

Wild Mayo

A dramatic coastal scene featuring a large, curling wave with a vibrant green hue crashing against a rugged, reddish-brown rocky cliff. The sky is overcast and grey. In the foreground, a seagull is captured in flight over the turbulent water. The overall atmosphere is wild and powerful.

Michael Viney

W i l d M a y o



Holly blue

Wild Mayo

BY MICHAEL VINEY

PUBLISHED BY
MAYO COUNTY COUNCIL
ARAS AN CHONTAE
CASTLEBAR
COUNTY MAYO





Snowy owl

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This publication is available to purchase from
The Heritage Officer
Mayo County Council
Aras an Chontae
Castlebar
Co. Mayo
Tel: 094 9024444
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ISBN 978-0-9555429-0-9

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Graphic Design by Connie Scanlon and James Fraher, Bogfire, www.bogfire.com
Typeset in Officina Sans, Industria and Caslon

Mayo County Council would like to thank the Heritage Council for support in the publication of this book.

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



Comhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo
Mayo County Council

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The Peatlands

*“... the ‘inspiring’ effect of such landscapes . . .
remains among nature’s gifts to a fretful human society.”*



The Nephins dusted with snow



Bog pools



Blanket Bog

In an ever more congested and urbanised Europe, the wild space and silence of Mayo's great stretches of peatland have taken on a value that some countrydwellers can find strange. Even the great Irish botanist Robert Lloyd Praeger found the Nephin Beg mountain range and its great apron of peatland, now the heart of the Ballycroy National Park, 'the very loneliest place in this country'. But the 'inspiring' effect of such landscapes, to use his word, remains among nature's gifts to a fretful human society.

The case for their conservation, however, rests first on their value to nature — to the full array of the world's ecosystems and species, and to the sciences that draw on them for human benefit. Ireland's peatland habitats are vanishing, and with them their specialised networks of life. The great Owenduff bog at the heart of the new Ballycroy National Park is one of the last intact and active blanket bog systems in Ireland and Western Europe. It is all the more distinctive for its rise at the lowland fringe of the Atlantic, fed by the extra minerals of oceanic rainfall and sea spray carried in the wind. This makes it an extreme, 'hyperoceanic' kind of bog, found nowhere else in the world except on the north-west coast of Scotland.

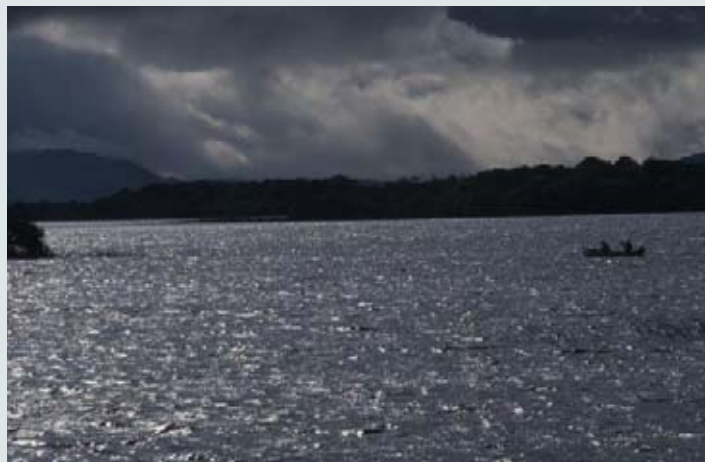
Blanket bog originally spread out from pockets of peat in wet hollows, mainly as the climate grew wetter about 7,500 years ago and more rain fell than could evaporate. As the current climate change brings even wetter winters to north-western counties, however, water from extreme downpours threatens to destabilise the peat of some steep hillsides.

The Lakes

“Along with the underlying geology, the lakes’ ecosystems are crucially affected by climate.”



Lough Carra



Evening fishing on Lough Carra

The myriad lakes of Mayo — 258 of them in the catchment of the River Moy alone — not only vary hugely in size, but in the habitats and nourishment they offer nature. In the dark, peaty and acidic water of the mountain lochans, aquatic vegetation is sparse and trout are sometimes little bigger than sardines. The great limestone lakes of the lowlands, however, such as Corrib, Conn and Mask, are richer in plant and aquatic life and offer big, plump trout ‘with flesh as red as a carrot’, to quote the great angler Mr Justice Kingsmill Moore. These are among a unique group of just twelve large lakes in Europe dominated by wild brown trout.

Along with the underlying geology, the lakes’ ecosystems are crucially affected by climate. Mayo’s summers have generally been cool, and Atlantic winds raise waves that keep the water of the lakes well mixed and full of dissolved oxygen from top to bottom. Polluting over-enrichment (eutrophication), however, from the phosphorus in farming and forestry run-off and sewage effluent has produced critical shortages of oxygen in the water, damaging to trout and other lake life. Despite improvements, the trout must now compete with soaring populations of coarse fish, such as roach and rudd, more tolerant of poor water quality.