

Site Guide

by Jason Monaghan



Slieve Blooms, Counties Offaly and Laois



Bog pool in Red Grouse habitat at the Cut, Slieve Blooms, Co Laois. **Photo:** Jason Monaghan (Conservation Ranger, NPWS).

Jason Monaghan takes us on a tour of the best birding spots in the Slieve Bloom Mountains.

The Slieve Bloom Mountains, straddling counties Laois and Offaly, are an ecological gem in the heart of Ireland. Under the Wildlife Acts, they are designated a **Special Area of Conservation** for their upland blanket bog and heath as well as a **Special Protection Area** for breeding Hen Harriers, an EU Annex I species and a bird of conservation concern. The **Slieve Bloom Mountains Nature Reserve**, managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, is, at 2,300 hectares, the largest in the State and runs along the spine of the mountains, protecting much of the blanket bog, heath and their upland species. Habitat management includes invasive conifer removal and ditch blocking.

Whilst there is bird interest at any time of year, spring and summer undoubtedly are the best times to visit. Slieve Bloom (*Sliabh Bladhma*) offers a range of tracks and trails to discover – below are just five of the many to check out.

Boardwalk on the Ridge of Capard, leading to a viewing platform with stunning views of the Slieve Blooms.

I Ridge of Capard

Follow the road signs from Rosenallis, taking the road opposite the church. The Ridge of Capard offers a good cross-section of the habitats in these mountains and there are signed walking trails to suit most levels of fitness.

Willow and bramble scrub near the two car parks are good for **Reed Bunting**, **Lesser Redpoll** and, in summer, **Willow Warbler**, **Whitethroat** and **Grasshopper Warbler**. All these are good prey species for the area's raptors. There is a visitor information board at the upper car park with information on the trails. Follow the **boardwalk** to a viewing platform that takes in superb views of the mountains, the surrounding countryside and much of Ireland.

Scan the ridge for **Hen Harriers** hunting over the mosaic of heath, bog, scrub and rough grassland. Look out for wing-tagged Hen Harriers: these are part of an ongoing NPWS research project in the Slieve Blooms.

Follow the boardwalk through the heath and blanket bog. In summer, you will enjoy the soundtrack of the aerial song-flights of **Meadow Pipit** (the main prey item of Hen Harriers in the mountains) and **Skylark**, which may be interspersed with the 'go-back, go-back, go-back' call of a male **Red Grouse**; look for the distinctive clusters of grouse droppings beside or on the boardwalk.

The boardwalk follows an old bog track where **Snow Buntings** have been seen feeding on heather seeds in winter; **Stonechats** and **Wheatears** may be seen in summer.

Sheltered areas of the track and near the car parks can be good for butterflies, so look

out for interesting species such as **Brimstone**, **Green Hairstreak** and **Marsh Fritillary**.

Keeping to either the blue (2km) or the purple (4km) trail loops will allow for the possibility of seeing or certainly hearing **Cuckoos** in spring; check the forest boundary on the moorland edge, as calling males fly from one tree to the next.

The blue loop brings you to a willow flush in the bog, an interesting place to look for **Emperor Moths** and plant species such as **sundews** and **butterworts**.

Follow the purple loop downhill through forestry of various age classes and into Glenbarrow Valley. Before going over the stile at the gate, scan north and south along the ridge and valley to pick up any raptor activity: **Buzzards**, **Kestrels** and **Sparrowhawks** may be seen, along with **Hen Harriers**.

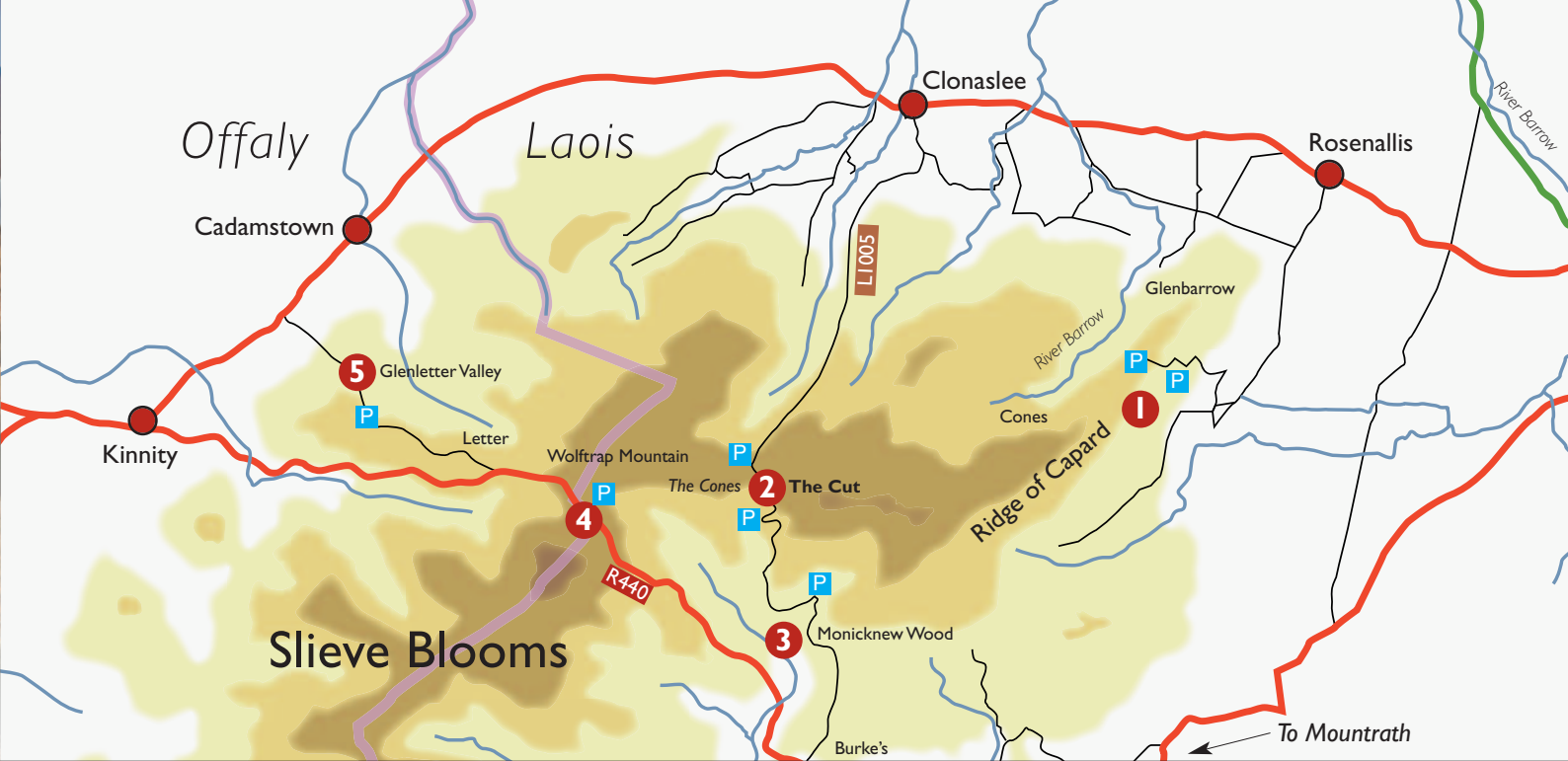
Follow the trail downhill past the ruins of the old village settlement of Cones, and take a sharp right turn. **Long-eared Owls** and roding **Woodcocks** may be encountered at dusk.

Follow the track which runs parallel with the upper reaches of the River Barrow. Further downstream is Glenbarrow Waterfall, worth a visit on another day.

Continue along the purple trail, which leads back into the nature reserve. Go over the wooden steps and stile, passing a small pond (good for **dragonflies**). The mix of willow scrub and forestry on one side of the track, with moorland on the other, supports a range of passerines as well as plants such as **Pale Butterwort**, **Round-leaved Wintergreen** and **Fir Clubmoss**. Look also for the distinctive, twisted sprouts of **Pine Marten** along the track, which leads back to the upper car park.



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2 The Cut

Follow the L1005 from Clonaslee; it brings you up the mountains to a gap known as the Cut. There are car parks on either side, both of which are good vantage points for viewing wide expanses of moorland and forestry.

In the Slieve Blooms, **Hen Harriers** predominantly use moorland for nesting and foraging. Look out for hunting adults and, if lucky, males skydancing in spring. **Merlins** may also be seen: scan for perching adults on old fence posts, on trees on moorland edges or on large heather hummocks (the latter used for plucking prey). **Peregrines** and **Ravens** may also be seen, particularly from the southern side of the Cut.

There are many Coillte forest trails on either side, worth checking for **Siskins**, **Coal Tits** and **Jays**. Listen for the metallic chirping of **Crossbills** and maybe even something rarer – **Yellow-browed Warbler** has been recorded here in autumn.

A short boardwalk on the northern (Clonaslee) side of the Cut is also worth a look.

Red Grouse: a bird emblematic of the area.

JOHN FOX



3 Monicknew Wood

Follow the L1005 south from the Cut to Monicknew Glen. There is a large car park here and a number of trails. A short walk will bring you to a riverside trail – this is a good spot for **Grey Wagtails** and **Dippers** (check the latter species for leg rings; they are part of a BirdWatch Ireland project). Willow scrub along the riverbank is good for **Willow Warblers** and **Chiffchaffs**. You might see **Pine Marten** ambling along the trail.

4 Wolftrap Mountain

Follow the L1040 to Burke's Crossroads and turn right onto the R440 (towards Kinnity); this road ascends into the mountains again. Continue on for several kilometres until you reach, on the right-hand side, a car park with interpretative boards. A track known as the General's Road leads from here to the summit of Wolftrap Mountain (there are radio masts on its top).

The track leads through moorland to a wet plateau at the summit. On the way up, **Wheatear**, **Red Grouse** and occasionally **Merlin** can be seen; in winter, **Snow Buntings** feed along the track. At the top, near the masts, is a flat area with wet pools and sedge-dominated blanket bog. In early summer, listen for drumming **Snipe**, calling **Skylarks** and maybe calling **Curlew**. Large flocks of **Golden Plover** can stage here on migration; it is worth scanning the flocks for **Dotterel**.

The 'trig' point pillar at the summit is a good vantage point with fantastic views. It's a good spot from which to view visible migration.

5 Glenletter Valley

Continue straight on through Letter Crossroads. There are a number of lay-bys along this road, good locations for scoping

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The wet plateau of Wolftrap Mountain.

Glenletter Valley. Listen for the bubbling calls of **Curlews** and possibly breeding **Lapwing**. Foraging **Hen Harrier**, **Merlin** and **Peregrine** may be seen here. Enjoy everything you see.

➔ For more information on the birds and habitats of Slieve Blooms Nature Reserve, and to download a pdf leaflet, check out the site www.slievebloommountainsnaturereserve.ie (NPWS website). See also www.slievebloom.ie which has information on some great trails and eco loops, e.g. the Silver River; Glenbarrow Walk and Glenafelly Eco Loops. *Please always stick to marked tracks and trails as the blanket bog may contain sink-holes and deep pools.*

Hen Harrier (female): an area speciality.

ANDY HAY (RSPB-images.com)

