



Ireland is considered a low-lying country, as only five per cent of the total land area can be described as upland and mountain. ‘Upland’ is land rising from 400-600m, while land from 600m up is defined as mountain. The main habitats found in Ireland’s uplands and mountains are blanket bog and heath.



A blanket bog is a carpet of wet ground covering a large area of land. Blanket bogs are found mainly along the west coast of Ireland and in the Wicklow Mountains. Westerly winds blowing in from the Atlantic Ocean carry large volumes of rain, and as the rain falls to the ground, it washes or leaches minerals down through the soil. These minerals form a hard layer or ‘pan’ through which water can no longer seep. As time passes, the soil above the hard layer becomes waterlogged, and sphagnum moss – ‘the bog builder’ – begins to grow. Sphagnum mosses grow upwards, and over millennia they have carpeted our mountains with bog. Our blanket bogs are visited by thousands of tourists each year. Their rugged landscape is unique, incomparable to any other place in the world.

Heaths are open areas of ground on poor soils with few trees. They are dominated by heathers. There are two types of heaths in the upland areas of Ireland: ‘wet heath’ and

‘montane heath’. Wet heath occurs on peaty soils and has an average depth of 15-50cm. Montane heath occurs at high altitudes where rainfall is plentiful and temperatures are low.

Other habitats found in Ireland’s uplands and mountains include streams, rivers, lakes and native woodlands, all supporting their own diversity of flora and fauna. Upland and mountain regions are exposed to extremes of wind and rain, and the plants and animals living here have cleverly adapted to survive these conditions. For example, deer found in Killarney grow exceptionally thick, long coats in winter, while all plants are short to avoid wind damage.

On visiting uplands and mountains, look for the striking green colour of the tiger beetle, or listen for the song of the skylark as it fills the air all around. Watch for the daring, acrobatic flight of the merlin, Ireland’s smallest bird of prey, and imagine the lives of the people who farmed these lands thousands of years ago.

THREATS TO THE HABITAT

There are a number of serious threats facing Ireland’s upland and mountain areas. Commercial tree-planting (afforestation) leads to a loss of these unique habitats and their associated biodiversity. The construction of large wind farms in protected uplands can cause significant changes to the habitat and loss of biodiversity. The main damaging activities include building of access roads across the peatland, service structure drainage and turbine foundations.

In the past, fire was used to maintain the mosaic of heather needed for red grouse. Burning the heather allowed for young shoots of the plant to grow. These shoots are what the red grouse feeds on, and they are more nutrient-rich for grazing livestock. However, too many fires

also allowed bracken fern – an invasive plant – to dominate in areas. Another problem arises when too many sheep graze the mountains. In some areas, every plant has been eaten, causing the peat to be washed off the mountains. All of these pressures have resulted in nearly an 80 per cent loss of blanket bog cover in Ireland.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS DO TO PROTECT THE HABITAT?

It is essential that we act today to help protect and halt the loss of Ireland’s biodiversity in our uplands and mountains. Through education you can learn more about these wild and wonderful places. You can support or get involved with organisations that are helping to protect and conserve these open areas, and volunteer to help on useful projects such as the removal of invasive plants. Watchdogging and reporting on illegal dumping on sites is essential, as rubbish spoils the scenic value of the landscape and can harm the wild fauna. On visiting an upland area keep to designated paths to avoid excessive trampling. But most importantly, do something. Don’t rely on others to ensure that upland and mountain habitats are being conserved. Act today!

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Irish Peatland Conservation Council: www.ipcc.ie
- National Parks & Wildlife Service: www.npws.ie
- Bord na Móna: www.bnm.ie
- Bogland Project: www.ucd.ie/bogland
- Slieve Bloom Mountains: www.slievebloom.ie
- Coillte Bog Restoration Projects: www.irishbogrestorationproject.ie
- The Heritage Council: www.heritagecouncil.com