

BSBI Field trip to The Heath, Co. Laois (VC H14) 6th June 2015.

A small group of intrepid botanists visited The Heath (also known as The Great Heath of Maryborough) near Portlaoise. While it was early in June the weather was unseasonably cold with a stiff breeze requiring gloves and woolly hats. The Heath is an unusual area of lowland commonage in Laois, (unusual in that there is very little lowland commonage in the midlands of Ireland – most grassland is enclosed in fields with single ownership) which is grazed by sheep. This area has a long and fascinating history, being farmed since the Iron Age, and containing several archaeological features. It is somewhat similar to The Curragh, a more well-known area of lowland grassland commonage in Co. Kildare. The Heath was also used as a racecourse back in the last century. It contains a range of habitats, being dominated by acidic grassland, but also containing rich fen, dry heath and a small lake with associated marginal wetland vegetation. The site has been listed for designation as a proposed Natural Heritage Area and was also listed as an Area of Scientific Interest for its botanical value, mainly the presence of extensive lowland grassland. A significant chunk has been used as a golf course for some time.

The fen was initially investigated. This area was dominated by tussocky Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and Purple Moorgrass (*Molinia caerulea*) and also contained species that are quite scarce in Laois, such as Blunt-flowered Rush (*Juncus subnodulosus*). Other species at various stages of development included Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*), and sedges such as Flea Sedge (*Carex pulcaris*), Common Yellow Sedge (*C. demissa*), Hairy Sedge (*C. hirta*), Bottle Sedge (*C. rostrata*), Carnation Sedge (*C. panicea*) and Common Sedge (*C. nigra*). An eagle-eyed botanist also spotted Dioecious Sedge (*C. dioica*) in a wetter seepage zone. This species has only been recorded once before in Laois and not at this site. One of the most interesting finds was Common Butterwort (*Pinguicula vulgaris*), and one of the few flowers in bloom. The fen was in relatively good condition, although there had been some Gorse thickets adjacent to the fen that had been recently cut and removed. Initially this looked like a typical example of habitat destruction. However, further research found that Gorse is actually causing a problem on The Heath, spreading and creating dense thickets leading to the loss of grassland and heathland habitats. There is obviously ongoing management of this issue.



Fen habitat in The Heath. Pictured are Fiona McCorry, Fiona Devery, Edwina Cole and Hugh Sheppard.

The lake (Little Bog Lough) was examined next after some lunch. This area is a quite interesting wetland with diverse marginal vegetation that was nicely zoned in places. The lake is one of the larger water-bodies in Laois (Laois has very few lakes), and is also managed as a fishery and is used on occasion by the local triathlon club! A small wetland to the west of the lake contained Water Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*), Common Mint (*Mentha aquatic*) and Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*), which could be found shin deep in the water with Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*), Brown Sedge (*Carex disticha*) and Common Yellow Sedge (*C. demissa*) found closer to drier ground along with Marsh Speedwell (*Veronica scutellata*). Another smaller Spike-rush was also found, which was probably Single-flowered Spike-rush *Eleocharis quinqueflora*, a species that has been recorded from this site before. Another visit will be required to verify this record. Other deeper areas had Common Reedmace (*Typha latifolia*). Some of the other plants were a little un-developed to be sure of 100% identification.



The Bog Lough, The Heath.

A bit of exploration around the west side of the lough was required to find a route between the Gorse and scrub patches into some of the heathland habitat. Here there were several open areas with low –growing vegetation dominated by Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and containing Carnation Sedge, Purple Moorgrass (*Molinia caerulea*), Marsh Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvestris*), Heath Rush (*Juncus squarrosus*) and Heath Wood-rush (*Luzula multiflora*) as well as Heath Pea (*Lathyrus linifolius*). Other sections were dominated by sedges and grasses. Many plants were several weeks behind their usual calendar and it took some searching to find an orchid in flower. This species was the Early Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza incarnata* subsp. *coccinea*), which had its distinctive brick red colour, and which has not been recorded by the BSBI before in Laois. (Of course, subsequent discussions and feedback since I originally wrote this have now turned up other potential records of this distinctive orchid, such as in Ballyadams Quarry – thanks to Hugh Sheppard. Just when us novice recorders thought we had found a new species to Laois!)

Only a small part of The Heath was examined during this field visit. So there is still plenty of exploring in other parts of the site to do in the future. This site is definitely a unique example of lowland heath that I am have not really seen before, particularly in Laois. Rare species in Laois such as Few-flowered Spike-rush (*Eleocharis quinqueflora*) and Fen Bedstraw (*Galium uliginosum*) have been recorded in The Heath in the past and remain to

be re-found and/or verified. One feature of the site is that it has a diverse range of habitats situated quite close to the local road so it is very accessible to botanists and naturalists. Attendees were Edwina Cole, Fiona Devery, Fiona MacGowan, Hugh Sheppard, Orla McCorry and Hannah McCorry.



Early Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza incarnata* subsp. *coccinea*)



Dry Heath Habitat, The Heath