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INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to the Lough Derg (on the Shannon) Nature Trail! Lough Derg is a stunningly beautiful and largely undiscovered natural amenity in the heart of Ireland, and a haven for wildlife. This brochure describes the Nature Trail, which circles the lake, and the rich natural heritage that visitors may encounter on their travels in and around Lough Derg.



Whether you are a nature lover, someone who enjoys the great outdoors, or you would like to learn a bit more about the wilder side of Lough Derg, there is something here for you. This brochure describes a variety of sites along the Nature Trail including walking routes, lakeshore access, birdwatching locations, woodland parks for adventuring, and quiet spots to enjoy the beautiful vistas of the lake. It captures many of the natural highlights in the Lough Derg area but there are many more to discover. You can travel the whole trail which is approximately 130 km in about 4 hours or join in at any of the stops.

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A hugely important access route to and from the midlands in prehistoric times, Lough Derg has a long and colourful history of habitation. The rich built and cultural heritage of the Lough Derg area is detailed in 'The Lough Derg (on the Shannon) Heritage Trail' phone app (see Further Information section below for how to access in page 77 at the end of this brochure).

Lough Derg is the third largest lake in Ireland and the largest lake in the River Shannon system. The lake is Ireland's premier inland navigation and water sports destination, and is a paradise for anglers. Lough Derg is fully navigable and has many beautiful harbours and piers for mooring.



Boating on Lough Derg (Photo: Velma Mercer)

Lough Derg lies within a limestone basin. The surrounding uplands, the Slieve Aughties, the Arra Mountains and Slieve Bearnagh, are composed of much harder rock, mainly sandstones. The diversity of landscapes that you will encounter when you visit the Lough Derg lakelands is a result of the variation in geology (i.e. limestone in the lowlands and sandstones in the uplands), topography, climate and land-use history in and around the lake. The outstanding natural heritage of Lough Derg enhances the visitor experience by providing a range of vistas, sights, sounds and places to explore and opportunities to experience and learn about nature and wildlife.



View of Lough Derg from Rosmore Pier (Photo: Allan Mee)

Protecting Nature

Lough Derg, and several areas in the surrounding landscape (see map on inside back cover), are designated for nature conservation both as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and a Special Protection Areas (SPAs), which reflects the huge significance of the natural heritage in this area. SACs and SPAs are part of the Natura 2000 network of sites across Europe, which are considered to be the most important sites for nature conservation across the European Union. SACs are designated on the basis of containing species and habitats of nature conservation importance because they are rare internationally, declining or under threat e.g. Otters and bogs. SPAs are designated because they contain birds of conservation concern and their habitats e.g. waterbirds such as Tufted Duck and Goldeneye, and birds of prey such as Merlin and the Hen Harrier.



Landscape view of Church Bay, Lough Derg (Photo: Allan Mee)

The variety of habitats and abundance of species of conservation importance makes Lough Derg a jewel in the crown Ireland's biodiversity resource. Whether you travel Lough Derg by boat or explore the many bays, woods, wetlands and uplands along the shoreline on foot, you are in the midst of a vibrant ecosystem that is teeming with life all year round. Lough Derg is a wonderful place to enjoy and experience nature, and is also an excellent destination for the specialist interested in seeing some of the rare and interesting species that can be found. Go explore!



Evening time on Lough Derg (Photo: Eamon Brennan)

HOW THIS GUIDE WORKS

The Lough Derg (on the Shannon) Nature Trail is essentially a driving route with many stops on the way (see map on the inside back cover). This beautiful area can also be explored on foot along the walking routes that run on either side of the lake, the East Clare Way and the Lough Derg Way, or by bicycle along the Lough Derg Cycle Route¹.

The Lough Derg (on the Shannon) Nature Trail is described from Portumna in County Galway down the western shore of the lake, to Killaloe in County Clare, and back up on the eastern side to Terryglass in County Tipperary but it can be travelled in any direction. You can visit one or all of the sites listed. The stops along the route include places with lake access (piers, harbours etc.), viewing points and walking routes. Features of interest are noted for each stop.

When you are out exploring Lough Derg and environs please follow the **Leave No Trace** principles:

- Plan Ahead and Prepare
- Be Considerate of Others
- Respect Farm Animals and Wildlife
- Travel and Camp on Durable Ground
- Leave What You Find
- Dispose of Waste Properly
- Minimise the Effects of Fire

Be conscious at all times that you may be on or close to active farmland. Keep dogs on a leash at all times in or near farms and farm animals. Be courteous and sensitive to local people. But above all enjoy yourself and the many delights that Lough Derg, the islands and its shoreline has to offer!

¹<http://www.everytrail.com/guide/lough-derg-cycleway>,
<http://www.everytrail.com/guide/lough-derg-way>;
<http://www.everytrail.com/guide/east-clare-way>



Birdwatching in Mountshannon (Photo: Allan Mee)

LOUGH DERG WILDLIFE HABITATS

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There is a huge diversity of habitats in and around Lough Derg including the lake itself, rivers, wetlands, woodlands, farmland, raised bogs, upland blanket bog, heathland and conifer plantation. These habitats provide food, shelter and cover for a myriad of wildlife. The wealth of nature in and around the lake greatly enhances the scenic quality of the area, producing an every changing palette of colours, texture, sights and sounds as you travel around the lake.

The lake

Lough Derg is 40km long and is less than 5km wide for most of its length. The widest point is from Scariff Bay to Youghal Bay (13km). The lake is relatively shallow at the northern end (mostly around 6m in depth) but it descends to over 25m as you travel south along the lake. The deepest point is 34m off Parker's Point. Water in the lake is relatively hard as you might expect as it lies within a limestone basin. The lake has many small islands, especially on its western and northern sides, ranging from the tiny Goat Island north of Killaloe to the largest island, Illaunmore (95ha).



Mute Swan (Photo: Eamon Brennan)

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Sailing on Lough Derg (Photo: Velma Mercer)

Lough Derg is characterised by broad bays, a highly indented shoreline and many islands. Much of the lake is fringed with reed beds, wetlands, fens, wet woods and native woodland, all of which help protect the water quality of the lake. The lake is flanked by the Slieve Aughty and Slieve Bearnagh Mountains to the west, and the Arra Mountains to the east. These uplands provide wonderful viewing points for the lake and greatly enhance the scenic quality of the area.



Fishing on Lough Derg (Photo: John Leech)

Lough Derg is famed for its Brown Trout fishing, particularly during the Mayfly season which tends to peak in mid-May. Trout feed voraciously on the Mayfly before heading up river to spawn. The lake is also teeming with coarse fish including Pike Perch, Roach and Bream. There used to be a commercial Eel fishery on Lough Derg but Eels are now protected due to the drastic decline in their numbers within the European Union.

Pollan, a rare type of fish, is also present in the lake although numbers are much reduced. Pollan is only found in five Irish lakes (its nearest relatives are in the arctic). The lake contains a landlocked population of

Sea Lamprey, River Lamprey and probably some Brook Lamprey. Lamprey are a primitive and peculiar group of fishes that look like eels. Some attach themselves to other fish during their lifecycle.

There are many rivers and streams that flow into and out of Lough Derg, the most notable of which is of course the mighty Shannon. Important tributaries to the lake include the Nenagh, Ballyfinboy, Woodford, Crow and Scariff Rivers. These have an additional flora and fauna associated with them that add to the diversity of Lough Derg. Several of the tributaries that flow into Lough Derg are important for spawning Atlantic Salmon as well as other fish.



Angler with Brown Trout (Photo: John Leech)



White-tailed Sea Eagle (Photo: Valerie O'Sullivan)

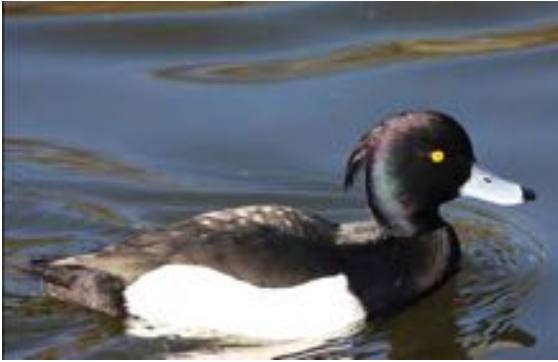


White-tailed Sea Eagle (Photo: Allan Mee)

Lough Derg is a great place for birdwatching as it supports important populations of both breeding and overwintering birds. The large numbers of resident birds are joined by summer visitors and others that arrive in winter. There are numerous piers and quays where you can observe waterbirds at close quarters and lovely walking routes around the lake where wetland, farmland and woodland birds can be seen.

White-tailed Sea Eagles are the most prominent members of Lough Derg's rich bird fauna and a regular sight in summer. They nest on islands on the lake much to the delight of visitors and local residents. The lake provides them with the fish diet they require and the security of safe nesting sites on the islands. These truly spectacular birds of prey were reintroduced to Ireland from Norwegian populations by the Golden Eagle Trust and have bred successfully in recent years. White-tailed Sea Eagles have been seen in a number of locations around the lake but they are most easily seen in Mountshannon in the summer.

Waterbirds of nature conservation interest on Lough Derg include the Tufted Duck, Cormorant, Common Tern, and Goldeneye. The lake is designated for nature conservation as a Special Protection Area (SPA) because it supports important populations of these species. SPAs are designed to protect birds of conservation importance and their habitats.



Tufted Duck (Photo: Eamon Brennan)

There is a resident population of Tufted Duck in Ireland but numbers swell when visiting birds arrive in winter. Tufted Duck is a diving duck that feeds on mussels and insect larvae. They nest in waterside vegetation. Cormorants are also resident all year round in Ireland but some arrive to spend the winter here. These distinctive birds feed on fish and can regularly be seen roosting on piers and rocks. These nest in trees in colonies around the lake. Common Terns are a summer visitor that arrives to breed on the lake. They can be seen flying gracefully over the water and diving for fish. Goldeneye are winter visitors that arrive from Scandinavia to overwinter in Ireland.

Greenland White-fronted Geese are also winter visitors to Ireland. They used to arrive in large numbers to sites around Lough Derg and feed on bogs and agricultural grasslands. They still use sites around the lake but not in such big numbers.

Other waterbirds to keep an eye out for include Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Whooper Swan, Wigeon, Teal, Mallard, Pochard, Coot, Black-tailed Godwit and the familiar Mute Swan. Red-breasted Mergansers now

breed on the lake and several Gulls can regularly be spotted- Common Gull, Mediterranean Gull and the Lesser Black-based Gull.

Boat users have a responsibility to ensure their activities do not disturb water-birds, particularly breeding birds. When travelling close to shore, speed should be kept low to avoid creating waves or a wash that might disturb or displace breeding birds and/or young birds.



Cormorant (Photo: Eamon Brennan)