

Turloughs

*Co. Mayo contains some of the
country's finest examples*



Best wishes to all heading *Back to School* or starting school.

Did you know? Before September 1967, most children finished school at age 11 or 12 because second-level education was fee-paying. Minister Donogh O'Malley's bombshell **Free Education Scheme** allowed generations of working-class Irish children to return to school for their Leaving Cert.

*Turlough in the townland of Pollavaddy, east of the Balla
(image: google)*

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TURLOUGHES

Turloughs are one of Ireland's most distinctive natural habitats and are found mainly in the limestone regions west of the river Shannon. County Mayo contains some of the country's finest examples, making these seasonal lakes an important part of both the county's natural heritage and Ireland's biodiversity. The word turlough comes from the Irish *Tur Loch*, meaning 'Dry lake', perfectly named as these lakes appear during the winter months and disappear, as if by magic, during the dryer summer months.

Unlike ordinary lakes, turloughs are connected to underground limestone drainage systems rather than rivers. Rainwater absorbs carbon dioxide from the soil, making it slightly acidic. As it seeps through limestone, it gradually dissolves the rock, creating underground caves, channels and swallow holes.

During periods of heavy rainfall, groundwater rises through these underground passages and floods natural depressions, forming temporary lakes. As groundwater levels fall in spring and early summer, the water drains away through the same underground system, leaving behind fertile grassland. This yearly cycle makes turloughs a unique type of karst landscape found almost exclusively in Ireland.

County Mayo has numerous turloughs, particularly in the limestone areas of south and east Mayo around Ballinrobe, Balla, Shrulue and the borders with Galway and Roscommon. Several are protected as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), including Greaghan's Turlough, Ardkill Turlough, Doocastle Turlough and Shrulue Turlough, recognizing their international ecological importance.

These sites are protected under the European Union Habitats Directive because turloughs are considered a priority habitat.

Although it may not seem like it, turloughs support an extraordinary variety of wildlife.

The constantly changing water levels create different vegetation zones, which allows specialized plants to grow. Species such as turlough violet, silverweed, orchids, sedges or marsh plants are commonly associated with these habitats. Some turloughs also contain marl, a calcium rich white sediment deposited when dissolved limestone comes out of solution as groundwater reaches the surface. Marl provides ideal conditions for specialised plants that are rarely found elsewhere.

The animal life of Mayo's turloughs is equally remarkable. Amphibians like frogs breed on the temporary waters, while many aquatic insects, water fleas and freshwater shrimp have adapted to survive the annual flooding and drying cycle. During winter, flooded turloughs become important feeding and resting areas for migratory birds. Species including whooper swans, white-fronted geese, teal, wigeon and many wading birds regularly use these wetlands.

Greaghan's Turlough near Ballinrobe is especially well known for wintering whooper swans and for supporting the rare northern yellow-cress, believed to have been introduced by birds migrating from Iceland! Mayo's turloughs are also home to the rare spreading damselfly, once thought to be extinct in Ireland before being rediscovered in the 1990s.

Historically, turloughs have also played an important role in farming. Once the floodwaters recede, the nutrient-rich soils provide valuable summer grazing for cattle and sheep. However, during the twentieth century many turloughs were drained through arterial drainage schemes to increase agricultural land. While this improved farming in some areas, drainage often damaged the delicate ecosystems by altering natural water levels, reducing biodiversity and destroying habitats that had developed over thousands of years. Conservationists now recognize that preserving the remaining natural turloughs is essential for protecting Ireland's unique environmental heritage.



Turlough violet (image: irishwildflowers.ie)

Today, County Mayo's turloughs continue to be valuable for both scientific research and environmental education. Geologists study how they form, hydrologists investigate their underground water systems, while ecologists monitor the specialized plants and animals that depend on these seasonal wetlands.

They also provided opportunities for birdwatching, nature photography and learning about Ireland's limestone landscapes. As climate change, pollution and land use pressures continue to threaten wildlife habitats, protecting Mayo's turloughs is so important.

Turloughs are therefore far more than temporary lakes. They are rare geological features, internationally significant wildlife habitats and an important part of County Mayo's natural identity. Their annual transformation from flooded lake to flower-filled grassland makes them one of Ireland's most fascinating natural landscapes.

SOURCES:

Mayo-ireland.ie
Burrengeoopark.ie
Shutterstock.com
Wikipedia



Whooper swan (Image: Wikipedia)