

71E028

Blackwater River and Estuary

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The Blackwater flows east through limestone to Cappoquin before it turns southwards to Youghal, meeting several sandstone ridges on the way. The lower valley was much deepened during the glacial period so that the sea now penetrates far inland - in fact almost to Lismore itself. This means that the channel edges are subject to daily inundation. The adjacent fields are protected by a system of sluices and embankments. In some places however, particularly on the Bride, this has broken down so that fine marsh communities have developed.

The river side of the embankments was often used for willow growing in the past (currently at Cappoquin) so that the channel is lined by narrow woods of white and almond-leaved willow (*Salix alba*, *S. triandra*) with isolated crack willow (*S. fragilis*) and Osier (*S. viminalis*). Grey willow *S. cinerea* spreads naturally into the sites and occasionally, as at Villierstown and Sapperton, forms woods with a distinctive mix of woodland and marsh plants including gypsywort (*Lycopus europaeus*), guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), bittersweet (*Solanum dulcamara*) and various algae and mosses.

Marshes and reedbeds cover most of the flat areas beside the rivers. Common reed (*Phragmites australis*) is ubiquitous and is harvested for thatching. There is also much marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*) and, at the edges of the reeds the large pond sedges (*Carex riparia*) and (*C. acutiformis*). Hemlock water dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), reed grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and nettle (*Urtica dioica*) are further common species with a little purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and marsh valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*). Spaces are colonised by smaller species like water mint (*Mentha aquatica*) and forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*).

The valley still has a number of dry woodlands though these have mostly been managed by the estates with the introduction of beech and a few conifers and sometimes of rhododendron and laurel. Oakwood is well developed on sandstone about Ballinatray showing in one place the classic community of holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Fraochan (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), greater woodrush (*Luzula sylvatica*) and buckler ferns (*Dryopteris affinis*, *D. aemula*).

The spread of rhododendron is locally a problem, as is overgrazing. A few limestone rocks stand over the river showing traces of a different woodland type with ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), wood false brome (*Brachypodium sylvaticum*) and early purple orchid (*Orchis mascula*).

The margins of the river support many grey heron, non-breeding cormorant, moorhen and mallard and there is a high population too of otter. Recent work shows that these feed on eels, small salmonids, stone loach, coarse fish (dace, roach) and stickleback, roughly in that order. In winter many more birds are present than in summer and most are based in the lower estuary, near Kinsalebeg, in the Tourig Estuary and near Youghal. Nationally important numbers of six species occur (numbers are average peaks in 1984/85 - 86/87). They are wigeon (1,435), grey plover (133), lapwing (2,060),

dunlin (1,361), black-tailed godwit (496) and redshank (337). There are also flocks of shelduck (132), teal (338), mallard (213), Oystercatcher (348), golden plover (885), bar-tailed godwit (171) and curlew (908).

Overall this river system contains a greater area of wet woodland than any other in the country, much marshland and also sizeable wintering bird populations. These features continue the interest of the middle reaches (below Fermoy) to the sea.