
NATIONAL TOURISM MONITORING PROGRAMME 2021-2025

ANNUAL RESULTS FOR 2021

LOUGH KEY FOREST PARK

for:

Fáilte Ireland

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Lough Key Forest Park – Interesting Finds

ECOLOGICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Lough Key is a known stronghold of the red squirrel which is a protected species. Pine marten are also known to have strong populations at the site.

The diversity of habitats presents on site such as broadleaf woodland, the lake, grassland patches, marshy areas etc. provide ample resources for a number of bat species.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

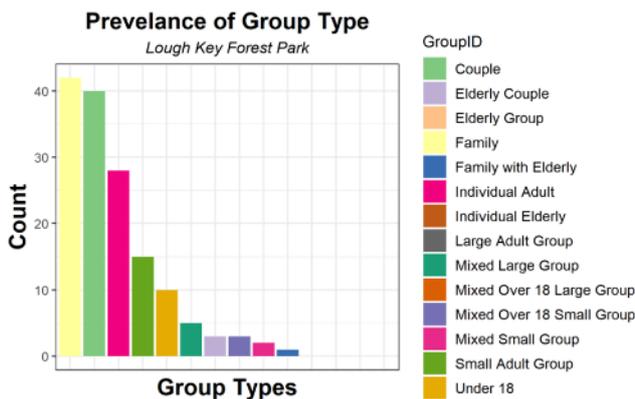
- A stronger litter management process is needed for the site as the majority of impacts were littering. More bins are needed to alleviate the littering pressures.
- The site is well managed and ecologically diverse – there is an opportunity for higher rates of direct engagement at the site through biodiversity or nature related education events.
- Increased signage related to biodiversity which is interactive in nature could increase visitor experiences at the site.

VISITOR INTERACTION & MANAGEMENT

- Visitor interactions on site well controlled with strong management practices in place.
- 80% of all activities undertaken were considered to be low level activities such as dog walking, jogging and picnicking.
- Over 40% of all observable impacts by visitors was noted to be littering.
- Most of the visitors to the site stayed for at least 53 minutes –given the nature of the site itself as a forested area.
- Majority of visitors did not read signage that was available on site.

VISITOR NUMBERS AND DWELL TIME

- 426 people visited the site over 8 hours
- Average dwell time of 53 minutes



Highlights:

- Strong populations of red squirrel and pine marten.
- High levels of littering noted, and controls should be implemented.
- Long site dwell time of at least 53 minutes.
- Site signage is limited – missed opportunity for wildlife and habitats.



1 Lough Key Forest Park

1.1 Purpose & Outputs of the Programme

Building on the success of the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) environmental monitoring programme which ran from 2015-2019 – Fáilte Ireland has decided to expand the programme to a national level. The programme will monitor 19 individual sites located in all of Fáilte Ireland's regional areas; The Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, Ireland's Ancient East and Dublin. The programme will run for 5 years from 2021-2025.

The sites that are included in the programme vary in type from inland forest parks, to coastal sites, to privately owned attractions and diverse urban locations - can be seen below.



The purpose of the programme is as follows:

- To gain more insight from an environmental perspective as to what is happening at a variety of sites where we encourage visitors to frequent,
- To gather information (visitor behaviour, movement, path and trail conditions, surveys for birds, flora etc) for each site over the course of 5 years,
- To understand if there are observable trends and/or observable variations amongst site types over a 5-year period,
- To note good & bad practice at sites in order to;
- Make recommendations where appropriate for site management which is intended will have

sustainable benefits for the site, the visitor and the natural environment.

The Wild Atlantic Way Environmental Monitoring Programme allowed us to monitor the behaviour & movement of over 26,000 visitors, identify where there were stresses on the environment or potential future risks as well as good and bad practice.

This culminated in our ability to make useful recommendations to site owners and managers and ultimately to develop a practical set of Guidelines for Visitor management (from Planning thorough to Site Operation).

It is hoped that we can build on the learnings of this previous programme and by engaging with site managers, to knowledge share, can enhance the information that we gather for each site chosen nationally for this new programme.

The key areas of focus within the data being gathered is to answer the following questions:

- How do the learning outcomes from the WAW monitoring compare when using repeat measures at fixed locations over a long period? Hence, what are the predictors of impact occurrence and severity?
- Following on from the WAW monitoring data – with the refined methods we aim to understand what activities cause which impact; and what are the factors which influence these activity choices in visitors?
- Understanding visitor movement patterns with respect to ranging behaviours – i.e., is there a distance threshold where impacts are less severe or negligible?
- Undertake pathway condition assessments to understand the relative sensitivities or tolerances of path types to visitor movements – taking note of habitat type and visitor numbers/load capacity.

These questions will be answered upon completion of the full suite of surveys and data collected annually over the course of the monitoring programme. However, each year will have annual interim reports to enable emerging findings and management recommendation to be identified and shared with the relevant stakeholders to support progressive management practices.

1.2 Methods & Surveys

The following surveys were undertaken at Lough Key Forest Park:

1.2.1 Visitor Characterisation Survey

Visitor characterisation surveys were undertaken at each of the monitoring sites during the weekend period between June-August. The survey at Lough Key Forest Park was undertaken on the 11th of July 2021, with max temperatures reaching approximately 15.9° C, low to moderate levels of rainfall and low levels of wind on the day¹. These surveys followed an 8-hour time period recording samples of visitor behaviour of as many visitors on site as possible. Visitor movement patterns, demographic data and activities undertaken were recorded for all sampled visitors. Where activities had associated impacts, these were also recorded and the relevant severity was recorded using the same coding system as with the WAW monitoring (see Appendix I for details). It is important to note that the visitor characterisation surveys are indiscriminate between visitors and local amenity use.

1.2.2 Ecological & Path Assessments

In addition to the visitor movement and behavioural records an ecological assessment and path network assessment was undertaken at each site. This consisted of mapping all tracks and trails – with records of hazards, notable damage etc. In addition to this, all habitats were mapped according to the Fossitt Habitat coding system while information on bird populations was gathered from National Biodiversity Centre Data.

¹ Weather data gathered from: <https://www.met.ie/climate/available-data/historical-data>

1.2.3 Other Surveys

Additional sample surveys were undertaken at Lough Key Forest Park to identify the species presence of breeding birds, wintering birds, mammals and bats. This information can inform potential management actions related to amenity services such as lighting which could conflict with sensitive species on site.

1.3 Site Description of Lough Key Forest Park

Lough Key Forest Park (Figure 1.1), a Coillte managed site, is a perfect example of a scenic forested visitor attraction in Boyle, County Roscommon. It contains many activities including ziplining and various walks and trails along with water activities within Lough Key itself. As the area is a forested area and located directly south of Lough Key, it contains a wide range of habitats that support local wildlife such as broadleaved woodland, mixed broadleaved/conifer woodland, reed and large sedge swamps and mesotrophic lakes.



Figure 1.1 Lough Key Forest Park

1.4 Pathways and Features Condition Results

1.4.1 Pathway Condition

The paths at Lough Key Forest Park consist mainly of soft infrastructure pathways, with a small amount of hard infrastructure paths, with heavy levels of compaction seen throughout Lough Key Forest Park. Damage was noted along the pathways due to trampling by walkers and the presence of rhododendron across Lough Key Forest Park.

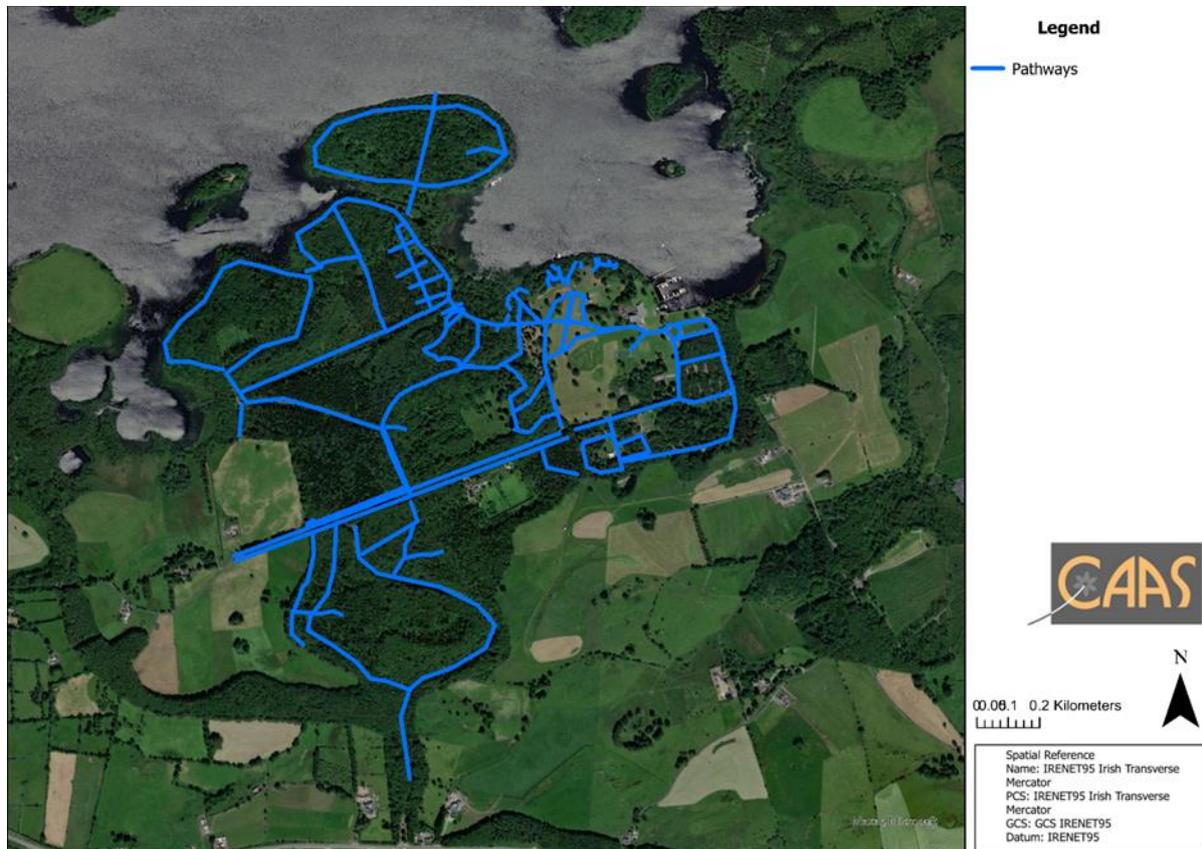


Figure 1.2 Pathways identified at Lough Key Forest Park



Figure 1.3 Pathway in Lough Key Forest Park

1.4.2 Features Condition

There are numerous signs within Lough Key Forest Park that relate to the activities that can be undertaken in the park itself, including multiple signs relating to orienteering that takes place within the park. There are also a number of trail markers throughout the park that show the designated pathways throughout the site.

To properly accommodate the activities available within Lough Key Forest Park, there is a car park, set down area for shuttle buses along with many benches and tables (Figure 1.5). There are also wooden features that relate to the activity park within the site along with cycle paths and a canoe rental centre for Lough Key itself (Figure 1.5).

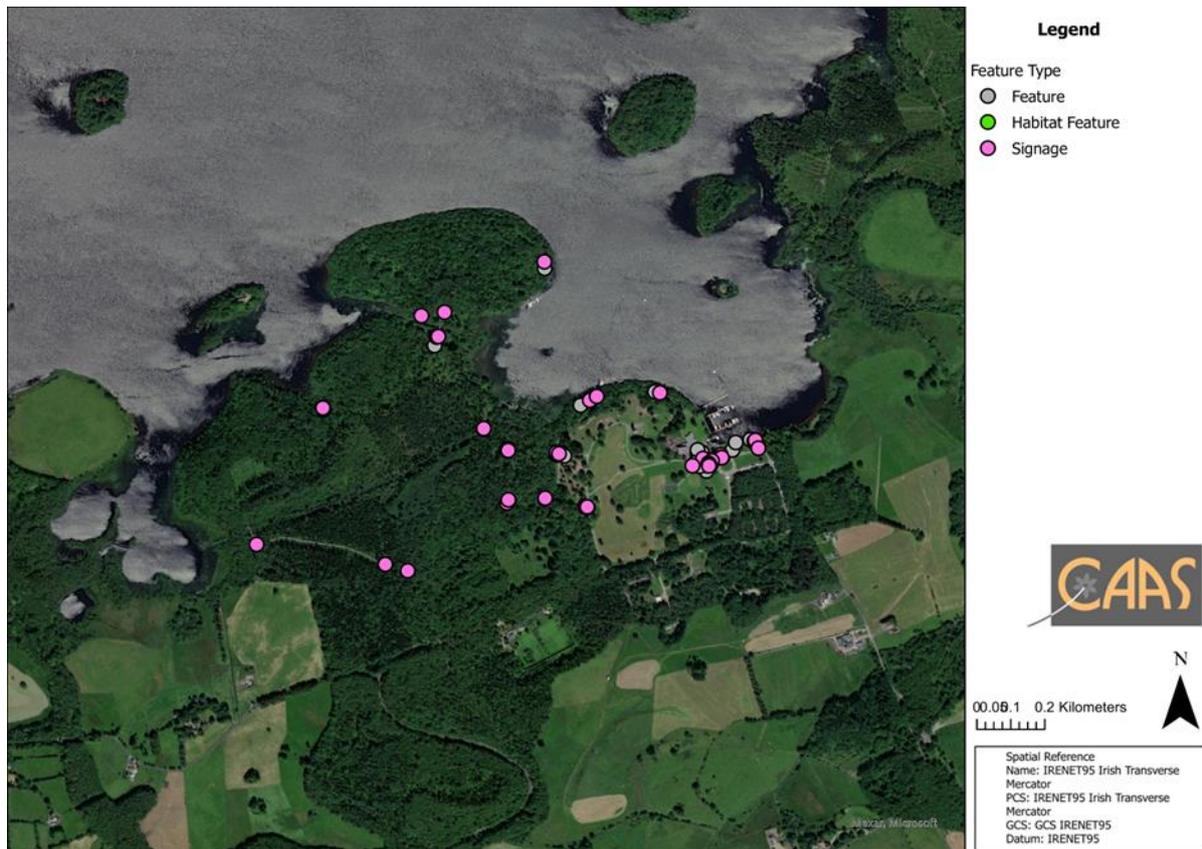


Figure 1.4 Features recorded at Lough Key Forest Park



Figure 1.5 Features at Lough Key Forest Park

1.4.3 Hazards

Few hazards were observed at Lough Key Forest Park. However, an unprotected broken barrier was noted along the edge of Lough Key itself.



Figure 1.6 Hazards recorded at Lough Key Forest Park



Figure 1.7 Broken barrier at Lough Key Forest Park

1.5 Visitor Characterisation Survey

The visitor monitoring surveys resulted in a total of 426 visitors (which represent 149 group observations). The site is most popular amongst the Family group with the dominant mode of transport being by foot. The average dwell time for the site was 53 minutes; with the following activities undertaken during the survey (listed in order of occurrence rate):

Activity Type
Littering
Picnicking
Jogging
Powered Movement Through Water (Boat, Jetski etc)
Sailing
Cycling
Dog walking (off lead)
Dog walking (on lead)
Sitting
Coffee
Football
Camping
Kayaking
Adventure Centre
BBQing
Climbing
Flying drone
Photographing
SUP Boarding
Swimming
Working
Ziplining
Basketball
Bird feeding
Birdwatching
Buying food
Damage to side road
Exploring off trail
Fishing
Lighting Campfire
Moving picnic bench
Mowing
Outdoor gym
Playing basketball
Reading
Rowing
Sports Match (informal)
Sprinting

Dwell Time

Lough Key Forest Park

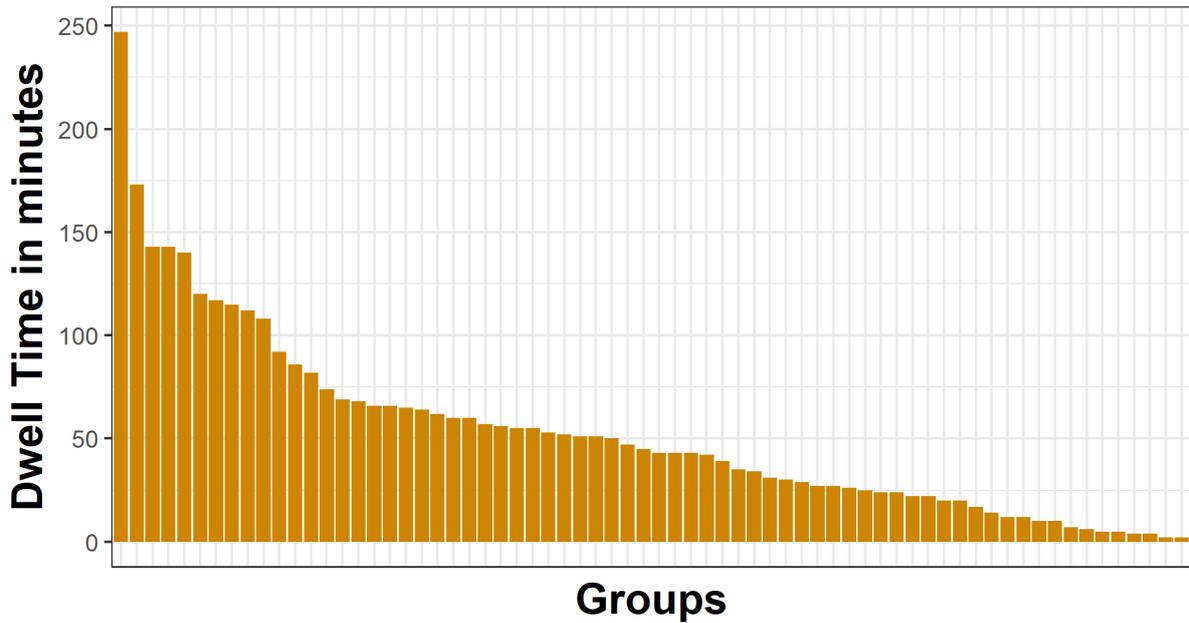


Figure 1.8 Duration of Time Spent at Lough Key Forest Park

Prevalance of Group Type

Lough Key Forest Park

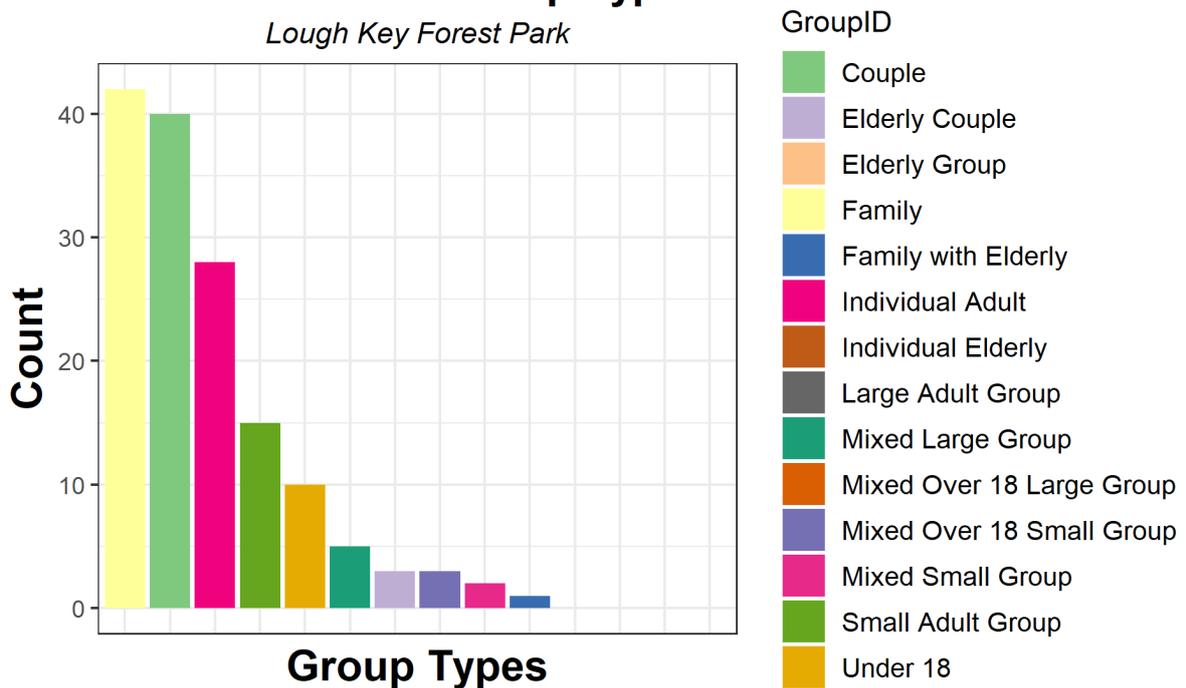


Figure 1.9 Groups of visitors that visited Lough Key Forest Park

Prevalance of Transport Type

Lough Key Forest Park

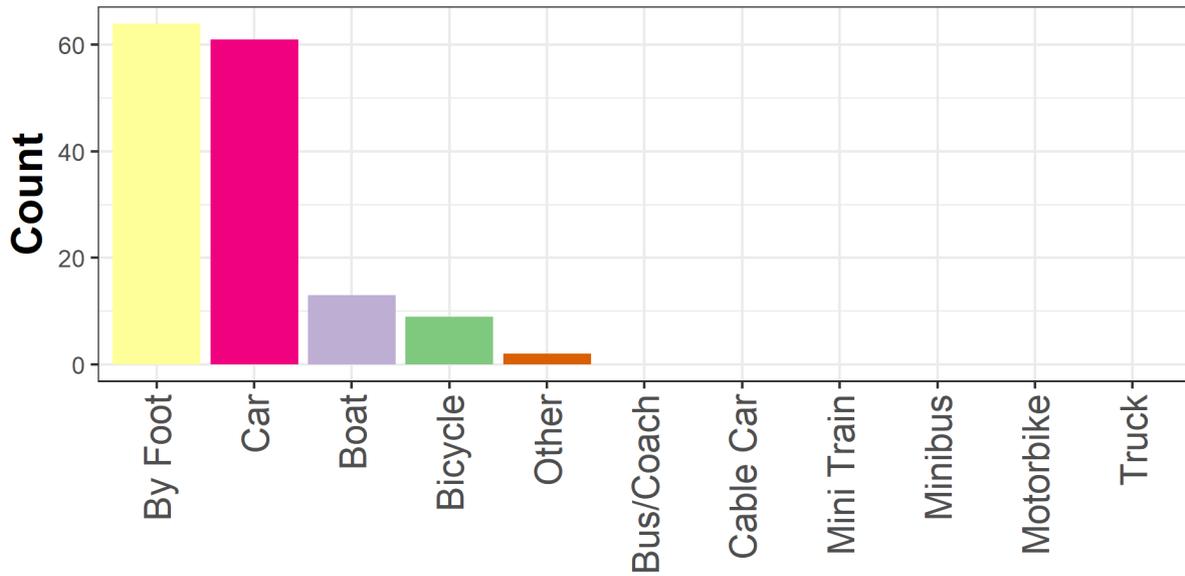


Figure 1.10 Mode of transport used to visit Lough Key Forest Park

Read Available Signage

Lough Key Forest Park

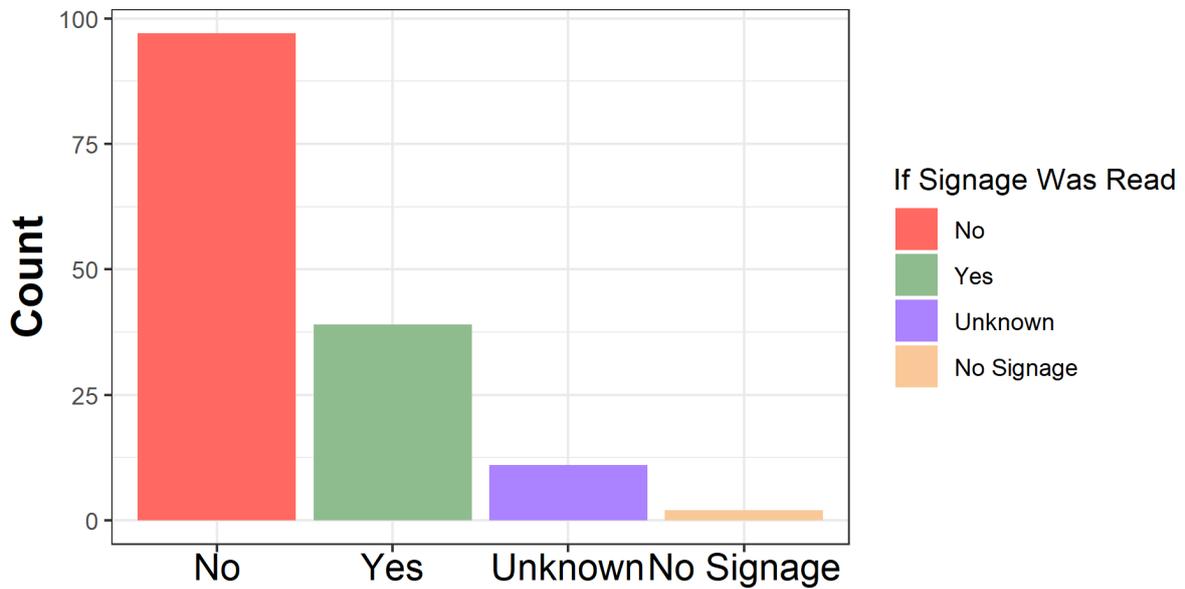


Figure 1.11 Use of Interpretive Material at Lough Key Forest Park

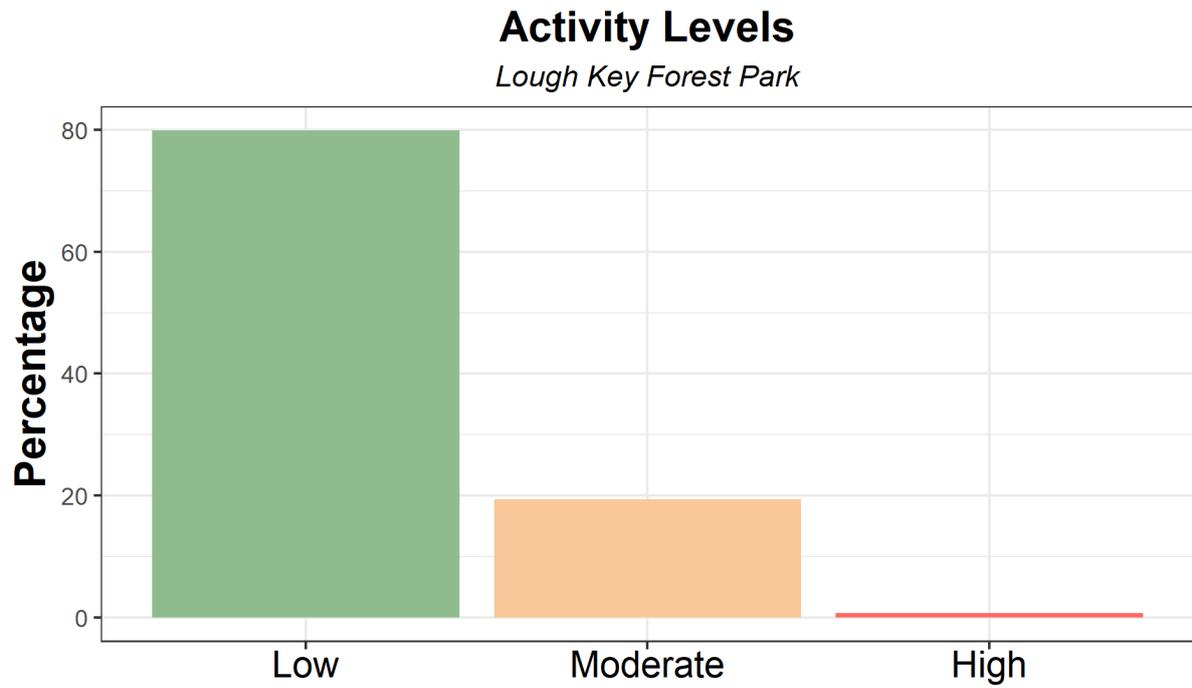


Figure 1.12 Categories of Activity Levels Observed at Lough Key Forest Park

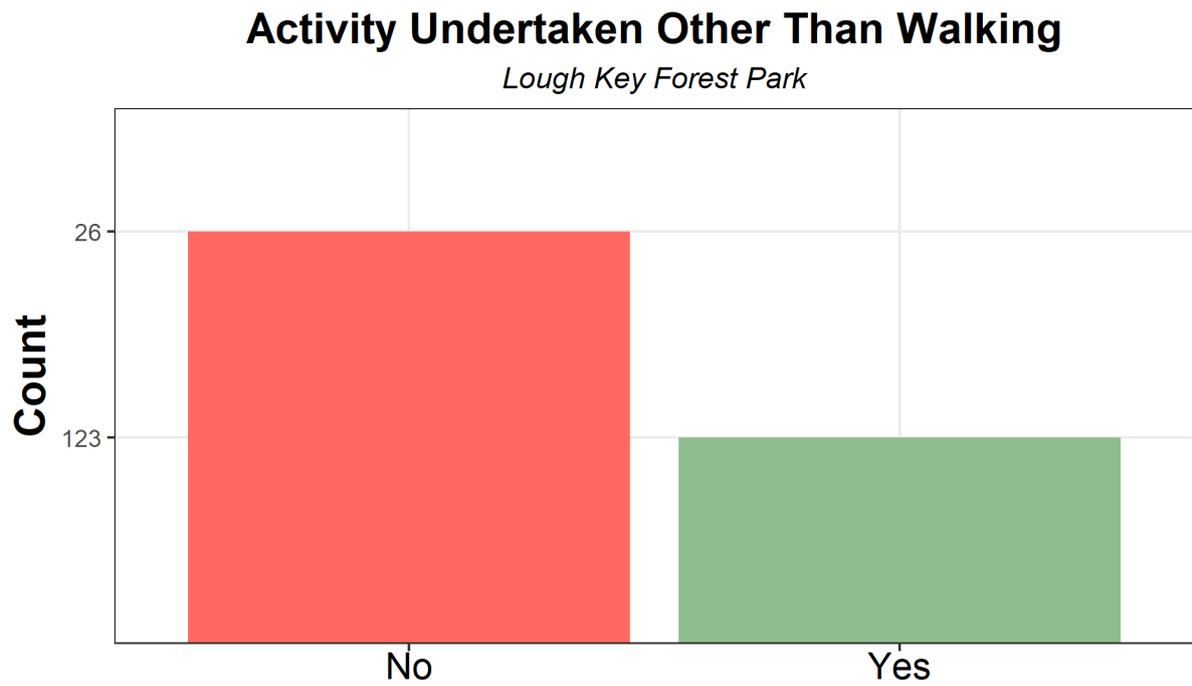


Figure 1.13 Activities undertaken other than walking

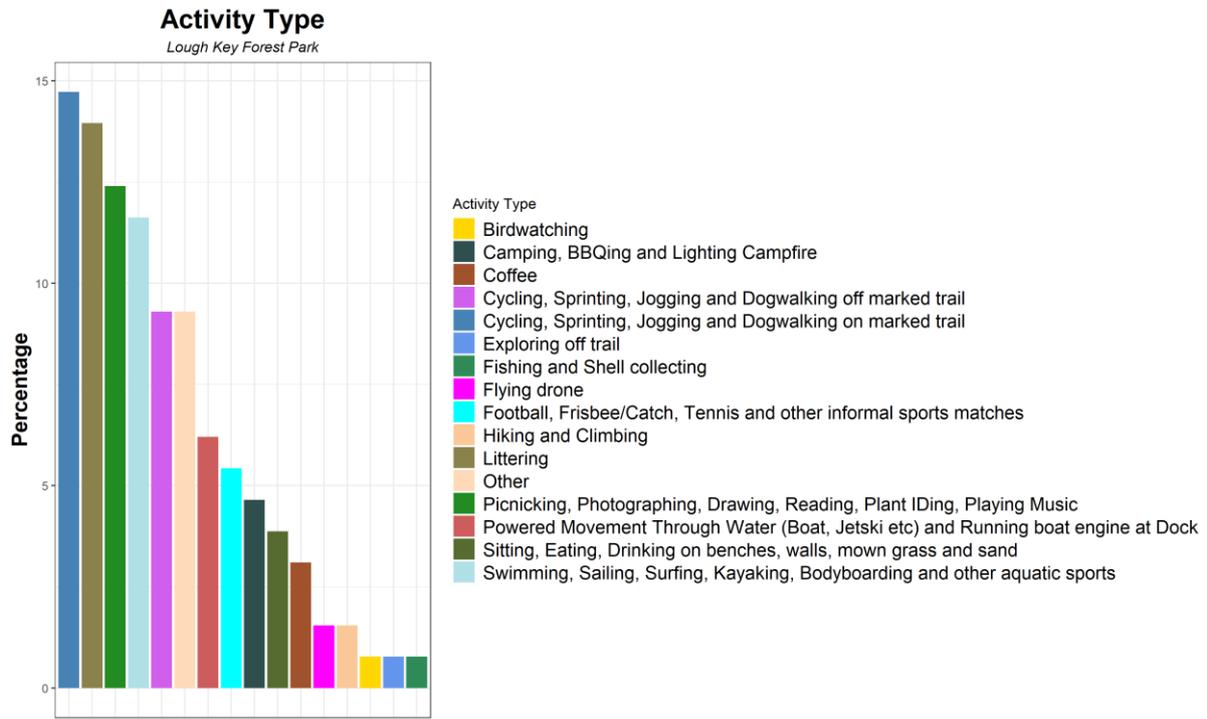


Figure 1.14 Range of Visitor Activities Observed at Lough Key Forest Park

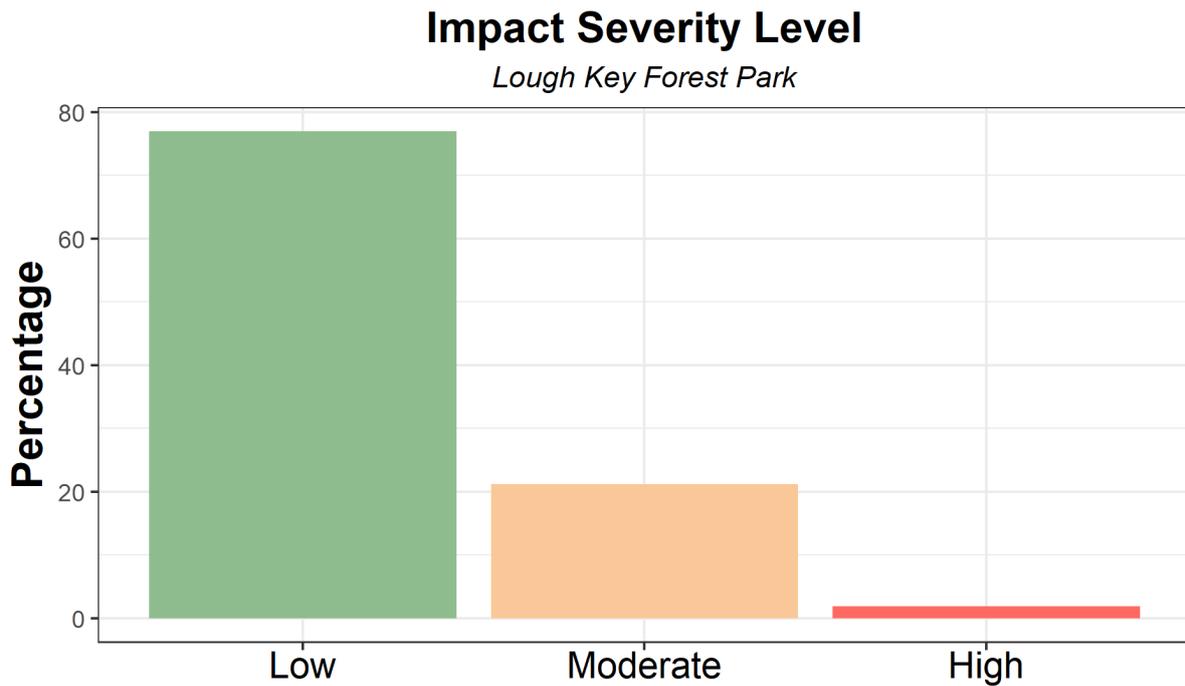


Figure 1.15 Categories of Environmental Impact Levels Observed at Lough Key Forest Park as a result of Visitor Activities

Impact Type

Lough Key Forest Park

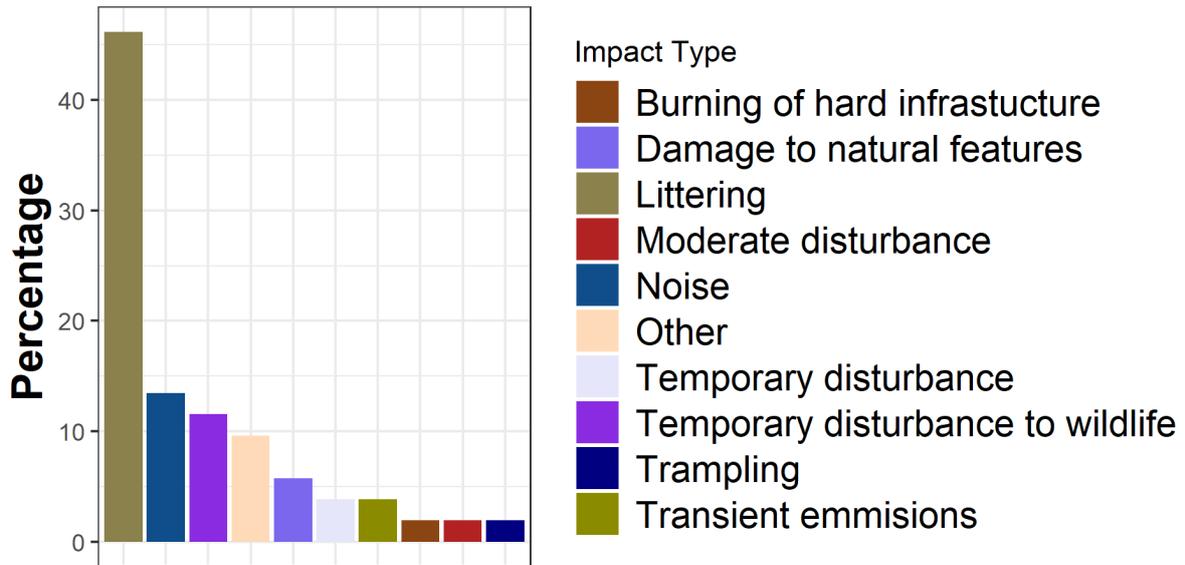


Figure 1.16 Range of Environmental Impacts Observed at Lough Key Forest Park

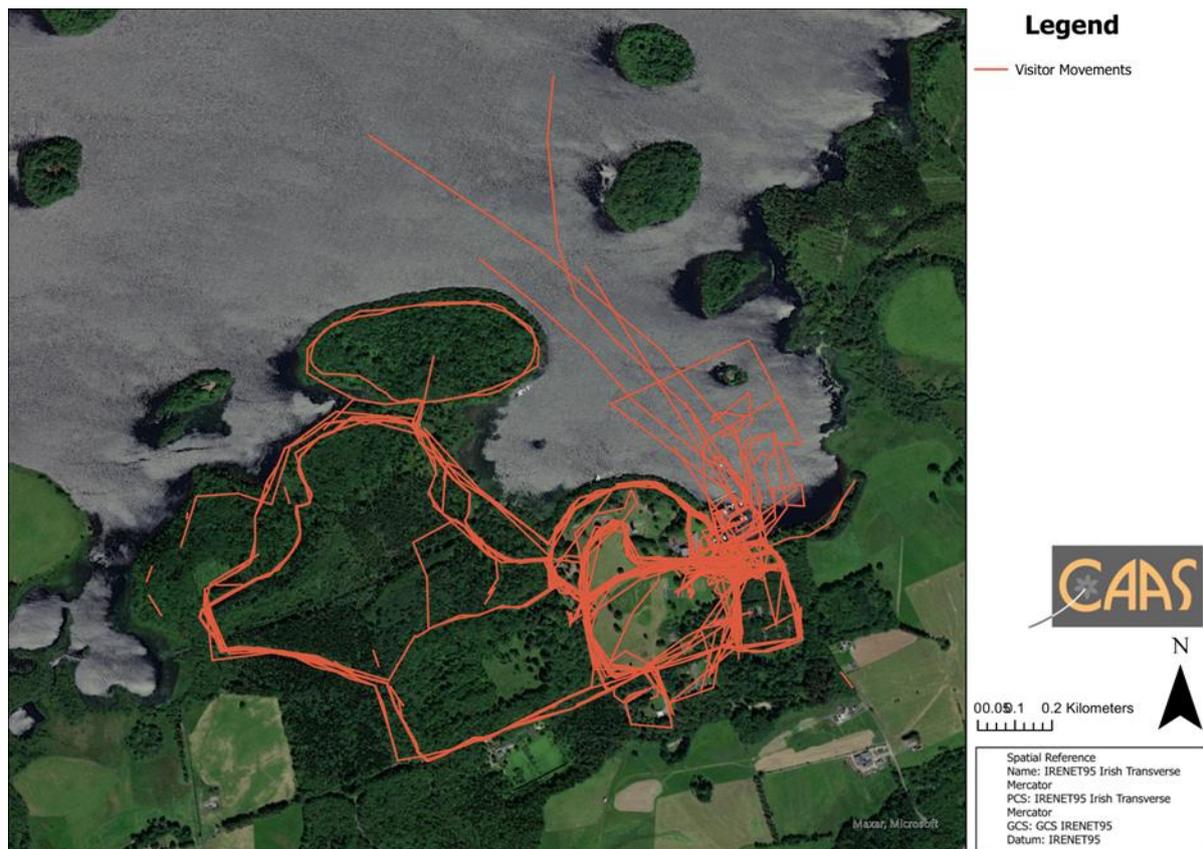


Figure 1.17 Visitor movement patterns at Lough Key Forest Park

Of the 149 groups recorded on site 83% of them undertook activities other than walking. These activities (identified above) resulted in 52 impacts being observed on site during the survey. Thus, 40% of activities on site resulted in impacts on the environment. The impact severity levels varied with 77% of the impacts being low, 21% of impacts being moderate, and 2% of impacts being high severity. The impacts identified for the site were:

Impact Type	Count
Burning of hard infrastructure	1
Damage to natural features	3
Littering	24
Moderate disturbance	1
Noise	7
Other	5
Temporary disturbance	2
Temporary disturbance to wildlife	6
Trampling	1
Transient emissions	2

1.6 Ecological Monitoring Results

1.6.1 Ecological Constraints

There are no EU sites designated within 2km of Lough Key Forest Park, however there are two designated proposed Natural Heritage Areas (pNHAs) with 2km of Lough Key Forest Park.

Table 1.1 Designated sites within 2km of Lough Key Forest Park and relevant ecological receptors

Site Code	Site Name	Distance (km)	Site Type	Qualifying Feature
[001633]	Drumman's Island (Lough Key) pNHA	0.77	pNHA	
[001636]	Fin Lough (Roscommon) pNHA	1.53	pNHA	

1.6.2 Habitat Descriptions

There are a wide variety of habitats at Lough Key Forest Park, with the majority of the area being covered by woodland habitats, specifically mixed broadleaved woodland (Fossitt Code WD1) along with smaller sections of conifer plantations (Fossitt Code WD4) and wet willow-alder-ash woodland (Fossitt Code WN6). As Lough Key is situated in the area, there are also lakeside habitats within Lough Key Forest Park, Lough Key itself is designated as a mesotrophic lake (Fossitt Code FL4) which leads to areas of marshes (Fossitt Code GM1) and reed and large sedge swamps (Fossitt Code FS1).

The visitor monitoring results show that visitors have a high rate of path fidelity on site and the management practices control visitor movements well.

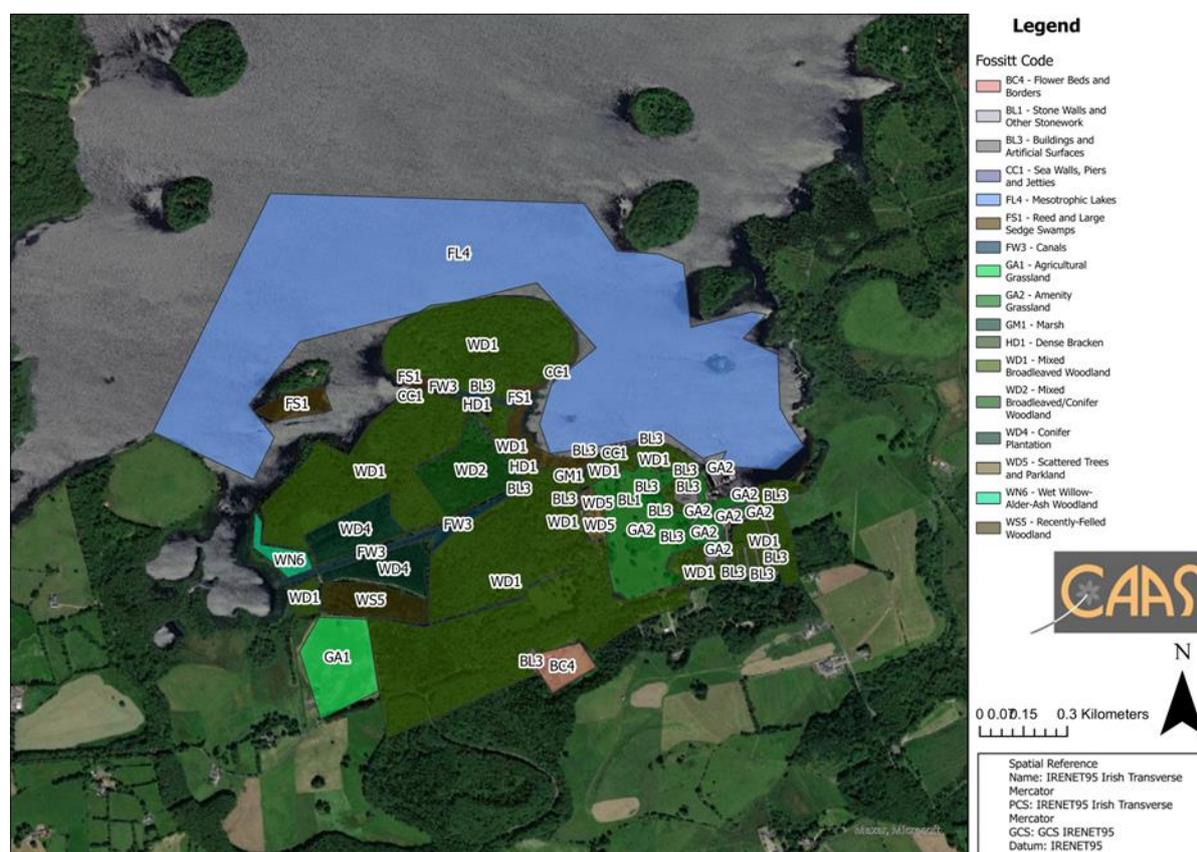


Figure 1.18 Habitats present at Lough Key Forest Park

1.6.3 Condition Assessment

There are a range of habitats present on site, the assessment of habitat condition identified that the overall habitat quality² following the assessment scale was "1" which means the majority of the habitats have no evidence of any negative impact on the habitats or other ecological features. There were 42 recorded incidents of damage to habitats occurring off the marked paths on site. The causes of the damage were identified to be visitor movements around the lake causing disturbance effects to semi domesticated duck species, littering and deliberate damage.

1.6.4 Breeding Bird Survey

Lough Key Forest Park contains a variety of passerine and wader birds, in large part to both the woodland and lakeside habitat of the site. Due to the lakeside habitat, the most common species that was recorded at Lough Key Forest Park were mallards with black-headed gulls and mute swans also being observed. Other birds which were observed in high numbers were blackbirds, blackcaps and song thrushes.

Table 1.2 Results of the breeding bird survey conducted at Lough Key Forest Park

Common Name	Scientific Name	List Status	Number Recorded
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Green	11
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	Green	10
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Amber	6
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	Green	2
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Green	2
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	Green	1
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	Green	2
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Amber	6
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Amber	3
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Green	2
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Green	2

² This value was calculated using the methods set out in Appendix II

Common Name	Scientific Name	List Status	Number Recorded
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Amber	4
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Green	25
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	Amber	2
Maggie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Green	1
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Amber	35
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	Green	7
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	Amber	7
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>	Green	2
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	Green	1
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Green	9
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Green	14
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Amber	5
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Green	13
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Green	10

1.6.5 Mammals on Site

Red squirrel was observed on site during the survey and there was evidence (scat samples) of pine marten recorded at Lough Key Forest Park. Moreover, the NBDC data shows that there are a large number of terrestrial mammals in the area, this is helped by the woodland habitat and surrounding habitat, of Lough Key Forest Park leading to high observations of species such as red squirrels and badgers, along with other species such as pine martens, foxes, hedgehogs and various bat species.

Table 1.3 List of mammals that have been recorded at NBDC Hectad G80

Taxonomic group	Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Terrestrial mammal	American Mink	<i>Mustela vison</i>	3
Terrestrial mammal	Brown Long-eared Bat	<i>Plecotus auritus</i>	9
Terrestrial mammal	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	1
Terrestrial mammal	Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	2
Terrestrial mammal	Daubenton's Bat	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>	49
Terrestrial mammal	Eurasian Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	62
Terrestrial mammal	Eurasian Pygmy Shrew	<i>Sorex minutus</i>	1
Terrestrial mammal	Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	50
Terrestrial mammal	European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	2
Terrestrial mammal	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	1
Terrestrial mammal	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	11
Terrestrial mammal	Irish Hare	<i>Lepus timidus subsp. hibernicus</i>	4
Terrestrial mammal	Irish Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea subsp. hibernica</i>	2
Terrestrial mammal	Lesser Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i>	1
Terrestrial mammal	Lesser Noctule	<i>Nyctalus leisleri</i>	4
Terrestrial mammal	Natterer's Bat	<i>Myotis nattereri</i>	6
Terrestrial mammal	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	25
Terrestrial mammal	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	10
Terrestrial mammal	Soprano Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>	9
Terrestrial mammal	West European Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	10
Terrestrial mammal	Whiskered/Brandt's Bat	<i>Myotis mystacinus/brandtii</i>	1
Terrestrial mammal	Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	2

1.6.6 Wintering Bird Survey

The site had a large mallard population present during the winter survey – there was minimal bird activity beyond the common duck species.

Table 1.4 Results of the wintering bird survey conducted at Lough Key Forest Park

Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	7
Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	3
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	17

Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	3

Table 1.5 List of wintering birds that have been recorded at NBDC Hectad G80

Taxonomic group	Common name	Scientific name	Record count
bird	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	22
bird	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	10
bird	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	4
bird	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	6
bird	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	18
bird	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	8
bird	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	1
bird	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	2
bird	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	12
bird	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	10
bird	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	13
bird	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	6
bird	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	5
bird	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	10
bird	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	9
bird	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	14
bird	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	15
bird	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	1
bird	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	5
bird	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	20
bird	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	27
bird	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	8
bird	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	26
bird	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	9
bird	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	1
bird	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	4
bird	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	9
bird	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	1
bird	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	7
bird	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	7

1.6.7 Bat Survey

The site has a range of habitats with high suitability for bats. Relatively low number of bats were recorded during the survey – however, there are records of all of the Irish species of bats being present on site.

Table 1.6 Bats recorded at Lough Key Forest Park

Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	8
Daubenton's Bat	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>	11
Natterer's Bat	<i>Myotis nattereri</i>	6
Soprano Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>	9

Table 1.7 List of bats that have been recorded at NBDC Hectad G80

Taxonomic group	Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Terrestrial mammal	Brown Long-eared Bat	<i>Plecotus auritus</i>	9
Terrestrial mammal	Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	2
Terrestrial mammal	Daubenton's Bat	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>	49
Terrestrial mammal	Lesser Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i>	1
Terrestrial mammal	Lesser Noctule	<i>Nyctalus leisleri</i>	4
Terrestrial mammal	Natterer's Bat	<i>Myotis nattereri</i>	6
Terrestrial mammal	Soprano Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>	9

Taxonomic group	Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Terrestrial mammal	Whiskered/Brandt's Bat	<i>Myotis mystacinus/brandtii</i>	1

1.7 Recommendations

- A stronger litter management process is needed for the site as the majority of impacts were littering. More bins are needed to alleviate the littering pressures.
- The site is well managed and ecologically diverse – there is an opportunity for higher rates of direct engagement at the site through biodiversity or nature related education events.
- Increased signage related to biodiversity which is interactive in nature could increase visitor experiences at the site.

Appendix I

Activities		
Category 1 Low Level		
Walking, running or cycling on paths, marked trails or hard surfaces		LA 1
Walking, running, cycling or playing in mown grass, managed grassland or level sand		LA 2
Sitting on benches, walls, mown grass, sand		LA 3
Swimming, sailing, surfing, kayaking in water		LA 4
Resting, reading, looking, picnicking, sightseeing, painting, photographing		LA 5
Vehicular movement on roads and parking areas		LA 6
Watching nature in hedges, woods, streams, pools and intertidal areas		LA 7
Category 2 Medium Level		
Powered movement through water		MA 1
Any movement leaving an existing trail or marked path		MA 2
Any movement leaving a trail through leafy vegetation		MA 3
Any movement leaving a trail through woody vegetation		MA 4
Climbing on walls, loose stones, sand, soil etc.		MA 5
Fishing		MA 6
Category 3 High Level		
Walking through wet/muddy soil		HA 1
Scrambling on steep or loose slopes		HA 2
Off road vehicular movement		HA 3
Disturbance of wildlife		HA 4
Deliberate building or moving or knocking site materials - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand etc.		HA 5
Picking herbaceous vegetation		HA 6

Appendix I Activity and impact code index used for recording visitor behaviours on site

Category 1 Low Impact		
No identifiable effect		LIE 1
Desire lines or trails visible on grass and leafy vegetation		LIE 2
Temporary disturbance (including chasing and feeding) of insects, fish, amphibian, reptiles, insects, birds and mammals		LIE 3
Temporary change of character - due to the appearance or nature of activities (noise, crowds, etc.)		LIE 4
General/light littering		LIE 5
Category 2 Medium Impact		
Desire lines or tracks visible outside of existing trail or marked path		MIE 1
Trampling of herbaceous vegetation		MIE 2
Damage to woody vegetation		MIE 3
Incidentally moving or knocking site materials - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		MIE 4
Addition/alteration of site features, transient emissions, noise		MIE 5
Transient disturbance, emissions, noise		MIE 6
Disturbance of wildlife		MIE 7
Category 3 Severe Impact		
Direct interference with site material - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		SIE 1
Removal of material - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		SIE 2
Vandalism or graffiti		SIE 3
Destruction of structures, vegetation or fauna		SIE 4
Heavy littering or dumping quantities of waste		SIE 5
Burning materials or lighting a fire		SIE 6
Injuring, killing or taking wildlife		SIE 7

Appendix II

Habitat Condition Assessment Methodology

A rating scale has been designed for this monitoring programme as a standardised, repeatable measurement for assessing habitat condition across all sites³. For the purposes of this monitoring programme, habitat condition is assessed at every site by the surveyor examining four core criteria:

1. The extent to which habitat degradation (due to human activity), if any, is observed;
2. If habitat degradation is observed, the degree to which the impact is localised or widespread;
3. The potential ability for the habitat to recover (related to scale of degradation); and,
4. The requirement for intervention (related to the degree of the previous 3 elements).

For these assessments the term ‘degradation’ is taken to mean any change that reduces the long-term viability habitats and its qualifying interests [flora and fauna]. Degradation can include readily visible evidence of factors such as surface erosion or compaction, vegetation loss, crowd disturbance [noise], disturbance by pets, littering, burning or pollution.

Based on these four criteria, each site is walked along transects established by the principal pathways that are used for visitor access and movement through each site. At 100 metres intervals along the selected pathways, an assessment of habitat condition is made, using an established rating scale of 1 to 5; 1 being no impact and 5 being high impact. Each rating is then translated into a condition assessment, as displayed in Table II - 1 below.

These ratings are gathered for each site, and are then grouped; from which the mode is taken (i.e., the rating that occurs most frequently). This then recorded and reported as the resultant overall rating of the assessed habitat condition assessment for each site.

Table II-1 Habitat rating scale and condition assessment

Scale	Condition
1	No evidence of any habitat degradation observed.
2	Localised habitat degradation, but slight and capable of rapid recovery.
3	Widespread habitat degradation, but slight and capable of rapid recovery.
4	Localised habitat degradation, requiring intervention to allow full recovery.
5	Widespread habitat degradation, requiring intervention to allow full recovery.

³ Note: Where possible, the same surveyor is used across multiple sites – but in some instances, different surveyors survey different sites. This can lead to a human variation in the assigning of the rating scale for impact. However, there will be sufficient repetition of the data through the several years of the monitoring programme to account for any variations in human interpretation on this scale.