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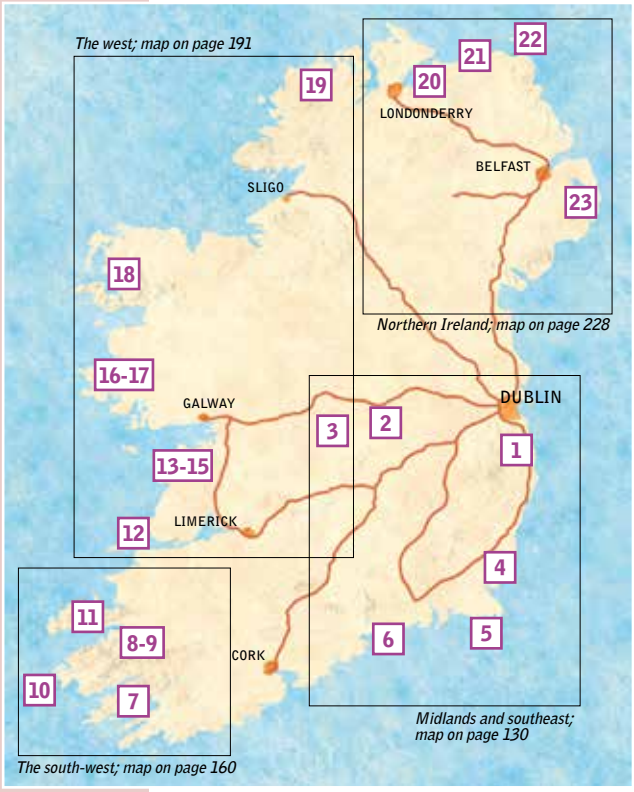
Geographical overview

The island of Ireland measures 84.421 square kilometres and sits at the north-western edge of Europe. It is separated from its neighbouring island of Great Britain by the North Channel and the Irish Sea. To the south of Ireland the Celtic Sea forms a natural border to France and continental Europe. To the west and north lies the Atlantic Ocean.



All roads lead to Dublin. Most of the major roads connect the capital Dublin with 'the rest of the country'.

Ireland's topography is often compared to a saucer. All the major mountain ranges are located in the coastal regions while the interior is for the most part a flat lowland plain. The highest of these mountains can be found in the southwest where they form the backbones of a number of narrow peninsulas.

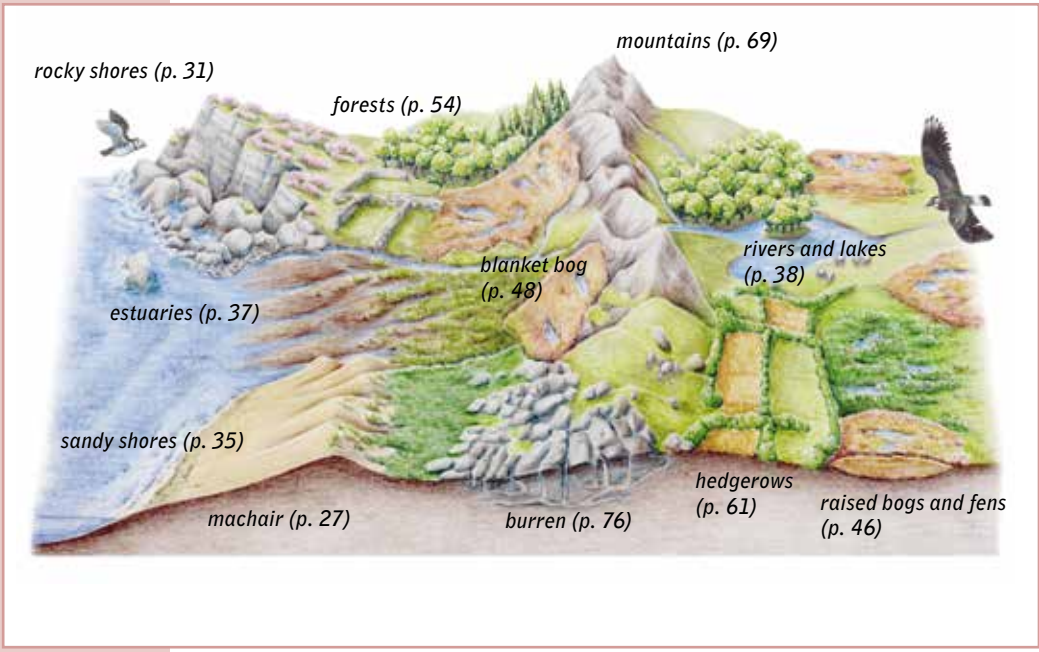
The western part of the country is without a doubt the visually most enticing, hosting not only five of the six national parks, but also some of the most unique landscapes on the island, including the limestone karst of the Burren and the bleak and beautiful blanket bog and mountain landscape of Connemara. In addition, the west is home to the last surviving native oak forests, and unique plant communities.

The eastern half of the country is very different, with an almost continental flair. This is where most of the Irish live and the landscape is more domesticated, showing off the green checkerboard of fields, pastures and

Habitats

Some naturalists have described Ireland as a miniature Europe and there is some truth in this. Most of the major habitats that cover vast areas on the continent exist in a smaller version in Ireland.
Ireland's interior is mainly a cultural landscape. The unlikely main habitat here are the hedgerows that have replaced the forests as a home for plants and animals. These hedgerows together with old stone walls and roadsides have become one of the most important and species-rich habitats in Ireland. Remains of intact raised and blanket bogs and a few native forests can also be found but the space these occupy is rather small.
The coast alongside some lonely mountaintops is probably the only truly wild habitat in Ireland. This coast is a mix if various habitats. Rocky shores and cliffs, river estuaries with mudflats and saltmarshes, sandy beaches and dunes make this the most exciting habitat in Ireland to explore.

Schematic cross-section of the habitats of Ireland.



Flora and fauna of the peatlands

Besides the bog mosses, the peatlands support few but typical plants rarely found outside peatlands. Brown and White Beak-sedge, Ling and Cross-Leaved Heath, all of which are perfectly adapted to the wet, acidic and open conditions of this landscape. They are joined by Common Cottongrass, Bog Asphodel, Bog Rosemary and Cranberry. The most interesting bog plants are probably the carnivorous species that have found a unique way to obtain vital nitrogen and phosphorus. Round-leaved and Oblong-leaved Sundew, Common Butterwort, Bladderwort and the Pitcherplant, introduced from Canada into Co. Roscommon in 1906, have all found ways to catch insects to fulfil their nutritional needs.

Bog Asphodel with Early Marsh Orchid in the background (top) and Irish Hare (bottom).

Blanket bogs dominantly feature grasses and sedges like Purple Moor Grass, Deer Sedge and cotton grasses. Wildflowers like Milkwort, Tormentil, Lousewort and various heather species are also widespread.

The animal life on raised as well as blanket bogs is a mix of only a few permanently resident species and more numerous visitors. The Common Frog is one of the more common species that calls the bog its home. Frogs come out of hibernation around March, although in mild winters they can be out and about as early as January, which makes them and their offspring vulnerable to possible cold spells. As soon as the animals are warmed up mating takes place and soon after the bog pools are filled with balls of frog spawn. The Common or Viviparous Lizard, Ireland's only native reptile, also rises from hibernation around March.

The Red Grouse is very much at home in the bog. This reddish-brown

Hazel forest at Eagle's Rock in the Burren with a groundcover of Ramsons (Route 14).

A glimpse of what these early forests must have looked like can today be found in the Burren (see page 76). The Burren woodlands consist mainly of hazel with the occasional Hawthorn, Holly, Ash and Willow. Because these species don't form a thick canopy, the Burren forests support a rich and varied herb layer. Primrose, Wood Anemone, Bluebell, Wild Garlic and other wildflowers thrive here.

After the ground was prepared the giants of the forest appeared on the scene. Scots Pine, Elm and Oak became the dominant species and the pioneer trees were demoted to the shrub layer in the new forest hierarchy, or disappeared completely. Birch forests only managed to survive in some damp corners on poor soil, or as an early succession stage after fire. Oak and Elm dominated the valley forest while Scots Pine took over the mountain slopes. Other species like Rowan, Whitebeam, Holly, Ivy and Honeysuckle thrived in clearings and along lakes and rivers. These primeval forests covered much of Ireland except for the highest mountain tops and extreme coastal fringes.

The decline of the ancient Irish woodlands occurred in a series of unfortunate events. The first-known human settlers arrived in Ireland around 9,000 years ago but their impact on the forest was most likely minimal and involved felling single trees for firewood and the little building material they needed. The first noteworthy forest clearances happened in the

Wildflowers of the coast

The wildflowers of Ireland's coast are some of the most highly adapted and toughest plants you can find. Many grow in the splash zone (also known as spray zone) and some even thrive on the upper shore that at times gets fully immersed in saltwater. The most common of these flowers is Thrift, also known as Sea Pink, and this delicate looking plant can form vast mats and grow in the most inhospitable places. They are a typical sight on clifftops and around rocky shores in spring. The flowers are mainly pink, as the name suggests, but the colour can vary from pure white to an almost crimson red.

Flowers that often grow in close vicinity to Thrift are Scurvy Grass, Sea Campion, Kidney Vetch, Sea Plantain, Bird's-foot-trefoil and White Clover. A surprising sight for the first time visitor might be Primroses, which are usually associated with woodlands, clinging onto soft cliffs or flowering in the shelter of old stone walls along coastal drives. Common summer flowers on the exposed coasts are Wild Thyme, Sheep's-bit, English Stonecrop, Rock Samphire, Sea Aster and Rock Sea-spurrey.

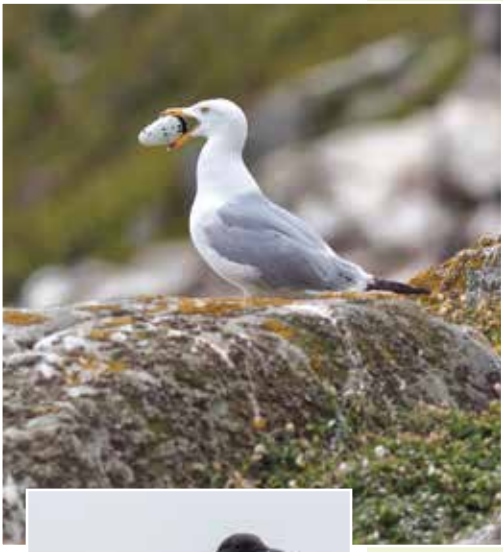
Along estuaries, bays and inlets the plant communities look a bit different. The dominating plant in saltmarshes today is often Common Cord-grass, an introduced species. Typical native wildflowers in this habitat include Greater and Lesser Sea-spurrey, Sea-lavender, Sea-milkwort, Sea Mayweed, Scurvy Grass and Annual Glasswort, an edible plant that can withstand prolonged exposure to saltwater. On the edges of the saltmarsh Yellow

One of Ireland's most common coastal plants, Thrift or Sea Pink (top).
This unusual location of a Primrose on a clifftop hints at the fact that Ireland was once densely forested (bottom).

Birds

Routes 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 18, 19, 20, 22 and 23 are best for bird watching, as are sites B and C on pages 157-159., site H on page 190, sites B and C on pages 225-226 and sites A and B on page 157-158.

Ireland is a birdwatcher's paradise. From the lakes and peatlands at the centre of the country to the coastal fringes, birds are the most obvious and easy to observe wildlife. Over 450 species have been recorded, from common resident natives like Wren, Raven and Peregrine to summer visitors like Wheatear and Fulmar and winter guests like Brent Goose and Whooper Swan. In addition, Ireland is a popular stopover for many birds on their spring and autumn migrations.
A complete list of Ireland's birds is available on the Birdwatch Ireland website (**www.birdwatchireland.ie**).



The Herring Gull is a very common and resident coastal bird (top). Black Guillemots are summer visitors and breed at a number of colonies around Ireland's coast (bottom).

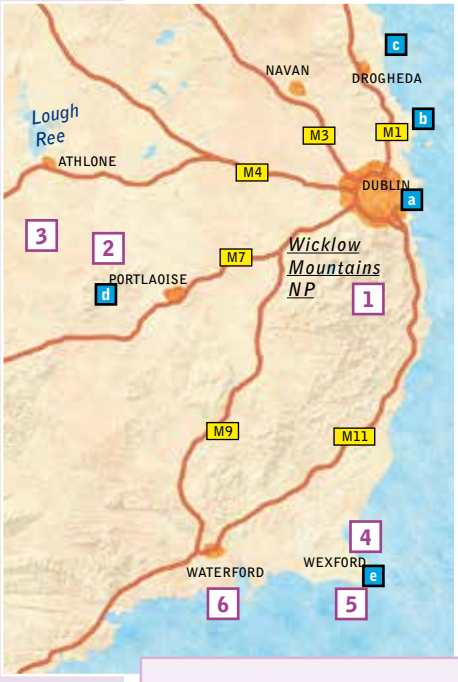
Birds of the coast

In spring and summer the sheer cliffs and offshore islands host a wide variety of migrants that come to Ireland to breed. The first to arrive each year are the Fulmars and they can start their cackling courtship as early as late January. The bulk of the breeding coastal birds arrive from late March onward: Gannet, Kittiwake, Puffin, Guillemot, Razorbill, Manx Shearwater and a number of tern species.
Gannets like to stick to themselves and form big colonies on the offshore islands Great Saltee, Bull Rock and Little Skellig, but can be observed from the mainland when they are on their fishing trips. The terns also

Routes in the Midlands, south and south-east

The landscape of Ireland's Midlands, east and south-east is mostly a tamed – a gentle farming scenery of fields, pastures and hedgerows. The only exception are the blanket bog covered hills of the Wicklow Mountains just south of Ireland's capital city. In these uplands or in one of the lake studded valleys it is hard to imagine that Dublin with its 1.5 million inhabitants is only a short car ride away.

Despite the anything but wild appearance, the Midlands are home to some of the country's most important wildlife areas: the river Shannon. The peatlands and the flood lands along the river (known as the Shannon Callows), were never tamed by engineers, and so have remained a haven for wildlife. Unfortunately, the fate of the great raised bogs in this part of the country was very much different and not much remains today of these once vast peatlands. Today however, they are the staging ground of the biggest rewilding effort Ireland has ever seen. The first big success of these rewetting and restoration efforts was the return of a breeding pair of Cranes in 2021, a bird that had been declared extinct in Ireland in the 18th century.



The southeast corner of Ireland is one of the prime destinations for birdwatchers. In winter the Wexford Slobs house one of the largest numbers of waterfowl in Ireland and in summer the Great Saltee island is home to a variety of seabird colonies.

Highlights

- The Shannon Callows – one of Europe's last natural floodplains, traditionally farmed and home to a rich flora and varied bird life.
- Clara Bog – one of the finest examples of a raised bog in Ireland.
- The Great Saltee – a small island off Ireland's south coast and one of the best places to get close seabird colonies.

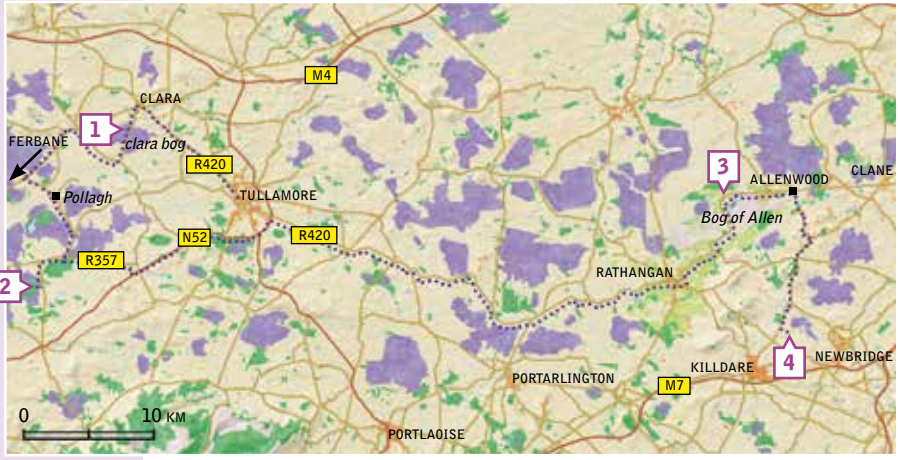
Route 2: The Central Peatlands

FULL DAY, 100 KM

A tour to the last remaining raised bogs and Ireland's finest spring fed fen.

Habitats: Raised bog, fen
Selected species: Lapwing, Grey Partridge, Smooth Newt, Viviparous Lizard, Butterwort, Round-leaved Sundew, Olblong-leaved Sundew, Marsh Helleborine, Fly Orchid

Ireland's heartlands are a farming landscape. The once extensive peatlands that dominated this landscape, mainly raised bogs, have mostly disappeared or are just a shadow of their former selves, harvested away for fuel and other commercial applications like peat compost. A limited number of small areas however have remained intact, and others are in the process of restoration, slowly regaining their rich plant life (see page 46 and 99). They have become a haven for birds, especially wintering waterfowl. This route visits four of these peatlands – a raised bog, a wetland area in the process of restoration and a spring-fed fen. Two are nearby just west

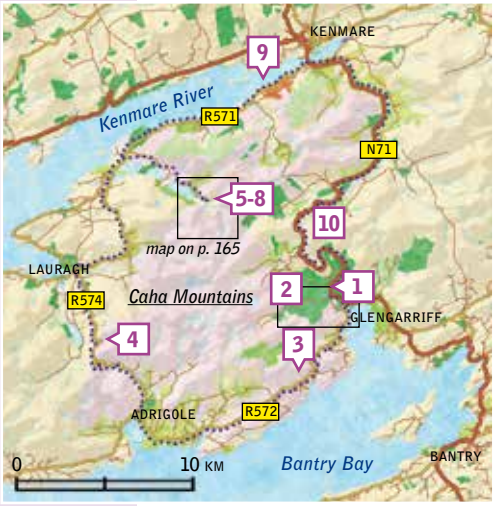


Route 7: Beara Peninsula

FULL DAY, 70 KM

A tour through
the unique habitats of southwestern Ireland.
A special flora and a rich geological past.

Habitats: Blanket bog, native oak forest, corrie lakes (or Tarns)
Geology: Devonian sandstone, glacial striation
Selected species: Large-flowered Butterwort, Kerry Slug, Narrow-Leaved Helleborine, Round-leaved and Oblong-leaved Sundew, Bog Asphodel, Red-billed Chough, Raven



The Beara Peninsula is one of the five promontories that dominate the topography of the south-west of Ireland. While the area has the reputation of being visually the most stunning of the great peninsulas, it has escaped mass tourism for the most part and exudes a tranquil and secluded atmosphere even at the height of the tourism season.

The Caha Mountains in the east and the Slieve Miskish Mountains in the west are Beara's backbone and form a natural border between the northern and southern half of the narrow landmass. Together with the north Atlantic current they dictate the mild and humid, almost subtropical, climate all year round. The result is a rich and diverse flora, especially in the south-eastern part of the Beara Peninsula around sheltered Glengarriff Bay.

This tour gives you an oversight of Beara Peninsula in a single day, starting in the ancient oak forests of Glengarriff Nature Reserve and up to the blanket bogs on the high mountain slope. This is a short car route over beautiful, quiet country roads, with two short walks (1-2 hours per