanket bog growth.

Glenveagh is home to a mix of native and non-native trees. The main species are sessile oak, downy birch, rowan, holly, hazel, yew and aspen. Scots pines are also a key feature; they were originally planted as shelter belts around the lake shore.

The denser areas of woodland are rich in plants adapted to moist shady conditions. Mosses and ferns form lush green carpets on boulders and trees, and delicate filmy ferns sprout from the banks of moss. Golden leaved saxifrage and liverworts cover the wetter rocks and woodrush, wood sorrel and wood anemone abound on the woodland floor. Red deer find woodland plants particularly palatable and the woods are heavily grazed except where fences keep the deer out.

The woods are at their busiest in summer, when rising sap and fresh foliage provide plenty of food for animals and insects. A variety of migrant birds, including the spotted flycatcher and chiffchaff arrive from Africa in mid-May, in time to exploit the summer abundance of insect life.

Among these is the wood warbler, a rare bird in Ireland but an annual visitor to Glenveagh. Arriving in mid-May, the male claims his territory and advertises to females by singing vigorously. The best way to locate one is to listen for its unique descending trill likened to the spinning of a coin on a plate. Other woodland birds include the colourful jay, the scarcer treecreeper as well as residents such as the chaffinch, song thrush and blue tit. Sparrowhawks are often heard too. Conifers planted in parts of the main glen harbour some typical pinewood birds including crossbill, siskin, gold crest and coal tit.

Badgers and foxes are important predators in the woods, though both are more commonly seen on the open heath. Their prey includes a shy denizen of the woods, the long tailed field mouse. They feed off worms in the spring and blackberries in the autumn. Glenveagh is also home to stoats and pine martens, rarely seen but often captured on wildlife cameras by staff.

Several species of bat emerge from hibernation in the spring, and often roost in old buildings and woodlands in Glenveagh, making the most of insect prey which becomes abundant on warm nights. Leisler's bat, Ireland's largest species, occurs in the woods, flying high above the trees and is more abundant in Ireland than the rest of Europe.

## Freshwater

Lakes in the park range from the small lochans to the long deep waters of Lough Veagh, the main body of water in the park. The areas from which the lakes collect their water all lie entirely within the park boundary, making it possible to prevent their pollution.

The waters are clean and well oxygenated and are particularly suitable for a range of species to thrive.

Most of the park's lakes hold brown trout, salmonid fish and eels. Lough Veagh has modest runs of salmon and sea trout as well as stocks of arctic charr. Like salmon, the charr is seagoing in arctic and sub-arctic regions, but in western Europe it is confined to freshwater lakes where it has remained since the ice age. The 'land-locked' charr requires cold and unpolluted water and with such a commodity now scarce in western Europe, it has become seriously endangered. Charr populations isolated in different lakes over the past 10,000 years have evolved slight differences. Recent findings suggest that Glenveagh charr are significantly smaller than those in nearby Dunlewy Lake.

The Glaskeelan river, whose headwaters rise from Lough Inshagh, is an important breeding habitat for the freshwater pearl mussel. These pearl mussels, which are only found in high-quality, near-pristine freshwater habitats, are capable of surviving for up to 140 years, making them Ireland's longest living animal.

Waterfowl are of major interest in Glenveagh and highlight the northern or Scottish connection. Visitors include the red-throated diver, which is increasing in numbers in Scotland and spreading southwards. Lough Veagh has long been the haunt of the red throated diver and it nests in small numbers in the park's vicinity, which is its only Irish breeding centre. The divers feed in nearby coastal waters, and divers calling as they fly in from the sea to their nesting areas are an evocative feature of summer mornings in Glenveagh.

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