



Vertical *Limit*

Ireland's mountains are special places – inspirational landscapes, vital for biodiversity, yet vulnerable to a range of threats. **Helen Lawless** outlines what Mountaineering Ireland is doing to help protect Ireland's mountain environment and the public's enjoyment of these wild spaces.

Although Ireland's mountains reach modest heights when compared with the Alps or the Himalayas, they are a significant element in Ireland's landscape, providing defining geographic features, some of our most beautiful scenery and our largest areas of relatively wild land.

Our mountains are more than a backdrop. The mountain environment delivers a host of ecosystem services, including biodiversity, carbon storage, water quality and flood mitigation. While the broad shape of Ireland's mountain landscape has been determined by geological events – particularly glaciation – our mountain habitats are also heavily influenced by Ireland's mild, wet, oceanic climate. Human activity plays its part too: our upland landscape is the product of a system of low intensity agriculture.

The heath and blanket bog habitats of our mountains support a limited, but quite specialised, range of species. Heather has a leading role in the mountain ecosystem. As an evergreen shrub, it is there all year round. Acting like a tree, it provides shelter for birds, animals and

insects, and its roots help to stabilise the soil. Heather is the primary food source for red grouse and part of another iconic upland species, the diet of the Irish mountain hare. The diversity of insect life in upland vegetation supports more elusive creatures, such as lizards and the pygmy shrew. Our upland flora includes plants like lousewort and the insectivorous sundews that have made ingenious adaptations to survive in a nutrient-poor environment.

Rugged Character

Irish people have always had a strong connection with mountains. In pre-Christian times, important people were buried in passage tombs on mountain summits. Later, St Patrick climbed Croagh Patrick and people continue to follow him. Today, the mountain landscape is central to Ireland's tourism – just look at any Fáilte Ireland brochure or website. Mountain areas draw visitors and local people for both passive and active recreation. For many people, the appeal and value of the Irish mountains lies in their wild and rugged character.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Republic of Ireland has 8 per cent of the world's blanket bog, making Ireland the most important country in Europe for this type of habitat (Irish Peatland Conservation Council).

Hillwalking and rockclimbing are activities rooted in the mountain environment. Consequently, concern for these areas is central to the work of Mountaineering Ireland. As the representative body working on behalf of all hillwalkers and climbers in Ireland, Mountaineering Ireland has a membership of over 11,500, made up of 160 affiliated clubs and almost 1,500 individual members. The body's environmental work is focused on two core objectives:

- ✿ To secure continued access to mountain areas and crags
- ✿ To promote the conservation and responsible use of the mountain environment

Access to Mountain Areas

Outside of our six national parks (which comprise approximately 1 per cent of Ireland's land area) and Coillte's extensive estate (7 per cent), virtually all of the land in Ireland's mountain areas is privately-owned. Some mountains are owned by individuals, many are owned jointly as commonage. Although there is no legal right of entry onto mountain land, the majority of landowners continue to allow access. To maintain this goodwill, it is important that those entering land for recreation minimise the impact of their activities and respect those

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▼ Sika deer, Glendalough. Photo: A. Kelly.
Main: Macgilllicuddy Reeks by C. Krieger.
Above left: Ling, or Heather, the most abundant upland plant. Photo: C. Krieger



who own and work the land. For example, it is not advisable to take dogs onto hills where farm animals may be grazing.

With regard to access, Mountaineering Ireland's policy is 'reasonable access for responsible users'. The aim of the organisation is to have open, unrestricted access on foot to unenclosed hills, mountains and coastal areas throughout Ireland. Where there isn't direct access to these areas from the public road, access should be achieved via routes leading from the public roads and car parks, through or around the enclosed fields, and out onto the mountain land. Mountaineering Ireland pursues its access aim largely through involvement in Comhairle na Tuaithe (the Countryside Council) and through building relationships with other upland stakeholders.

It is clear that with increasing levels of recreational activity, a framework is needed for the management of access in Ireland's mountain areas. A Comhairle na Tuaithe project currently being piloted on Carrauntoohil and at Binn Shléibhe (Mount Gable) near Clonbur may provide a solution.

Changing Landscape

By agreeing access with the landowners on a mountain, producing a map showing designated access points, indemnifying the landowners, providing parking and any infrastructure required to sustain recreational use and the pilot Mountain Access Project sets out to manage recreational enjoyment of mountain areas in a way that minimises

inconvenience for landowners and local residents and means that the use of the area can be promoted with clarity and confidence.

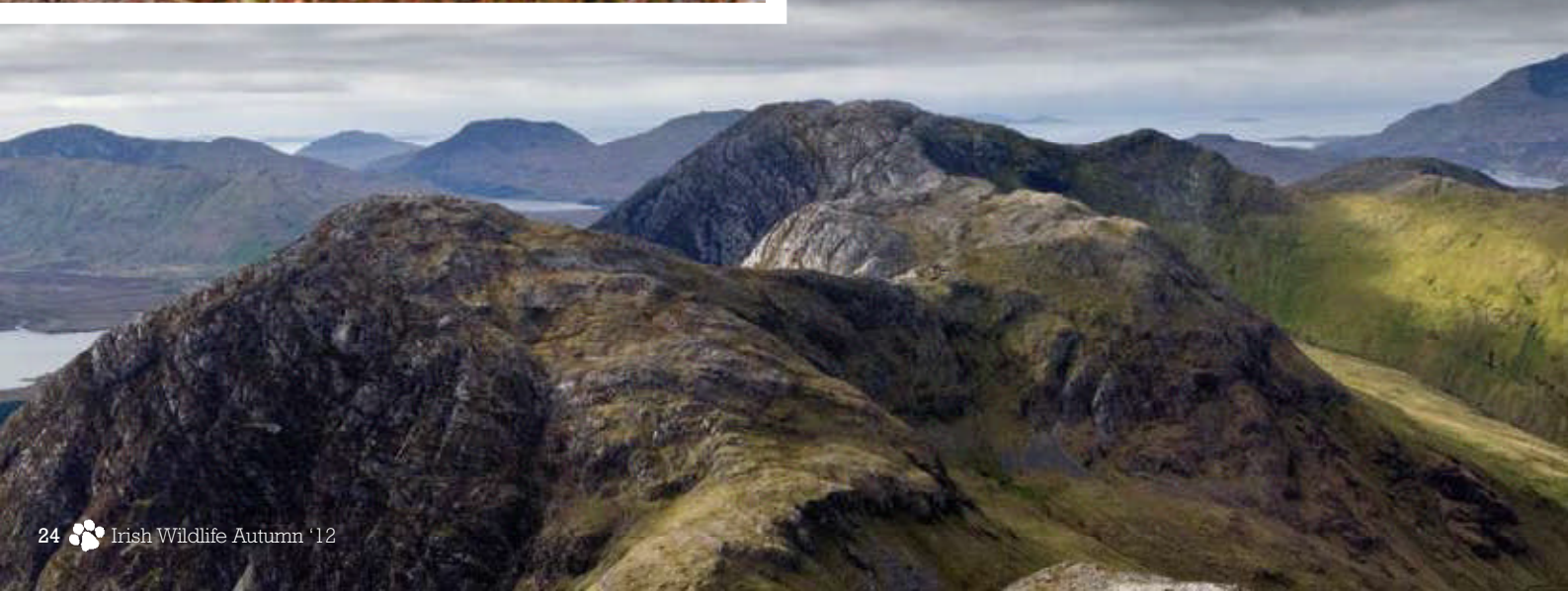
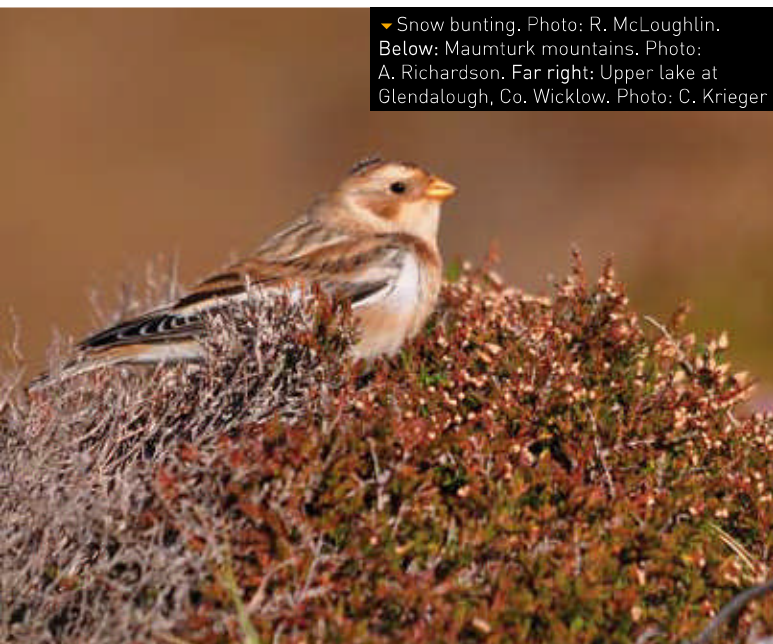
The Mountain Access Project is a different proposition to the development of marked walking route. It is not intended to change the landscape or the distinctive recreation experience offered by the Irish mountains. As these are mountain areas, recreational users should be appropriately skilled and equipped to look after themselves. Mountaineering Ireland is urging Comhairle na Tuaithe to extend the pilot to at least six other areas this year so that the viability of the scheme is fully-tested.

Role of Agriculture

The management of recreational access is just one element within the overall management of Ireland's mountain areas. A large proportion of Ireland's upland areas are designated under EU legislation as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) or Special Protection Areas (SPAs) as they include habitats and species of international importance. Ireland has a responsibility to maintain these areas at a favourable conservation status. Failure to do so will result in significant fines from the EU. A 2008 report by the National Parks and Wildlife Service showed that only 7 per cent of our protected habitats and species were in good condition. The situation with Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) is probably even worse, as we have 630 proposed NHAs that remain without statutory designation since their initial listing in 1995. Clearly, there is a need for resources to be allocated to give effect to nature conservation designations and to ensure that we have management plans in place for our 'protected' areas. As most of these areas are on private land, the most practical and cost-effective way to look after them is likely to be in co-operation with the people who own and work the land.

While overgrazing was a problem in the 1990s (and still is in some areas), land abandonment is of growing concern, with gorse and bracken becoming dominant in some areas that are not grazed. Mountaineering Ireland is currently working with other upland stakeholders to explore the opportunities for an upland agri-environment programme under the next Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Such a scheme could support continuity in low-intensity hillfarming to deliver farm produce, but also reward farmers for the

▼ Snow bunting. Photo: R. McLoughlin.
Below: Maumturk mountains. Photo:
A. Richardson. Far right: Upper lake at
Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. Photo: C. Krieger



delivery of public goods such as landscape, biodiversity and recreation opportunities. Mountaineering Ireland would like to see payments under the proposed scheme based on the delivery of agreed outputs.

Coillte's Estate

Within the Coillte estate, there are 11 forest parks and more than 150 recreation sites, but that is just a small part of the story. Virtually every piece of land owned by Coillte is used in some way for recreation, often by people who live locally. For almost 50 years, there has been an open access policy across Ireland's state forestry.

Access to and, most specifically, through Coillte land provides hillwalkers, orienteers, birdwatchers, scouts and many more recreational users with access to higher ground. The Government is currently considering the possible sale of some of Coillte's assets, such as the timber crop, but excluding the sale of land. This implies a possible misunderstanding of the pivotal role Coillte has in outdoor recreation in Ireland – it is not just the ownership, but the management, of the land that is critical. Any sale of Coillte's assets to commercial interests could change management on the ground, and thereby threaten public enjoyment of public land.

Personal Responsibility

Walking and other outdoor recreation activities enable people to have positive experiences through interaction with the natural environment. Whether it's the sound of a tumbling mountain stream, the incredible beauty when you look closely at a heath spotted orchid, or the excitement of coming across a badger sett – mountain areas provide us with special experiences. Our enjoyment of these areas brings with it a

responsibility to minimise our impact on the natural environment and on other people.

Along with land managers, tourism interests and other recreation groups, Mountaineering Ireland is a partner in the Leave No Trace programme – an all-Ireland initiative to encourage responsible enjoyment of the outdoor environment. Leave No Trace is based on an education programme which helps people to understand the impact of their activities and make better choices when they use the outdoors.

Not that long ago, 'take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints' was considered the height of good practice. However, the cumulative impact of footprints is now causing concern in many mountain areas as our damp, peaty soils are highly susceptible to erosion. Many popular routes on Ireland's mountains are suffering the effects of erosion, whether through increased recreational activity, natural processes, or a combination of these. To raise awareness of this issue, facilitate debate and demonstrate possible interventions, Mountaineering Ireland is hosting a conference during September on the management of upland paths. Full details of the conference are available at www.helpingthehills.ie.

Let's Get it Right

As our largest expanses of semi-natural habitats, Ireland's mountain areas are a huge natural asset and we have a duty to protect these areas for future generations. This requires political will and policy mechanisms, but we can take the first step by individually celebrating and valuing Ireland's mountain environment. If mountains matter to you, consider joining Mountaineering Ireland and supporting our work to protect Ireland's mountain areas.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Irish upland habitats include blanket bog, heath, flushes, grassland, and communities associated with exposed rock and scree. Almost 19 per cent of Ireland can be considered to support upland habitats. The importance of these areas to plant and animal conservation is unquestionable (National Parks and Wildlife Service).