

71E043

## Lough Owel

Lough Owel is a large (1,008ha) calcareous lake located north-west of Mullingar. It is a relatively shallow lake with a rocky, marl-covered bottom. The rocky nature of the shoreline has given rise to marginal vegetation which is patchy and sparse. Apart from some reedswamp formed by common reed (*Phragmites australis*) and common clubrush (*Scirpus lacustris*), shoreline vegetation is dominated by occasional patches of alders (*Alnus glutinosa*). There are however areas of marsh and fen in the northern and south-western corners of the lake. These areas (Bunbrosna marsh and Tullaghan fen) were formerly separate A.S.I.s but have now been subsumed into the Lough Owel N.H.A.. Bunbrosna is an area of marsh and fen which is partially invaded by birches (*Betula pubescens*) and willows (*Salix* spp.). The area contains some rare plant species, namely marsh pea (*Lathyrus palustris*), marsh fern (*Thelypteris palustris*) and the protected round-leaved wintergreen (*Pyrola rotundifolia*). Tullaghan fen is an area of flooded cut-over bog which has developed a varied fen and marsh vegetation quite similar to Bunbrosna marsh. Mud sedge (*Carex limosa*), greater tussock sedge (*Carex appropinquata*) and marsh fern (*Thelypteris palustris*) are to be found here. In addition, three other rare plant species are found along the lake margins namely, white sedge (*Carex curta*), marsh stitchwort (*Stellaria palustris*) and frogbit (*Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*).

Although Lough Owel is not noted for its wildfowl there are small populations of mallard, shoveler, pochard and tufted duck present. Farmland adjacent to the lake are feeding grounds for internationally important numbers of Greenland white-fronted goose. Lough Owel is one of the most important fishing lakes in the Midlands and is especially good for trout. The possible presence of Scharff's char here (*Savelinus scharffi*), a distinct race confined to Lough Owel and Lough Ennell, is also of immense interest.

With the exception of Lough Carra in County Mayo, Lough Owel is the best example of a large, spring-fed calcareous lake in the country. The lake and fringing wetland areas support an outstanding array of rare plant species as well as supporting bird and fish populations of considerable interest. Possible threats to the scientific interest of the lake include the increasing of levels of water supply to Mullingar, overfishing, eutrophication caused by local farming practices and pressure from amenity uses such as boating and fishing.