

Enjoying Ireland's Mountain Environment

By Helen Lawless

The long days of the summer months provide an excellent opportunity to get out and discover the joy of walking in Ireland's hills and mountains. To give you a taste of the wildlife you might come across in the mountains, here's some information on one plant, one mammal and one bird, all commonly found in this environment. The app also includes advice on how you can get out walking in the hills and some useful websites.

What you might see

Once you get above the farmland and forests, Ireland's mountain habitats are mainly acid grassland, heath and blanket bog. Heather is one of the larger and more visible plants, and between July and September drier parts of the hills will be cloaked with their purple flowers, providing a very impressive sight.

The colourful and spongy *Sphagnum* mosses are the building blocks of our bogs. This damp, acidic and nutrient-poor environment is also home to a few small, but really fascinating plants. Butterwort and Sundew supplement their nutrient-poor diet by trapping insects on their leaves and digesting them.



Common Butterwort above Doolough, Co. Mayo, photo Helen Lawless

Butterwort is a very distinctive plant, its rosette of yellow-green leaves (about 5cm across), clings to the ground in a star-shape. Butterwort is found on wet heaths and bogs, usually on bare ground and where water seeps from crags and rocks. Butterwort's violet flowers appear between May and July each year, as a single flower (about 1cm across) on a leafless stem of 5-10cm high.

Butterwort's tongue-shaped leaves are covered by microscopic glands that exude a sticky substance. If the glands are touched by a drop of rain, or a grain of sand, nothing happens, but if they come in contact with any nitrogenous material such as the body of an insect, the glands discharge an acid fluid that dissolves the insect. The resulting solution is then absorbed by the plant. The edges of Butterwort leaves are curled slightly inwards; if an insect alights near the margins, the leaf slowly curls a bit more, bringing additional glands in contact with the prey and thus hastening its absorption.

Butterwort is also known as bog violet and in Ulster known as St Patrick's Staff, due to the resemblance of the shape of the flower to a staff. It was said that one of the flowers sprang up wherever St. Patrick's own staff touched the ground on his travels over the bogs.

We have three species of Butterwort in Ireland and also three species of Sundew, another insectivorous plant. Sundew is more difficult to see, its reddish colour blends with the peat and the *Sphagnum* mosses, and the plant is often only 1-3cm in diameter. Butterwort and Sundew will typically trap small insects such as midges and spiders, but they can also capture larger prey such including wasps and even small dragon-flies.

Looking towards the larger creatures on the hills, you will often be lucky enough to see deer.



Red Deer stag in Kerry during rut, photo Chris Barron

Deer

Deer are Ireland's largest land mammals. Summer is a good time for deer on the hills, the weather is less harsh than during winter and they have more to eat. Calves are born in late May or June; over the summer the hinds and calves remain in separate groups to stags.

The stags shed their antlers in spring, their new antlers will be fully grown by the end of August, ready for the rut in the autumn.

Deer feed mainly in morning and late evening. Deer are herbivores - they eat green vegetation. As plant material is very tough, they spend a lot of time chewing their food. Deer have a complex digestive system, they bring some of their food back up, and 'chew the cud' like cattle, sheep and goats.

Walkers will often see a deer's white or cream rump patch as the deer bound away. This patch widens to warn other deer of danger. Deer moult in September and in the spring, their winter coat is rather grey, but the summer coat is brighter, sometimes chestnut coloured with white spots.

There are three species of wild deer commonly found in Ireland. Sika deer, the smallest of the three are the most numerous. Fallow deer are the most widespread, but found more in parks and woodland than on the mountains. Red deer, the largest of the three and our only native deer species are found in forestry and on the open mountain.

Wicklow has a lot more deer than any other county in Ireland. While there are Fallow deer in Wicklow, most of the Wicklow deer are Sika Red hybrids, the majority with stronger Sika characteristics. In 1860 Lord Powerscourt introduced four Sika deer to his estate near Enniskerry. Ireland's Sika deer population spread from this introduction. The Glenealo valley above the Miner's Village in Glendalough is one of the best areas in the Wicklow mountains to observe deer.

The Red deer found in Kerry are believed to be our only native deer herd. While once they would have been widespread, numbers declined due to hunting, and Red deer were absent from all counties except Kerry after the Great Famine. The red deer in Connemara and Donegal have been bred from re-introduced stock.

Looking to birdlife, while the Meadow Pipit is the commonest bird on the hills, and during spring walkers often hear the unmistakable call of the Cuckoo, the Raven is one of the easiest birds to see and identify in the Irish mountains.



Raven in flight, Co. Cork, photo www.wildlifesnaps.com

Raven

The largest member of the crow family, the Raven, is slightly bigger than a Buzzard. A widespread resident bird, Ravens are found especially in upland areas. Your attention will be caught by their deep, croaking *pruk pruk* call and it's worth pausing to appreciate the Raven's acrobatic flight which sometimes includes tumbles and somersaults.

An all-black bird with glossy plumage, Ravens have long wings with 'fingers' at the end, their diamond-shaped tail also helps in identifying them.

While Ravens eat insects and berries, they feed largely on carrion. Ravens nest as early as February or March, even when there is still snow on the ground, so that they can avail of weaker birds and small animals that are unable to survive the winter.

The Raven's nest; a large affair of sticks, wool and heather, is typically on steep rocky ground, often under an overhang.

These highly intelligent birds have as many as 30 different calls; they form groups as juveniles and at about three years they pair off into lifelong monogamous relationships, ravens are also strongly loyal to their territory.

Getting out there

By spending a little time planning your walk you're certain to have a more enjoyable experience. Think about where you're going to go, what the weather will be like and what you need to take with you.

The www.irishtrails.ie website is a good place to start planning. The website has details of hundreds of marked walking routes across the country. It includes the Fáilte Ireland looped walks, Coillte's Mountain Access Routes and multi-day walks such as the Wicklow Way, Kerry Way, Western Way etc. You can download a printable map for most of the routes.

Be prepared for Ireland's changeable weather. If you plan to walk in the hills remember that the temperature will be lower there, the winds stronger and you are more likely to get rain. Mist is a serious problem; you can quickly lose all visibility, especially on coastal hills. Don't forget that due to the lack of shade, heat can also be an issue.

Mountaineering Ireland has published a leaflet with tips and safety advice for walkers. The leaflet can be downloaded from <http://www.mountaineering.ie/news/viewdetails.asp?ID=693>, hard copies of the *Walk Safely* leaflet are available from Tourist Information Offices.

Learning to use a map and compass greatly improves your ability to get off trail and enjoy wilder, quieter places. A weekend of Mountain Skills Training is an excellent way to learn, or refresh, map-reading skills. Courses information and contact details for approved training providers are available in the Training and Safety section of www.mountaineering.ie.

A lot of people get to know the hills and gain the skills of hillwalking by joining a club. In addition to a regular programme of walks, most clubs have a strong social side. There are clubs all over the country, go to www.mountaineering.ie to find your nearest club.

Responsible enjoyment of the Irish countryside

As increasing numbers of people seek the beauty and excitement of recreation in the Irish countryside, our collective mark on the natural environment increases. The impacts include litter, water pollution, disturbance of wildlife, damage to fences and loss of privacy for local residents.

These tips will help ensure your impact is a positive one:

Respect property - Most of the Irish countryside is privately owned, including mountain land and marked walking routes. As there is no legal right of entry to private land, walkers depend on the goodwill and tolerance of landowners. To maintain this goodwill, walkers should act responsibly and respect the landowner's wishes.

Park carefully - Take care when parking at gateways or on narrow roads, remember that large farm vehicles or the emergency services may need access. Do not leave valuables in your car.

Dogs can cause problems - Dogs may chase or frighten farm animals, wildlife and other people. Dogs in the countryside should always be on a lead. Only take dogs on the hills if you have the landowner's permission to do so.

Prevent erosion - Keep to the path where there is one. This reduces erosion and disturbance of wildlife.

Bring your litter home - Litter detracts from the beauty of the countryside and can be hazardous to people and animals. Carry a small bag to take away all litter, including biodegradable items such as fruit peels and tea bags.

Put something back – Support the rural economy by using local shops, pubs and restaurants.

For more information on how you can reduce the impact of your activities on the environment and other people, visit www.leavenotraceireland.org.