

Conservation

A River in Summer



Image courtesy of Mike Brown/NPWS.

The Owenduff is an important breeding ground for Atlantic Salmon, with many places along its length providing suitable sites for redds, which are shallow nests in which eggs are laid. Brown Trout can also be found in the river.

By Richard Creagh

The Owenduff River winds its way westwards from the Nephin Beg Mountains, through Mayo's biggest area of bog. Most of the river passes through Ballycroy National Park. This 11,000 hectare park is considered special because of its huge area of blanket bog, most of which has remained unchanged since it started developing after the last ice age. The Owenduff River system is one of the last remaining large, unforested river catchments in Ireland. A river catchment catches all the water from the surrounding area, eventually bringing it downriver to the sea. This unchanged area has created a healthy environment and home for a huge variety of habitats, animals and plants, which means it has a diverse ecosystem.



SUMMER is the season of life in Ireland; long days, mild temperatures and even the odd bit of sunshine provide plenty of productivity in the natural world. From late spring the increase in plant and insect activity is easily seen on the Owenduff. The acidic nature of the bog means only acid tolerant plants occur in and alongside the river. Bogbean, with its attractive pink and white flowers, is the first plant species to flower, starting in early summer. It doesn't tolerate flowing water but it can be found alongside the river in flooded bog pools and is a food plant for Elephant Hawkmoth caterpillars. The river is also home to a very rare Irish plant, the Ivy-leaved Bellflower. The banks of the Owenduff are the only known site in Mayo for this rare wildflower, which is mostly confined to the south of the country. Its delicate lilac flowers appear in July and August.



Bogbean

Ivy-leaved Bellflower

Insect life is plentiful in summer time, with dragonfly and damselfly young (or nymphs as they are called) emerging as adults from suitable sheltered areas of the riverbed. Mayfly and stonefly nymphs can also be found, with huge numbers of midges present along the riverbank. A windless summer evening can become unbearable as they seek out any exposed skin! All of these insects provide a food source for the Dipper, an aquatic bird that walks along the riverbed in search of its prey. Its powerful legs allow it to hold position in flowing rivers and it can see underwater and hold its breath for much longer than other terrestrial birds.

Otters on the River

Otters are plentiful along the river, which has plenty of fish for them to eat. An otter can use 20 km of river as its territory which is a lot for an animal that doesn't get much bigger than 1 m in length! Watch out for otter droppings, known as spraints, on boulders or outcrops overlooking the river.



All images courtesy of NPWS.

A Blanket Bog

Like a huge cloak lying over the land, a blanket bog can slowly form over thousands of years as plant material decomposes on waterlogged land, creating a peaty soil.

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