Connemara National Park

Páirc Náisiúnta Chonamara

THE PARK

Situated in the heart of the west of Ireland in County Galway, Connemara National Park covers some 2,000 hectares of scenic mountains, expanses of bogs and heaths, and grasslands. Some of the Park's mountains, namely Benbaun, Bencullagh, Benbrack and Muckanaght, are part of the famous Twelve Bens range. Diamond Hill, which towers over the Park visitor centre, is worth climbing to view the Park lands and surrounding scenery. Glanmore (meaning large glen) forms the centre of the Park. From it the Polladirk river flows through a spectacular gorge just south of Kylemore Farm.

The Park experiences a mild climate greatly influenced by the Atlantic Ocean. Rainfall is plentiful with an average annual precipitation of 1500 mm falling on 250 raindays.

The visitor centre is open from Easter to the end of September. Arrangements can be made for visiting groups at other times of year by telephoning **(095) 41054**. The Park entrance is on the Clifden side of Letterfrack village. Facilities available in and around the visitor centre include picnic tables, nature trails with accompanying booklets, an audio-visual show, a photographic display of Connemara scenery, an information centre and a summer series of nature talks and guided walks. Visitors are encouraged to walk over the mountains and lowlands and explore all parts of the Park.

CONSERVATION

Agricultural and industrial uses have caused many changes in the Irish countryside. Further economic developments will bring more changes affecting wildlife and the landscape. The aims of the National Parks and Monuments Service are to conserve interesting aspects of our heritage and to help people to enjoy and learn from them. Connemara National Park is part of this effort, conserving part of the Connemara landscape and the wild animals and plants that live there, and preventing further exploitation of them. The National Parks and Monuments Service is affiliated to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), which provides international recognition for Parks like this that meet its criteria and standards.

Visitor centre

Waterfall

HISTORY OF LAND OWNERSHIP AND USAGE

Much of the present Park lands formed part of the Kylemore Abbey estate and the Letterfrack Industrial School, the remainder having been owned by private individuals. The southern part of the Park was at one time owned by Richard (Humanity Dick) Martin who helped to form the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals during the early nineteenth century. The Park lands are now wholly owned by the State and managed solely for National Park purposes.

The visitor centre buildings were formerly the farm buildings belonging to Letterfrack Industrial School, and the administration office was the school infirmary. These buildings were erected around 1890.

In the past the lands were used for agriculture, mainly as grazing for cattle and sheep. Vegetables were grown on some of the more fertile lowlands. Today, these areas are easily recognised by the old cultivation ridges and hollows. Several of the bogs in the Park were used extensively as fuel sources, and old turf banks, now disused, are commonly seen.

Many remains of human presence can be seen in the Park. The oldest is a megalithic court tomb, some 4,000 years old, in the north eastern section. Close by is an early nineteenth century graveyard about which little is known. Also of that period is Tobar Mweelin, a well which was tapped to supply water to Kylemore Castle around 1870 and is still in use today. Stretches of the old Galway road, in use over a century ago, may still be seen in the northern sections of the Park, but other stretches are obscured by vegetation. Ruined houses, a disused lime kiln, old sheep pens, drainage systems and old walls in various parts of the Park, are all evidence of greater population and more extensive use of these lands in the past.

Lime kiln

FLORA

Western blanket bog and heathland are the predominant vegetation types to be found in the Park. The boglands, situated in the lowlying areas, are normally very wet. Heathers clothe many of the mountain sides, with ling, cross-leaved heath and bell heather all very common. Probably the commonest plant in the Park is purple moor-grass. It grows in clumps particularly in the bogs and is responsible for the colour of much of the landscape throughout the year. Insectivorous plants form an integral part of the bog community. Sundews and butterworts trap and digest insects with their leaves to gain nutrients which are in short supply in the bogs. Other common plants of the bog are lousewort, bog-cotton, milkwort, bog asphodel, orchids and bog myrtle, with a variety of lichens and mosses, including bog-moss (Sphagnum).

Saint Dabeoc's heath

As the bog plants die they only partly decay, due mainly to the prevading high rainfall. Their remains accumulate and are compacted to form peat (turf). The deepest peat in the Park is about 5m. The vegetational history of the area is in these peatlands in the form of preserved pollen grains. By identifying the pollen grains it is possible to know what plants grew here in the past. Also preserved in the peat are the stumps of pine trees, some 4,000 years old.

Most of the commoner plants of the Park are typical of the temperate climate of Ireland. However, some rarer species typical of the colder areas of Europe and the Arctic may be found high up in the mountains, such as roseroot, purple and starry saxifrages, and mountain sorrel. Conversely, plants from Spain and Portugal are also found in the Park, notably pale butterwort, St. Dabeoc's heath, a member of the heather family, and St. Patrick's Cabbage.

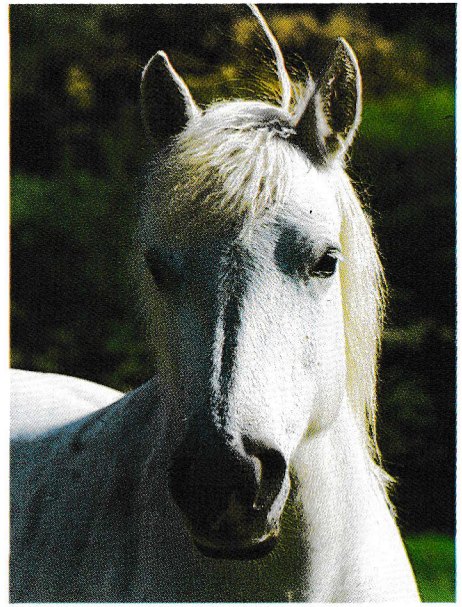
FAUNA

Birdlife of the Park is varied. Meadow pipits, skylarks, stonechats, chaffinches, robins and wrens are just some of the common song-birds within the Park. Birds of prey are sometimes seen, usually kestrel, with sparrowhawk, merlin and peregrine falcon making occasional visits. Winter-time brings an increase in the numbers of some resident birds such as woodcock, snipe, starling, song thrush and mistle thrush, and frequent migrants from other countries are redwing, fieldfare and brambling.

The elusive nature and nocturnal habit of some mammals makes them more difficult to find, but their traces and signs often indicate their presence. The regular use of certain runs by badgers can lead to their sets (lairs), especially in woodlands. Piles of gnawed nutshells and seeds indicate fieldmice which are abundant throughout the Park. While walking over the bogland it is not unusual to disturb a hare or at least see the signs of one. Rabbits, foxes, stoats, shrews, and even bats at night, are often observed. With patience most of the Park's mammals can easily be seen.

Native red deer once roamed the hills of Connemara but due to human pressures they became extinct some 150 years ago. An attempt is being made to reintroduce red deer to Connemara and already the nucleus of a herd has been established within the Park. The main aim of this project is to help in conserving Irish red deer. The largest mammal in the Park is the Connemara Pony. Although a domestic animal this pony is very much part of the Connemara countryside. A herd of pure bred Connemara Ponies is being established to assist in conserving this unique equine breed. Some of the present herd may be seen behind the visitor centre.

Meadow Pipit

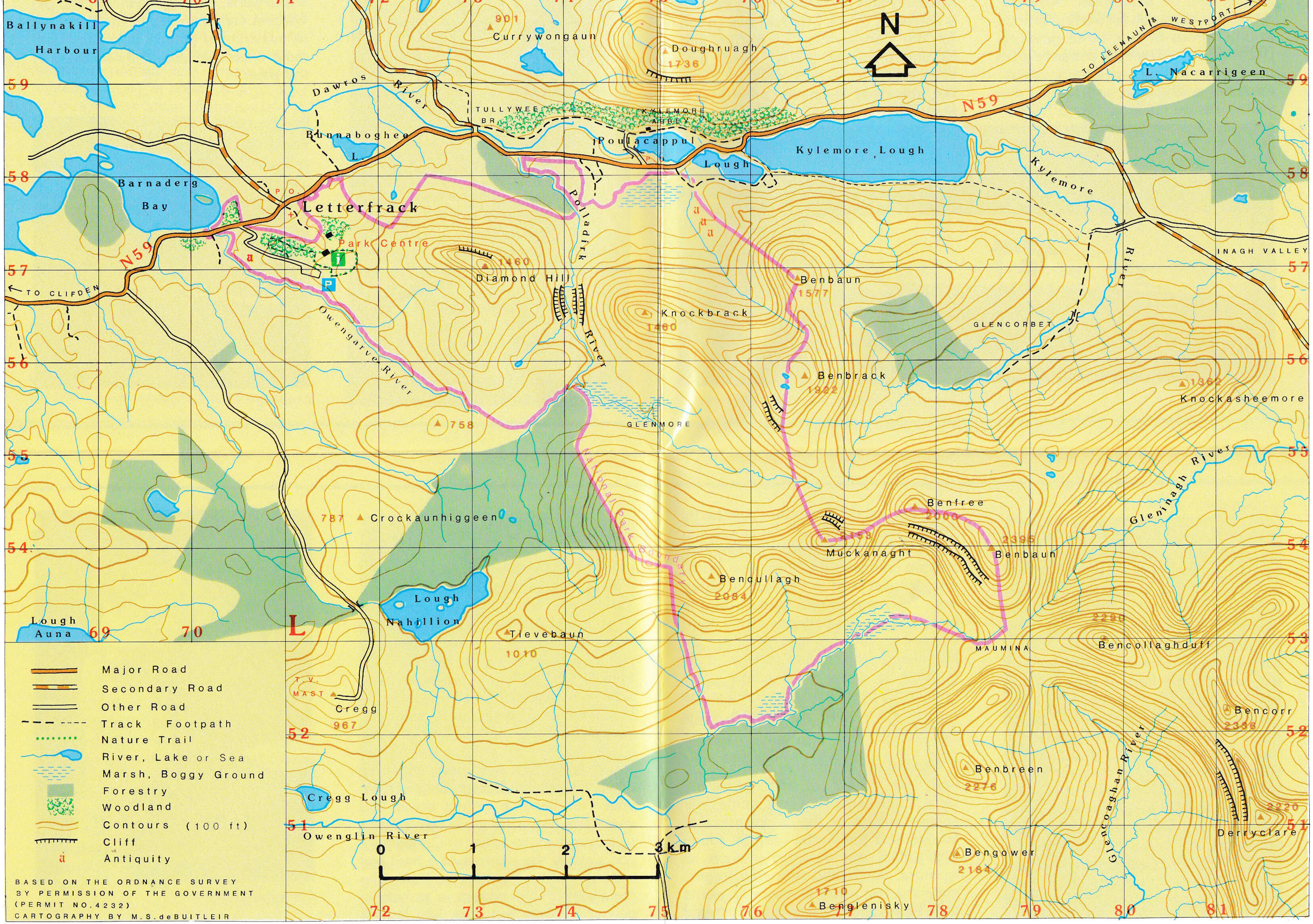


Connemara pony

GEOLOGY

The rocks underlying the National Park are metamorphic rocks typical of the Twelve Bens area. The mountain tops are mostly of more resistant quartzite, while the flanks consist of less resistant schists and grey marbles. These rocks derive from sediments deposited in a warm shelf sea between 700 and 550 million years ago. Upheavals in the earth's crust formed the sediments into crystalline schists within the roots of an elongated mountain belt. Regional uplift and erosion have since brought the rocks to the surface.

The last ice-age, which ended about 10,000 years ago, imposed a final shaping to the landscape and left behind localised deposits of sand and gravel, widespread boulder clay and erratic boulders. These features largely determine the pattern of plant communities within the Park.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Ballynakill Harbour
Barnaderg Bay
Letterfrack
Park Centre
TO CLIFDEN
N59
Dawros River
Bunnaboghee L.
TULLYWEE BR.
KYLEMORE ABBEY
Poulacappul Lough
Kylemore Lough
Kylemore River
L. Nacarrigeen
TO LEENAUN & WESTPORT
INAGH VALLEY
901 Currywongaun
Doughruagh 1736
1460 Diamond Hill
Polladirk River
Owengarve River
Knockbrack 1460
Benbaun 1577
Benbrack 1922
GLENCORBET
1362 Knockasheemore
GLENMORE
758
787 Crockaunhiggeen
Lough Nahillion
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Tievebaun 1010
T.V. MAST
Cregg 967
Cregg Lough
Owenglin River
Benculagh 2084
Muckanaght
Benfree 2000
2395 Benbaun
MAUMINA
2290 Bencollaghduff
Glencoaghan River
Gleninagh River
Bencorr 2336
Benbreen 2276
Bengower 2184
1710 Benglenisky
2220 Derryclare
0 1 2 3km
Major Road
Secondary Road
Other Road
Track Footpath
Nature Trail
River, Lake or Sea
Marsh, Boggy Ground
Forestry
Woodland
Contours (100 ft)
Cliff
Antiquity
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