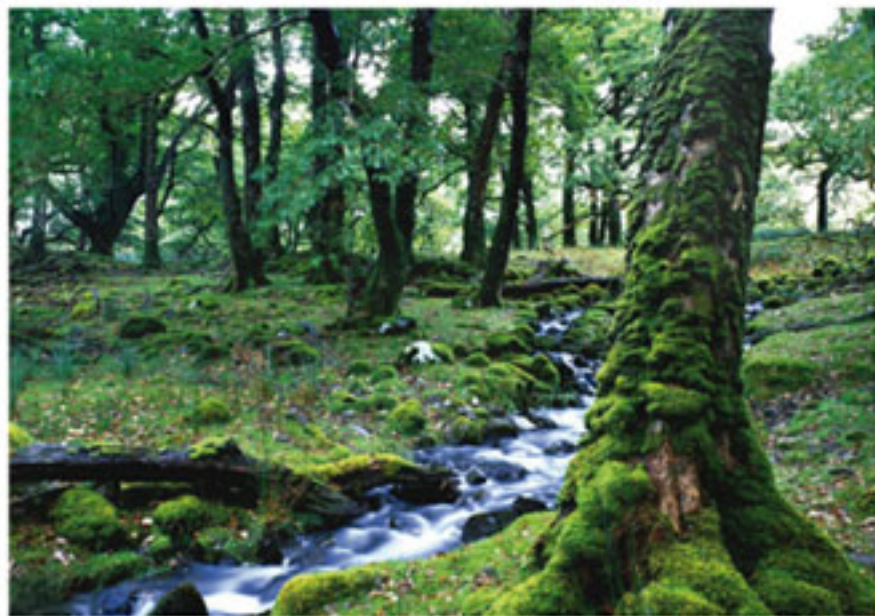




Ireland's broadleaved woodlands have an aura of mystery and magic. Bouncing off ferns and mosses that grow high up in the trees, light filters through the tree-top canopy before reaching the woodland floor, which in spring is carpeted with bluebells, pungent wild garlic and delicate shamrock-leaved wood anemones. Primroses flower early, making use of the sun's energy before the leafy canopy casts its shade on the ground below. In summer – when the canopy has thickened with leaves and less light penetrates to the woods beneath – the only plants able to grow are those specially adapted to low light levels. These include under-storey trees such as holly and elder, as well as ferns, woodrushes and shade-tolerant herbs. Winding through the undergrowth are the well-worn tracks of badgers, foxes, mice and other animals.



Woodland soils are normally very rich in nutrients, thanks to the 'decomposers': microscopic fungi, worms, millipedes, woodlice and slugs. These break down and recycle dead material on the woodland floor, such as fallen leaves, logs and even dead animals. Many of these little bugs are also important protein-food for mice, hedgehogs, badgers and birds. A well-developed broadleaf woodland has multiple layers of growth, ensuring that every nook and cranny – every available inch of habitat – is used by some plant or creature.

Woodlands once covered almost all of Ireland, being the natural climax vegetation of most of our landscape and soil types. Woodland is one

of the most biologically diverse ecosystems on this island, and Irish woodlands – sometimes referred to as temperate rainforests – are unique on account of our very moist climate. Canopy trees such as oak, elm and ash form the most recognisable element. Trees like willow, alder and birch grow well in wetter ground. Yew, holly, Scot's pine, juniper and the unusual strawberry tree are our only native evergreen trees. Beech, horse-chestnut (the conker tree) and sycamore are not native to Ireland, but were first planted here by humans. Similarly, plantations of exotic coniferous trees – mainly Sitka spruce, lodgepole pine and Douglas fir – cannot be considered 'natural' habitats, as they harbour a much narrower range of wildlife species than native woodlands do. Conifer plantations can even damage the environment, and their management can cause pollution to nearby rivers and lakes.

Circumstances in Ireland's long history have left us with the least woodland cover in all of Europe. Efforts are being made to protect remaining pockets of old native woodlands as national parks and special areas of conservation. Some examples are the extensive and unique woods of Killarney National Park, Saint John's Wood in Roscommon, and the oak woods on the steep slopes of the Wicklow Mountains.

THREATS TO THE HABITAT

Our native woodlands are sometimes cleared for construction development, but more often they are under severe pressure from overgrazing by deer and goats, which eat tree seedlings, preventing young trees from establishing. Japanese Sika deer are a particular problem. Another introduced species, the rhododendron bush, was brought into Ireland from the Himalayan Mountains by the Victorians because of its big brightly-coloured flowers and its ability to grow well in the shady woodland environment. It has since taken over in many woods, casting such heavy shade that nothing can grow beneath it.

Collecting firewood can leave the woodland

floor barren of dead logs, which are an important micro-habitat for invertebrates and fungi adapted to live only on rotting logs. Quad-biking and motorcycling in woodlands disturbs wildlife, causes soil erosion and damages tree roots.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS DO TO PROTECT THE HABITAT?

Work with organisations to ensure that the woodlands in your area are properly managed and protected. Educate others on the importance of leaving dead wood on the forest floor and keeping woods free of invasive species.

Woodlands around the world are being unnecessarily felled by unsustainable harvesting for timber. The result is species extinctions, irreversible habitat loss and climate change. When you purchase timber products such as tools, furniture and flooring, make sure they are harvested from certified sustainably managed forests. Individuals can also promote or even plant sustainable hardwood forestry in Ireland, so that we have our own supply and need not plunder the precious resources of other continents.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- *Ireland's Wild Countryside* by Éamon de Buitléar (Boxtree, 1993)
- *Atlas of the Rural Irish Landscape* edited by FHA Aalen, K Whelan and M Stout (Cork University Press, 1997)
- National Parks & Wildlife Service: www.npws.ie
- Conservation in the community: www.heritageknowhow.ie
- An Taisce: www.antisce.org
- Tree Council of Ireland: www.treecouncil.ie
- Native Woodland Trust: www.nativewoodtrust.ie
- Woodlands of Ireland: www.woodlandsofireland.com