
Páirc Náisiúnta Néifinne Fiáine Wild Nephin National Park

Nollaig Shona agus Athbhliain faoi Mhaise daoibh

Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year

Newsletter 2025

Spring

Minister of State for Nature, Heritage and Biodiversity, Christopher O’Sullivan visits Mayo Dark Sky Park at Wild Nephin National Park to celebrate its “Past, Present and Future” – Sinead Gaughan Guide

Minister Christopher O’Sullivan joined a special celebration on Friday 4th April in Ballycroy Visitor Centre. This event marked the awarding of International Dark Sky Place of the Year to



Minister of State Christopher O’Sullivan TD with Denis Strong (Divisional Manager, NPWS Western Division) and Georgia MacMillan (Mayo Dark Sky Park Development Officer).
Photo: Michael McLaughlin

the team at Mayo Dark Sky Park. Minister O’Sullivan said: “I’m delighted to see that Ireland, through Mayo Dark Sky Park, has taken a strong leadership role to protect and restore our night skies.”

In December 2024 DarkSky International announced that Mayo Dark Sky Park had received the award for recognition of outstanding leadership on the importance of dark skies for nature, climate and communities.



Minister of State Christopher O’Sullivan TD with Denis Strong (Divisional Manager, NPWS Western Division) and the staff of Wild Nephin National Park, Connemara National Park and NPWS Western Region Photo: Michael McLaughlin

Guest speakers included Dr. Frank Prendergast a prominent archaeo-astronomer, Denis Strong Divisional Manager, NPWS Western Division and Tia Crowley, Head of Tourism at Mayo

County Council, who highlighted key projects including: Newport's reduction of light pollution by some 50%, the growth of Mayo Dark Sky Festival (now attracting over 1000 visitors) and the successful bid to host the international conference on Artificial Light at Night (ALAN) in Westport later in the year.

Devastating wildfire results in closure of popular walking trail in Mayo – Mary Gavaghan Guide

The beginning of the month of April was tough for us all at Wild Nephin National Park and the wider local community we lost a large area of peatland habitat and a wonderful community resource when a wild fire at night engulfed the Claggan Mountain Coastal Trail and 35 acres.

The Claggan Mountain Coastal Trail was a very popular trail with over 12,000 visitors in 2024 and it was an amenity where we could deliver educational visits to schoolchildren and the public whilst also been a family friendly safe, accessible trail with breath-taking views of the mountains and coast.



Claggan Boardwalk – Photo Michael Chambers



Wildfire Claggan 2025 - Photo National Park Staff

The following evening and weekend, we also had fires in Letterkeen near the very popular Letterkeen Trailhead and camping area.

Thank you to Mayo Fire & Rescue Service and all WNNP & Coillte Staff that helped bring both fires under control.

Summer

Ongoing Conservation Projects at Wild Nephin National Park – Doireann Nicholls Conservation Ranger



Natural Bog Pool - Owenduff/Nephrin Complex SAC – Photo Mary Gavaghan

Peatland Restoration

Protecting our peatlands secures carbon storage for our future generations, reduces carbon emissions, increases biodiversity and improves water flow attenuation and quality, providing an environmentally stable landscape.

We have completed works on the Bangor Erris Bog Natural Heritage Area as well as various Wild Nephin National

Park sites, with over 2000 peats dams created (in the image below) allowing 540 acres of peatlands to natural restore.

The higher ground in the NHA was dammed first, then the lower ground, until the water table was restored. Characteristic bog species; sphagnum moss, sundew, heather and bog cotton have returned. A total of 1800 acres have been restored in collaboration with private landowners and the Wild Atlantic Nature Life Project.



Peat dam construction across historic drains to slow the water flow Bangor Erris Bog Natural Heritage Area – Photo Doireann Nicholls

Native Woodland Schemes and Invasive Species Treatment

A number of pilot project sites for the Native Woodland Scheme (NWS) were established in tandem with the treatment and management of invasive species, particularly *Rhododendron ponticum*.

Rhododendron is one of the most problematic non-native invasive species currently threatening Irish Biodiversity, particularly our native woodlands. Forming large thickets if left unchecked it effectively excludes native plants from their natural habitats. Increased awareness

of its long-term detrimental impacts, has recently lead to an urgent requirement for Rhododendron removal all across Ireland including the affected Owenduff/Nepin Complex SAC. Wild Nephin National Park has carried out management of the invasive at Ballycroy Visitor Centre, Srahduggaun, Claggan, Bellacorick, Vary's Loop and the Western Way.



Native Woodland Scheme Enclosure Srahduggaun -
Photo Doireann Nicholls



A frame deer proof fencing - Photo Mary Gavaghan

Some areas that have been successfully treated, such as the 9 acre site at Srahduggaun (pictured above) have had three A-frame deer proof enclosures constructed by our General Operatives.

These enclosures and others throughout the park will aid in the protection of over 7000 native trees including Alder, Willow, Birch, Pedunculate Oak, Hawthorn, Guelder Rose, Irish Origin Scots Pine along with 300 Oaks grown in the Ballycroy Visitor Centre sown by visiting school children. The scheme aims to protect and enhance the parks biodiversity, soil, and water quality, particularly by providing long-term shade and food along the river banks to aid salmonid species, thus mitigating the effects of climate change for declining species.

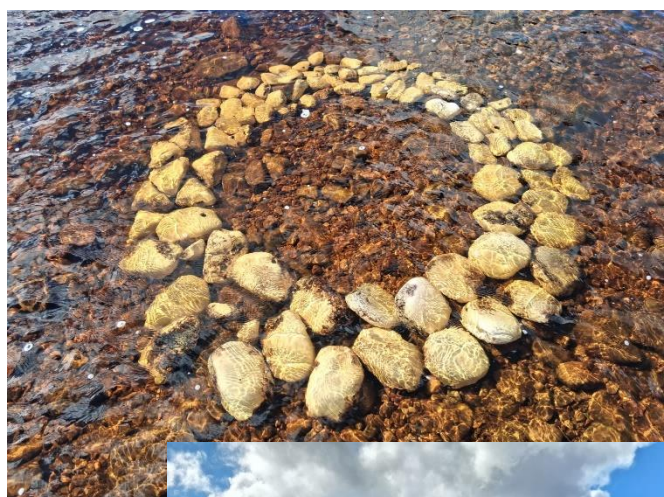
Mayo Day 2025 in Ballycroy – Mary Gavaghan Guide

Mayo Day is a celebration of ‘Mayo-ness’ worldwide and has grown over last 10 years. Year on year it has grown to the point that different events around the world take place to mark it and this year, Ballycroy Visitor Centre was delighted to be a flagship location for a day long celebration. From natural to cultural heritage, Mayo and Ballycroy had it all with birdwatching, nature walks, storytelling, plant pressing, and family fun throughout the day. Free poetry readings and an evening of exploring Mayo’s Dark Sky Park was capped off with a Céilí in our local community hall!

Wilderland at Wild Nephin National Park and Ballycroy Visitor Centre – Niamh O’Flynn Guide

The Wilderland project consisting of 15 artists, over 2 years partnering with Wild Nephin National Park, Co. Mayo with an interest in biodiversity and current climate issues and creating work/s from the different environments. Workshops were held in a number of counties including Galway, Mayo, Leitrim and Donegal. The artist’s backgrounds were in ceramics, textiles, sound recording, fine art, computing and other art forms. Workshops were in conjunction with local community groups, public in the vicinity of the national parks, townlands from Blacksod to Ballina and Belmullet to Castlebar.

These workshops brought together local musicians, dancers, singers, visitors, walkers and the local community. The staff (guides, general operations and rangers) assisted with preparing and took part in the workshops. The workshops varied from making ceramic rocks (for invertebrates in water and on land), dyeing textiles, meditation, sowing, nature walks with an awareness of



Selection of Photos from Solstice & Equinox Plant Walks to Art Installations - Images M. Gavaghan and N. O’Flynn



flora & fauna and linking local history and culture. The project linked in with the equinoxes and solstices over the years.



Flower Féilire Project currently on display at Ballycroy Visitor Centre
- Photo Mary Gavaghan

A display (sample) of the work created by participants can be viewed at Ballycroy Visitors Centre. For information on Wilderland & events held with Wild Nephin National Park, Ballycroy Visitors Centre and local communities in Mayo please check out <https://wilderland.ie> Funded by Creative Ireland Programme and Creative Climate Action Fund.

Guided Walks in the Park – Mary Gavaghan Guide

Our guides are always on hand to share their knowledge of the park on guided walks throughout the year. We often get local groups asking us along on their organised walks, we are happy to join! This year we again welcomed the International Castlebar Walking Festival with all their international participants for a walk around one of our newer loops, the Leana Loop, taking in McCanns Cottage. Our guides Michael and Mary also accompanied the Maumturks Hiking Club



Selection of Guided Walks 2025 Images M Gavaghan



as they climbed Corslieve, the highest peak in the park and considered Ireland's remotest mountain. A long days walk but a bucket list mountain for many in Ireland achieved! Our guided walks are a great opportunity to get to know the park and allow us to communicate our ongoing conservation projects, whilst also advocating for and encouraging responsible recreation in the area.

Autumn

Georgina Campbell Visitor Attraction 2025 – Mary Gavaghan Guide



Michael Chambers Supervisor Guide Wild Nephin National Park receiving the award on behalf of the Visitor Centre and Café with John Brennan Hotelier and Georgina Campbell

The family run café and gallery are a welcoming space with a selection of simple and fresh food, which is homemade using locally sourced produce and natural ingredients. The gallery exhibits carefully selected Irish artwork, eclectic jewellery, studio pottery, textiles and artefacts from across the globe. The assessment process is based on the 'mystery shopper' principle, where a member of the Georgina Campbell team make anonymous visits and report back without fear or favour, truthfully and in detail. Excerpt from the mystery shopper assessment;

"Wild Nephin National Park is home to this outstanding modern visitor centre ...helped along by staff who are clearly proud of it and take pleasure in introducing the area to visitors, it's a place you could grow very fond of. Upstairs the lovely Ginger & Wild café is always well worth a visit for its stunning views - across to Achill Island, the Nephin Beg Mountains, the wild Atlantic coast - and delicious food"

Although the café is closed for the winter months, it will be open again mid-March 2026, perfect timing for an early Spring visit to Mayo!

At the end of September, the prestigious Georgina Campbell Speciality Hospitality & Sustainability Awards 2025 were held in the Intercontinental Hotel, Dublin. The Georgina Campbell Awards are the longest running Hospitality Awards in Ireland and are highly coveted throughout the industry. We were delighted to pick up the award for Visitor Attraction 2025. This was awarded to both the Ballycroy Visitor Centre and the Ginger & Wild Café. Nicola Stronach and Jean Pierre Maire have run the café since 2012.

L to R: Fintan Masterson Visitor Guide, Michael Chambers Supervisor Guide, Doireann Nicholls Conservation Ranger, Nicola Stronach Ginger & Wild Café, Sinéad Gaughan Visitor Guide, Mary Gavaghan Visitor Guide, Sam Birch Regional Manager and Jenni Roche Ecologist NPWS



Snapshot Europe is the first Europe-wide camera trap survey to collect and share data on mammal and bird species - Sara Sheridan Conservation Ranger



Setting up a Trail Camera Photo
Mary Gavaghan

This year was the third year that Wild Nephin National Park has taken part in Snapshot Europe. Snapshot Europe is a Europe-wide initiative for standardised monitoring of terrestrial mammals and birds using camera traps. The Max Planck Institute for Animal Behaviour, launched it in 2021. The project brings together scientists, conservationists and citizen-scientists across Europe, all with the goal of gathering data on mammal diversity and distribution in various habitats across Europe.

In 2024, 50 cameras were deployed in the Nephin Forest as part of the project, led locally by Colin Guilfoyle PhD with the help of Park staff. In 2025, 28 cameras were deployed for the project again focused on the Nephin Forest. As well as taking part in the European initiative, we in Wild Nephin National Park aimed to gain insights particularly into the habits, densities and distribution of the Red Deer population in the Park.

The project has given us interesting insights including the confirmation of two new species to the Park- the Great Spotted Woodpecker and invasive Fallow Deer.

We plan to continue participating in the Snapshot Europe project moving forward.



Images from the 2024 Snapshot Europe Project (L-R) Pine Marten/Cat Crainn/*Martes martes*, Red Deer/Fia Rua/*Cervus elaphus* and Bradger/Broc/*Meles meles*

Artificial Light At Night (ALAN) International Conference – Molly O’Grady Guide

This prestigious International conference was held in Westport, Ireland for the very first time and hosted by Dark Sky Ireland and the friends of Mayo Dark Skies, with on the ground support from the Wild Nephin National Park/Mayo Dark Sky Park teams.

ALAN 2025 brought together global leaders, researchers, and lighting experts from over 40 countries to discuss impacts of artificial light at night and explore sustainable solutions for a brighter-and darker- future. These international delegates shared their expertise in their respective fields, but also had an opportunity to experience the award-winning Mayo Dark Sky Park and the famous Irish hospitality that Westport and Mayo are celebrated for.



Dark Sky Park Viewing at Ballycroy Visitor Centre Image: Molly O’Grady

On the second evening of the conference, over 100 delegates travelled out to the Ballycroy Visitor Centre in Wild Nephin National Park/Mayo Dark Sky Park. They were greeted with delicious cuisine from Nevins Newfield Inn and had a brief introduction to the park. Delegates then participated in a Dark Sky Walk around the Visitor Centre pond and interacted with various artists/art demonstrations from the Wilderland project. Delegates departed star-struck and in awe of the beauty of the dark night sky.



Minister Dara Callery T.D. and Regional Manager of Wild Nephin National Park Sam Birch with the Volunteer "Dream Team" from NPWS, DarkSky Ireland and Friends of Mayo Dark Skies Image: Lisa Hallinan

Mayo Dark Sky Festival at Wild Nephin National Park and Ballycroy Visitor Centre – Fintan Masterson Guide

The formal opening of the 2025 Mayo Dark Sky festival took place at the Ballycroy Visitor centre on Friday, October, 31st. The opening ceremony was performed in front of a large crowd by Keira Keogh TD. This was followed by music from the internationally renowned Emer Mayock and John Hoban.

Over the weekend a number of events took place celebrating the night sky, nature and heritage throughout the neighbouring villages of Newport and Mulranny and here in Ballycroy. Some of the family friendly free events that took place in the Ballycroy Visitor Centre included guided walks, Kids and family activities, poetry readings by Seán Lysaght, Talk about the Ceide fields by Gretta Byrne, Soundscape experience with artist Ann Maire Deacy and a native tree workshop.

The highlight of the weekend activities in Ballycroy was the rambling house experience in the nearby Ballycroy Community Centre that saw friend's new and old, gather together in an evening of music song and fun.



Ballycroy Visitor Centre during the Mayo Dark Sky Festival - Image Michael Chambers

Installation of Defibrillators on remote Trails in Wild Nephin National Park - Michael Chambers Supervisor Guide

We are delighted to announce that four solar powered defibrillators have been installed throughout the National Park.

The defibrillators were installed by Darren Forde and his team at Eco Powered Cabinets along with the Wild Nephin National Park General Operatives staff. The defibrillator cabinets are installed in locations at Tarsaghaun Cottage, Lough Avoher (Bangor Trail turn off), Letterkeen

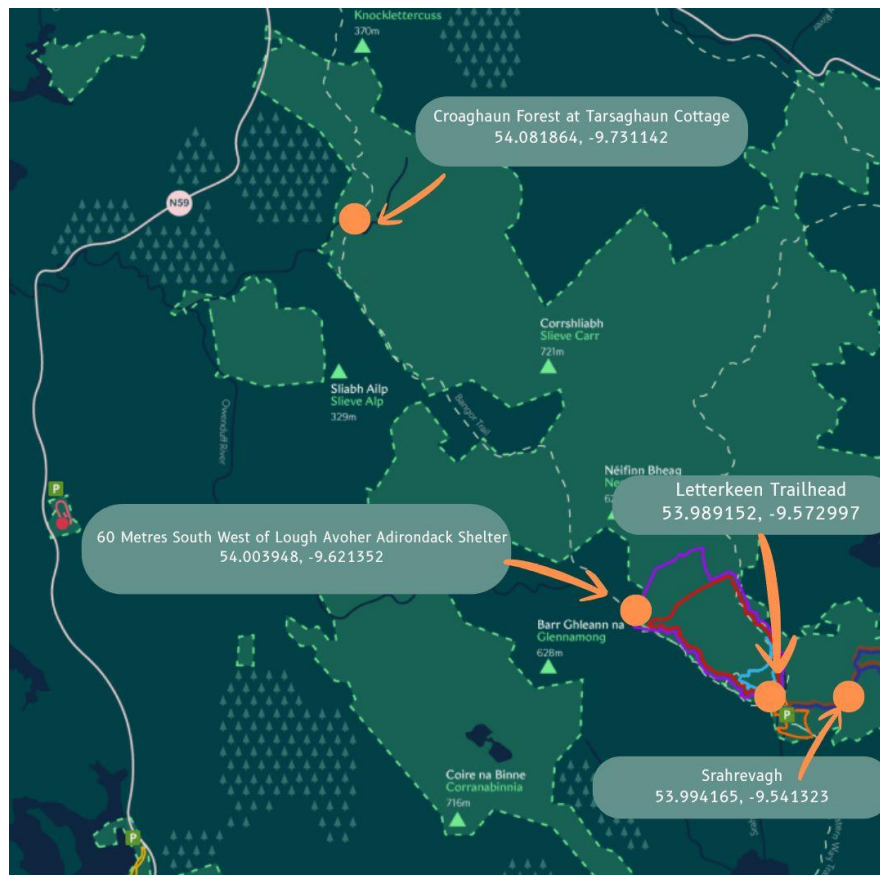
Trailhead and Bothy Carpark, and on the Srahrevagh trails near the bridge close to the McCann Cottage on the Leana/Jamesie's Well Loop.

Each cabinet is made of Stainless Steel with a rubber seal, making them weather/salt and storm proof. The solar powered cabinets do not require access to a power supply and can safely store life-saving medication as well as the defibs for use in a cardiac emergency.



Defib Cabinets installed by NPWS General Operatives Image: Sam Birch

Location and Co-Ordinates for AED Cabinets



Croaghaun Forest at Tarsaghaun Cottage	54.081864, -9.731142
60 Metres South West of Lough Avoher Adirondack Shelter	54.003948, -9.621352
Srahrevagh	53.994165, -9.541323
Letterkeen Trailhead	53.989152, -9.572997

Winter

Green Flag and Heritage Awards 2025/2026 – Michael Chambers Supervisor Guide

On the 12th of December the Internationally recognised Green Flag awards was awarded to 128 parks, gardens, greenways and wildlife sanctuaries around the country. The awards ceremony took place at Maynooth Campus. A number of NPWS sites that received Green Flags on the day included Killarney House and Gardens, Connemara National Park, Wild Nephin National Park, Glenveagh National Park, and Coole Park Nature reserve.



Michael Chambers Supervisor Guide and Doireann Nicholls Conservation Ranger collecting the Award from An Taisce Staff
Photo: An Taisce



Green Flag and Green Heritage Site Flags 2025/2026 on a beautiful Ballycroy morning! Photo: Mary Gavaghan

Wild Nephin National Park also collected a Green Heritage site award for the amazing work that has been carried out restoring the old cottages throughout the park so visitors and hikers can avail of these shelters that are reminders of the rich history of the area.

The pollinator awards were also presented on the day. For the second successive year the Ballycroy Visitor Centre at the Wild Nephin National Park was crowned the winner for the Country Park/ Demesne category, with the overall Pollinator award going to the Maynooth Campus.

The pollinator award once again highlights the amazing work that has been carried out at the Ballycroy Visitor centre in providing conditions through our wild meadow, hedgerows, new orchards, native tree planting and our wild bird linnet plot for our pollinators to thrive.



If you would like to be added to our mailing list and kept up to date throughout the year with news and events, please email ballycroyvisitorcentre@npws.gov.ie with the subject line: Mailing List.

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