

CAVAN'S Historic Graveyard NETWORK



Cavan's Historic Graveyards... Where Nature Finds Sanctuary

**Discover Local History And Natural Beauty
In Cavan's Ancient Graveyards**



Introduction

As we become more aware of the value of biodiversity, we are reminded of the importance of preserving it. With the ways we use land, produce food, and address climate change having such a significant impact on the world around us, it is our duty to take a stand and protect the natural world. By recognising the role we all play in preserving biodiversity, we can work towards a brighter future for our planet.

Historic graveyards in County Cavan are a place of sanctuary for biodiversity. We can play an important role in nurturing biodiversity in our historic graveyards and other parcels of land in our communities.

Dotted around the county and predominantly in rural areas, our historic graveyards are the final resting places of our ancestors and places of huge historical value. Most historic graveyards in County Cavan are closed to new burials. As human activity in these pockets of land decreases, nature is slowly reclaiming these spaces, reminding us of the beauty and resilience of life.

These guidelines aim to encourage a balance between maintaining our historic graveyards as an act of respecting those buried there and protecting them as sites of high biodiversity value.

We appreciate the hard work and commitment of local community groups in maintaining their local historic graveyards. We hope they will benefit from the practical advice in these guidelines and enjoy learning more about the biodiversity in their locality.

I want to thank all contributors to this project:

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Dr. Tina Aughney - Bat Specialist

Heather Bothwell - Ecologist

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What is biodiversity and why is it important?

Biodiversity or 'biological diversity' is the variety of living things that exist on our planet – the diverse array of plants, animals, fungi, and bacteria that make up nature. Each of these plays a unique role in maintaining the delicate balance of their ecosystem. It's important to remember that this balance is fragile, and without the wide range of species that exist, nature's equilibrium can be disrupted. Let's do our part to appreciate and protect the biodiversity around us.

Biodiversity on a global scale is huge and can be difficult to grasp. There are 1.7 million species of animals, plants, fungi and bacteria recorded worldwide, but scientists understand there are possibly up to 9 million. These are species that have evolved over millions of years and precede humans. In tropical regions, there are more species of plants, animals and fungi and that concentration declines as you move further from the equator. The loss of biodiversity at this scale and so far from us here in Ireland can make the problem seem distant and difficult to connect with.

Biodiversity in Ireland

The biodiversity in Ireland is one of a kind, shaped by our geography, history, and climate. There are approximately 30,000 species of flora and fauna found in Ireland. These species are responsible for the vibrant life around us, including the marine life in our seas, the birds soaring in our skies, and the lush greenery Ireland is famous for.

Up to 2,000 years ago, Ireland was home to native forests. However, with the growth of farming, commercial forestry, and urban expansion, our land use has changed dramatically. As a result, it is estimated that 75% of Ireland is now intensively managed, leaving only 25% of the land available to support biodiversity.

County Cavan, also known as the Lake County, is home to a variety of wetland habitats, including peatland in the Cuilcagh Mountains and grassland in the lowland Drumlin landscape. In May 2023, the government announced its plan to acquire nearly 1,000 acres of upland habitat in North Cavan as part of the world's first cross-border Geopark. The Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark is spread over 2,333 km² and extends from County Cavan across the border into County Fermanagh. The park will be managed for biodiversity conservation, climate action, and regenerative tourism.

The term ‘biodiversity’ was first coined in the 1980s and is now commonly used by everyone. It’s a term we hear frequently but why is biodiversity important?

Biodiversity is crucial for the survival of life on Earth. In other words, the loss of biodiversity poses a real threat to the existence of life on our planet. Biodiversity is the foundation of our life support system, as the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat all depend on it. Furthermore, biodiversity has value in and of itself, beyond just its significance to human life.



Red admiral
Vanessa atalanta



Cowslip

What are the main reasons for the loss of biodiversity?

The biggest threat to biodiversity in the world is how we have changed, either deliberately or accidentally, natural habitats.

- Land use change, in particular, the impact of agriculture on land
- Population growth and increased demand on the Earth’s resources to support the increased population
- Air, water and land pollution
- Climate change
- Invasive species



Ivy berries

Cavan's historic graveyards...Where nature finds sanctuary

Did you know that our historic graveyards are not just a resting place for the departed, but also a sanctuary for rare and endangered species? These hallowed grounds provide a safe haven for some of the most vulnerable creatures, making them all the more special and worth preserving.

Historic graveyards are long-established, permanent green spaces that are unique parcels of protected land. Despite significant changes in land use over the past century, our graveyards remain constant. Let's learn more about the biodiversity value of our local graveyards and strive to manage them with conserving biodiversity in mind.

Cavan County Council is responsible for 46 historic graveyards in County Cavan. There are many more historic graveyards throughout the county in the care of faith communities. Collectively, these graveyards occupy a significant amount of land and can be managed to promote biodiversity.



It is a policy of Cavan County Council to protect historic graveyards as important places for biodiversity. Number 13 in the Historic Graveyard Policies:
 'No pesticides to be used in a historic burial ground. Historic graveyards are often a haven for wildlife, rare species of invertebrates, grassland fungi and mosses, ferns and lichens. A maintenance programme for the upkeep of the burial ground should recognise the value of the burial ground as a habitat.'

ACTIONS

1. Don't use herbicides, insecticides and fungicides

Spraying herbicides may seem like the easiest option when trying to control weeds but herbicides can pollute water, soil and other vegetation and can be toxic to birds, fish and insects. Research indicates that the use of insecticides and pesticides has contributed to the global severe decline of wildlife and the widespread loss of farmland biodiversity.

2. Don't mow, let it grow

Reduce the frequency of grass cutting to allow native wildflowers to grow. Remember, weeds and wildflowers are an important source of food for our pollinators. Consider mowing a path around your graveyard to facilitate pedestrian access to the site and leaving areas of grass uncut. A reduced mowing routine will make it easier for the community to maintain the graveyard and will increase the biodiversity value of the site.

3. Manage your native hedgerow

Some historic graveyards will have native hedgerows around their boundary, others will have stone walls. Both are habitats and should be managed carefully. Plants such as Hawthorn and Blackthorn are native plants and flower in early spring. Their flowers are an important food source for wild bees when they emerge from hibernation. Trees in hedgerows are a nesting habitat for many different species of birds.



A word on Ash die back...

Ash dieback disease was first detected in Ireland in 2012 and will wipe out most of Ireland's ash trees. A very small number of trees are showing a natural tolerance to the disease. Researchers at Teagasc and universities in Ireland are studying these trees and developing a gene bank to produce ash trees resistance to the disease.

If you have ash in our graveyard, monitor it. If the diseased tree presents an unacceptable risk to people, property or the headstones and features in the site, felling may be necessary.

A guide to 'light touch' maintenance in historic graveyards

Heather Bothwell, Ecologist

Historic graveyards, that have not been altered for many, many years are rich in biodiversity. Graveyards can be feeding and nesting areas for birds, bats and visiting larger mammals. Much of the biodiversity in historic graveyards is small, some needing a hand lens to really appreciate. Stone walls and banks can be rich in, lichens, mosses, ferns and provide nesting and overwintering crevices for invertebrates.

Take time....

Making an effort to explore and learn what is present on the graveyard site takes time and varies over the seasons of the year. It is worth taking the time to document this and not embark on large changes to the graveyard, quickly. Consideration, consultation, communication
Remember the three Cs: considering what biodiversity you have on the site, consulting with all involved in the maintenance, workers, funders and community groups and finally communicating with all in the wider community and visitors. This means letting people know why maintenance strategies may have changed.
Reduced Mowing

Most graveyards have a grassland habitat which is maintained by grass cutting. Short grass is important for access, such as paths. Areas of short grass and bare ground can be very important for nesting mining bees. These bees will also have to be areas where flowers are plentiful.

It is very important to;

- Protect any native hedgerows and allow them to flower in spring. Areas such as brambles and ivy can also be important for pollinators and nesting birds.
- Let the Dandelions bloom in many areas

It may also be possible to maintain some areas in a way that you are creating a short-flowering '6-week meadow' or wildflower lawn. You may wish to go further and create a small, long-flowering wildflower meadow area that is only cut once a year.

The grass cuttings should be removed after each cut to reduce soil fertility over time. This reduces strong grass growth and allows more flowers. The site of composting of grass cutting should be chosen carefully. In many small historic graveyards, it may be off site.

Bumblebees nest in long grass, often at the base of a hedgerow. We have 62 species (types) of solitary bees who are mining bees. They nest by burrowing into bare ground or south/east-facing banks of bare earth (soil, sand, clay.) It should not be necessary to bring in new plants or sow seed in historic graveyards. Instead, rely on maintenance to encourage native plants to grow.

Guide to Irish Bats in Graveyards

Dr. Tina Aughney

Graveyards can often be an important biodiversity hotspot for local bat communities. This is not to reinforce the association of bats with nocturnal happenings in dark forbidden places but more that our graveyards are often places where there are older buildings, natural stone ruins, large mature trees and places devoid of outdoor lighting. Bats, as much of Ireland's wildlife, are nocturnal. This means that they have evolved to take advantage of the nighttime and therefore shy away from outdoor lighting.

This information leaflet will provide a checklist to allow a graveyard to be assessed for its potential biodiversity importance for local bat populations. It will also provide some conservation measures to increase the biodiversity value of graveyards for bats.

While all biodiversity is important, there are certain groups that can act as biodiversity indicators. Bats is one such group, as it is a slow reproducing mammal, relies on insects and needs a good network of habitats to fly through the landscape from roosting places to preferred foraging areas.

What is a bat?

Bats are mammals, which means that they have fur, have warm blood and give birth to live young which the female bats feed with their own milk. Bats are the only mammals that can achieve true flight. Irish bats are small, fitting into the palm of your hand and ranging in weight from 5-12gms. Fully grown bats can sometimes be mistaken for baby bats. Their wingspan can range from 20cm to 32cm, which can make them seem a lot bigger than they are, when they are in flight.

Where do they live?

Irish bats are very transient mammals and have a range of different roosting (or resting) places throughout the year. During the colder months, bats will seek out cool, stable environments for hibernation such as deep holes in trees or deep crevices in stone ruins. During the summer months, the female bats will come together to form maternity roosts, typically in attics of buildings such as churches, where they give birth to and raise their single pup. Bats tend to roost in locations that are close to a good regular supply of food (i.e., insects) such as woodland and rivers.



What do Irish bats eat?

Irish bats are insectivorous, meaning they eat insects. In an average night of feeding, our most common bat species, the Pipistrelles, can eat approximately 3,000 insects. They play a very important role in keeping insect populations under control. The bats will feed at dusk when they leave the roost and fly along defined flight paths, leading to good habitats where their main sources of food can be found. Hedgerows and treelines are essential commuting routes for bats to travel between roosting sites and preferred foraging habitats.

How do bats navigate their environment?

Bats use echolocation to navigate their environment and seek out their prey. The bat produces ultrasonic sound, which bounces off solid objects in the environment, and bats can gauge the distance by how quickly it takes for the echo to return. Bats can determine if the echo is returning from an object to avoid or an insect that is good to consume. Bats are not blind but use echolocation as a navigation and hunting tool in the hours of darkness.



Soprane pipistrelle

How many species of bat are present in Ireland & County Cavan?

Ireland has 9 resident species of bat:

- Common pipistrelle
- Soprane pipistrelle
- Nathusius' pipistrelle
- Leisler's bat
- Brown long-eared bat
- Daubenton's bat
- Whiskered bat
- Natterer's bat
- Lesser horseshoe bat

Eight of these bat species are found in County Cavan with Soprano pipistrelle and Common pipistrelle species the most common bats in the county. The only resident bat species not found in the county is the Lesser horseshoe bat, which is found in western sea-board counties.

For more information on bats please check out the website www.batconservationireland.org and for younger members, the website www.learnaboutbats.com

Learning more about Biodiversity

Make 2024 the year you learn more about biodiversity and how to manage your local historic graveyard for biodiversity conservation.

The Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss was formally established by way of resolution of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann in February 2022. The Taoiseach Mícheal Martin appointed Dr. Aoibhinn Ní Shuilleabháin as chairperson of the assembly.

The assembly was composed of members of the public who were tasked with examining how the State can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss and suggest proposals. The Assembly heard from researchers and academics who work in conserving biodiversity and had field trips to see first-hand biodiversity projects. The Assembly published their final report with recommendations in March 2023 (the report can be found at www.citizensassembly.ie).

The report is easy to read and very informative and is a great way to learn more about biodiversity in Ireland and the actions we must take to conserve it. Also available on their website are video recordings of the presentations given by experts to the Assembly. The presentations are typically 15-20 minutes long and really fascinating.

The National Parks and Wildlife Services (www.npws.ie) is part of the heritage division of the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage. The NPWS is responsible for the protection and conservation of habitats and species in Ireland. They also designate and advise on the protection of Natural Heritage Areas (NHA), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Areas (SPA).

Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP) has been in development since October 2021 and is due to be published in 2023. The plan aims to deliver the transformative changes required to the ways in which we value and protect nature. A draft of the plan is available online now. The plan will run from 2023 – 2027 and contains up-to-date information and policies.

The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan is a framework bringing together different sectors across the Island of Ireland to create a landscape where pollinators can survive and thrive. The website is full of information and brilliant resources for families, businesses, farmers and community groups. Pollinators are bees, hoverflies some species of moths and they pollinate our flowers, crops and wild plants.



National Biodiversity Data Centre Become a citizen scientist!

Learn more about the biodiversity in your locality and record it. You don't need to be an expert, recording is easy and your data is important.

Go to their website and start recording. It's a great way of recording the biodiversity of your site and contributing to the national database.

www.records.biodiversityireland.ie

or download the Biodiversity Data Capture app and record biodiversity on your phone.

Bat Conservation Ireland is an independent, non-profit organisation and the leading authority on bats in Ireland. Visit their website to learn more about monitoring bat activity at your site, identifying bats and how to support bats. Bats are protected by law in Ireland. It is an offence to disturb, injure or kill bats or destroy their roosts.

The Bumblebee Monitoring Scheme The National Pollinator Plan website is looking for volunteers to make a record of the pollinators they see over the course of a 1-2km walking route once a month between March – October. How about incorporating a walk through your local historic graveyard and recording what you see?

Merlin Download the Merlin app and identify bird species in your graveyard. The app records the sound of birds and identifies them. It's a fascinating app and you'll enjoy using it. This app is free to download and use and was developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

The Heritage Council website is full of useful information and resources to guide community groups working to protect local sites of archaeological, historical and cultural importance.

www.Cavanheritage.ie has information about Cavan's Historic Graveyard Network. The aim of the Network is to connect community groups looking after their local graveyards and help them with researching and conserving these important historical and cultural sites.

Mapping Visit the Geohive Map Viewer to view current and historical maps of Ireland. Also available is up-to-date satellite images. This is a valuable resource when researching the development of your local historical graveyard.

Need to provide a grid reference for your site, visit

www.Irish.gridreferencefinder.com. This site can also generate a QR code for the exact location of your site – a very useful tool.

www.historicgraves.ie Some of our community groups have enjoyed working with John Tierney of Historic Graves to record the headstones in their graveyards. These records are now available online and are a great way for people far from Cavan to research their family history in County Cavan.



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For more information visit:
www.cavanheritage.ie



An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta
Department of Housing,
Local Government and Heritage

