

County Mayo

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

To Cong, County Mayo

Arriving into Knock Airport it is just an hour to Cong, our base for the next five days. Cong is beautifully situated at the northern end of Lough Corrib. The old castle is now an upmarket hotel, though we'll stay at the less-vaunted Ryan's Hotel where warmth and comfort and great food will no doubt make up for missing any luxurious fripperies! Nearby are ancient woodlands, great limestone karst, and lots of water. The Cong Canal, renowned as one of Ireland's greatest engineering misadventures, ends here. Intended to link Lough Mask and Lough Corrib, it runs through porous limestone and consequently leaks like a sieve. In summer most of the water from Lough Mask drains underground before even entering the canal and it is only after heavy rain that one can see it looking the part!

Days 2 - 5

Lough Carra & the Maumturk Mountains and the Roonah Quay coast

Though smaller than Loughs Mask and Corrib the nearby Lough Carra is undoubtedly one of the most important botanical sites in Ireland. One of very few limestone marl lakes in Europe, its exceedingly shallow waters have spawned calcareous fens where we can see a magnificent display of wild flowers. Spring Gentian and Snakeshead Fritillary will be well past but now is the time of greatest diversity and we can count on breathtaking displays of Marsh Helleborines as well as other orchids in abundance. A staggering 19 out of Ireland's 24 species of Orchid are found here including Fly Orchid, Dense-flowered Orchid and two local species of spotted orchids, *Dactylorhiza okellyi* and *Dactylorhiza kerryensis*. Grass of Parnassus is abundant but may only just be coming into flower. 'Swallows and Amazons' islands on Carra offer dense stands of Birdsnest Orchids and there are so many Fragrant Orchids the scent becomes quite overpowering. Yellow Birdsnest and Ivy broomrape are also found here. Lough Carra has quite an array of both emergent and submerged vegetation with several regional rarities, though this distinctive and unusual vegetation hasn't been studied properly for more than thirty years. Dragonflies are needless to say abundant and so too damselflies, including the Crescent Bluet, otherwise known as Irish Damselfly. Common Snipe will still be drumming away and in the fens we'll hear the distinctive reeling song of Grasshopper Warblers.

The adjacent woodlands are among the best places to find Badger, Red Fox and Pine Marten. One of your guides lives on the shores of the lake and knows these areas intimately and for those interested in early morning or dusk excursions he can take you to see Fallow Deer which are not uncommon locally, and to look for Pine Martens and Red Squirrels. The ruin of Moore Hall, the Georgian home of the famous Moores of Mayo, stands sentry over the northern shores. The human story behind the now sombre ruins is intriguing but life goes on and the continued existence of the ruins is

now essential for a large roost of Lesser Horseshoe Bats that now live amongst them, and this endangered species needs all the help it can get.

To the west of Cong are steep-sided hills known as Joyce's Country and beyond is the Maam Valley separating these gentler hills from the more spectacular Maumturk Mountains of Connemara, the name apparently originating in the 16th century when locals believed that the marauding Ottoman Turk pirates used the sea inlets behind these mountains to hide in. Though lower than the impressive Twelve Pins, which reach almost 3000 feet above sea level a little to the west, the Maumturks are still a land of high cliffs and glacial corries. Growing in the crevices we'll see Common Dog Violet and Wood Sorrel as well as Saxifraga spathularis and both Alpine and Fir Clubmosses. Heath-spotted Orchids, Marsh Violet and no less than three species of Sundew inhabit damp areas between heather and rock. Spikes of golden Bog Asphodels are a quite fantastic site with sphagnum humps home to delicate gardens of pink Bog Pimpernel and Pale Butterwort. As well as bright pink patches of She Heath, the local name for Erica cinerea, we'll find flowering plants of the local St Dabeoc's Heath. Dippers frequent the streams and Wheatears hop over the giant quartzite boulders. Skylarks provide almost the only sound as we enjoy the marvellous views of mountains, ocean, lakes and boglands all around this magical place.

Descending to the coast we find the deep fjord that is Killary Harbour where Common Dolphins and Porpoises can sometimes be seen close to the shore. Grey Seals and Otters are as likely to be seen along this rugged coast as anywhere and Peregrines are regularly sighted. Towards Westport we'll find a series of superb surf beaches and wide, shallow strands, the home of a good variety of wading birds and, for the avid rock-pooler, a quite remarkable diversity of shore life. A low spring tide gives the prospect of the occasional lobster or edible crab, as well as a host of other edible shellfish. We'll look again for Otters near Lecanvey, and on the shallow mudflats of Clew Bay we'll see Curlew, Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit and many other wading birds.

Days 6 & 7
Achill Island

It'll take us just forty minutes to drive to the entrance to Achill Island from Cong. Achill is only just an island, being connected to the mainland by a short bridge, but its island atmosphere becomes evident once we pass the Sound. We'll travel what is known as the 'Atlantic Drive' as here are some of the finest seascapes in Europe with spectacular views over Clew Bay and Clare Island. The cliffs at Keel are home to Ravens and Chough. Spectacular Keem Bay, right at the far end of the island, is where we'll find Grey Seals, hunting for fish along the surf line just a few metres from the shore, maybe Basking Sharks, and quiet peace. Common Lizards are a frequent sight in the coastal heath and we'll keep a careful eye out for Pygmy Shrews which are common on the island as well as the Irish race of Stoat. Graylings and the lovely Elephant Hawkmoth are reasonably common in this area.

Two thousand feet high peaks on the north-western side of Achill Island offer the chance to experience some exceedingly rare habitats. On the pre-Cambrian schists and gneisses of Slievemore and quartzite of Croaghaun are some rare flora and fauna. A group of five cirques host abundant Quillwort and Water Lobelia – but it is quite a walk up to them. Surrounding these is a wild landscape of cliffs and screes with Peregrines screaming through the often windy skies after the many wild Rock Doves that make this fabulous country their home. The alpine heath, a habitat listed on Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive, is a mosaic of scree, exposed rock, and blanket bog, and is of particular importance for its communities of oceanic bryophytes, some of which constitute what is known as The North Atlantic Hepatic Mat community, which descends on Achill to its lowest altitude. As well as the typical species for this community, a number of rarities are found including *Adelanthus lindenbergianus*, *Hymenophyllum wilsonii* and the rare *Sphagnum warnstorffii*. St. Patrick's-cabbage and Starry Saxifrage can be found on the tops with Bearberry, Lesser Twayblade and the very local Stiff Sedge *Carex bigelowii*. A species of Eyebright, *Euphrasia frigida*, is found only on Croaghaun. Another great rarity, Irish Heath, in Europe confined to counties Galway and Mayo in Ireland, and also found in Spain, Portugal and western France, has its most westerly station on the shores of Lough Nakeeroge, though it will have finished flowering by the time of our visit. Chough feed on the dense smooth mat of Sea Plantain and Buck's-horn Plantain, dotted with Thrift, Sea-spurrey, Sea Pearlwort, Sea Mouse-ear and Allseed, on the headlands above Achill Head, while the lower sea cliffs are hung with Roseroot.

Days 8 & 9

The Mullet & Ballycroy National Park

Back on the mainland the recently established Ballycroy National Park encompasses the moorlands of the wild Nephin Beg range where undisturbed blanket bogs unhindered by man's barriers descend to Blacksod Bay. Owenirragh Bog is part of the Blanket Bog Restoration Project and is particularly important as the numerous flushes and streams support rare plant species such as the moss *Homalothecium nitens* and Marsh Saxifrage, and the blanket bog pools host a sparse flora which includes Bog Bean, Many-stemmed Spike-rush and Pipewort. We'll also seek Red Grouse and the Irish races of Jay and Coal Tit. Red Deer have been reintroduced to the area after becoming locally extinct about a hundred years ago. The well bred stags, their antlers impressively large, make quite a spectacle. There will be a chance to look for these early or late on one of the days based in the Mullet.

The Mullet Peninsula has some of the most dramatically rugged scenery in Europe, especially in the north, whilst the golden sandy beaches are backed by extensive sand dune systems and flowery machair grasslands. The rasping call of the Corncrake will draw us near to another sought after avian quarry though even when you know where this bird is calling from it is entirely another matter to see it! Sheltered inlets are home to summer-plumaged Great Northern Divers, Slavonian Grebes and Common Scoter whilst Oystercatcher, Whimbrel and Greenshank are some of the more unusual waders we'll encounter along the strands. The quite lovely Red-necked Phalarope will

be sought alongside Dunlin in cotton-grass flecked boglands. Twite and Irish Hare frequent this wild country with Merlin coursing across the heather.

The Mullet's exposed location, jutting right into the North Atlantic, make it a fabulous spot for seabirds and though we'll be too early for the late summer and early autumn rarities we'll still see numerous Fulmar, Manx Shearwaters, Arctic, Little and Sandwich Terns, and Shag, as well as the little Storm Petrels which breed locally. The headlands provide a great vantage point to watch for cetaceans and we'll hope to see the occasional pod of Common Dolphins as well as Bottle-nose Dolphins and Porpoises. Basking Sharks could well be noted and if we are lucky we might see turtles or even a Sunfish.

Day 10
Return to UK

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