

Bogland restoration - back to the future

Coillte restores 2,571 hectares of blanket & raised bog habitat



DONAL MAGNER
FORESTRY

Large tracts of blanket bogs were planted in Ireland from the 1950s to the late 1980s with mixed results both commercially and environmentally.

Planting on blanket bogs was carried out when social forestry was a major objective in State forestry policy. This resulted in employment in rural areas where few job opportunities existed. Silvicultural and commercial objectives occasionally took a backseat to fulfil this policy objective. The existing Coillte forest estate — in terms of soil types and species — reflects an era when forestry was the land use of last resort. By the early 1990s, 43% of Coillte's forests had been established on peats, comprising western blanket bogs (37%) and raised bogs (6%) with mainly lodgepole pine and Sitka spruce.

Excellent forests were established in areas such as Ballycastle, Cloosh Valley and Crossmolina where yield

classes of between 14 and 20 (cubic metres per ha per annum) were achieved. However, low value crops were also established, and unlike forests on mineral sites they provided few commercial, environmental or aesthetic benefits.

In recent years, planting has shifted from bogs to mineral soils as better quality land is now being made available for afforestation by farmers.

PEATLAND FORESTS

Coillte has been reevaluating the performance of their peatland forests since the 1990s. A recent conference in Westport, Co Mayo heard how the company has been working to restore 2,000 hectares of forested land to its natural wetland condition of blanket bog. The conservation project and conference are part of the EU/Coillte-funded LIFE project, 'Restoring Active Blanket Bog in Ireland'.

According to Kevin Donnellan, project manager, the initiative has been in operation for five years and represents a very important conservation programme nationally and internationally. "The project complements Coillte's Nature Conservation Programme under which 15% of the estate has been identified for management, primarily for nature conservation." He said that the restoration of the blanket bogs includes the removal of trees

and drain blocking to raise the water table to re-wet previously drained areas.

Acknowledging the funding received from the EU LIFE-Nature programme towards the implementation of the project, he said: "The blanket bogs of Ireland are important for a wide variety of reasons including carbon storage, water supply and biodiversity. Blanket bogs also have a rich diversity of flora and fauna." He explained that plants such as sphagnum mosses, sundews, and purple moor grass, along with wildlife ranging from red deer to golden plover and migrating Greenland white-fronted geese "are specially adapted to the wet and nutrient poor conditions that prevail on blanket bogs".

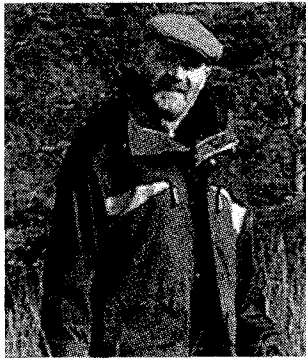
RESTORATION

Both raised and blanket bogs are recognised as major restoration habitats by Coillte, but in the wider context they are enormously important ecosystems and are listed as priority habitats for conservation under the EU Habitats Directive. In addition to the blanket bog project, Coillte is also restoring 571 ha of raised bogs in 14 midland sites. Work to date includes: raising of water levels on the bogs by removal of trees, installing dams on some sites; and removing some of the self-seeded trees from the open bog.

The overall aim is to create conditions, which will allow regeneration and preservation of active raised bog habitat.

Raised bog formation began over 9,000 years ago while blanket bogs began later, becoming widespread 4,000 years ago. Although the Coillte project is scarcely five years old, the first visible signs of restoration can be seen. Kevin Donnellan said: "In the extremely poor forestry sites, the reversal to blanket bog is very obvious as canopy often didn't close in original tree crop. However, even where ground vegetation had died off many years ago in commercial quality plantations, the restoration of blanket peat con-

ditions including recolonisation of typical blanket bog plants is slowly taking place."



Kevin Donnellan, Manager, EU/Coillte LIFE project 'Restoring Active Blanket Bog in Ireland'.



Golden plover nests in blanket bog habitats.



First stage of western blanket bog restoration – felling of Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine and windrowing 'lop and top' at Belleveaney, Co Mayo.

Photo: Neil Warner