



# Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan 2025-2031



**WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL**  
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí



**Ceangal**

Clár den Chomhairle Oidhreachta  
A Heritage Council programme

## Acknowledgements

The Westmeath County Biodiversity Action Plan 2025-2031 is the result of a collaborative effort by a dedicated group of individuals and organisations committed to safeguarding our natural heritage. We extend our gratitude to the Biodiversity Working Group for their expertise, guidance, and unwavering commitment throughout the plan-making process. Their insights and efforts have been instrumental in shaping a roadmap for biodiversity action across the county in the years ahead.

We also wish to acknowledge the contributions of local communities, conservation groups, schools, and individuals who have shared their knowledge, passion, and innovative ideas. Your involvement has ensured that this plan represents a shared vision for Westmeath's biodiversity.

We extend our appreciation to the Heritage Council for their invaluable support and encouragement in shaping this plan. Their commitment to preserving Ireland's natural and cultural heritage has been a cornerstone of this effort.

The collective effort in producing this plan highlights both the abundance of natural heritage in Westmeath and the shared commitment to protecting this important asset for our future generations.



# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3.2 Opportunities for Biodiversity in Westmeath</b>	<b>25</b>
1.1 Vision Statement	3	3.2.1 Growing Local Action through Communities and Volunteers	26
1.2 Aims	3	3.2.2 Building on Existing Projects and Partnerships	26
1.3 Objectives of the Plan	3	3.2.3 Using Public Land and Spaces for Nature	26
1.4 Role of the Biodiversity Action Plan	3	3.2.4 Supporting Nature-Friendly Land Management	26
1.5 Plan Preparation Process	4	3.2.5 Filling Knowledge Gaps through Local Recording	26
1.5.1 The BAP Process	4	3.2.6 Embedding Biodiversity in Council Work	26
1.5.2 Role of the Biodiversity Working Group	6	3.3 Nature Restoration on Council-Owned Lands	27
1.6 Biodiversity Policy Context	6	<b>4. Objectives and Actions</b>	<b>30</b>
1.7 Understanding Biodiversity	6	4.1 Strategic Objectives	31
1.7.1 What is Biodiversity?	6	4.2 Support Biodiversity and Build Climate Resilience	31
1.7.2 Why is Biodiversity Important?	9	4.3 Raise Biodiversity Awareness in Communities	33
<b>2. Westmeath Biodiversity</b>	<b>10</b>	4.4 Support Research and Monitoring of Biodiversity Practices	34
2.1 The Landscape of Westmeath	11	4.5 Integrate Biodiversity into All Council Activity	35
2.2 Designated sites for nature conservation in County Westmeath	12	4.6 Encourage Nature Conservation Projects	36
2.3 EU Designated Sites	12	<b>5. Delivering the Plan</b>	<b>37</b>
2.4 National Designated Sites	14	5.1 Coordinating Delivery	38
2.5 County Biodiversity Areas	15	5.2 Funding and Resources	38
2.6 Habitats in County Westmeath	15	5.3 Partnership and Collaboration	38
2.6.1 Lakes & Rivers	17	5.4 Supporting Communities and Stakeholders	38
2.6.2 Peatlands	18	5.5 Communication and Outreach	38
2.6.3 Eskers	19	5.6 Monitoring, Reporting and Review	41
2.6.4 Semi-natural Woodland	19	5.7 Celebrating Success and Learning	41
2.6.5 Hedgerows	19	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>42</b>
2.6.6 Grasslands	19		
2.6.7 Urban Green Spaces	20		
2.7 Overview of important & protected species	20		
<b>3. Challenges and Opportunities for Biodiversity in Westmeath</b>	<b>21</b>		
3.1 Key Challenges	22		
3.1.1 Habitat Loss and Fragmentation	22		
3.1.2 Pollution	22		
3.1.3 Invasive Species	22		
3.1.4 Climate Change	23		
3.1.5 Drainage and Peatland Degradation	23		
3.1.6 Lack of Awareness and Engagement	23		
3.1.7 Under-resourced Conservation Efforts	23		

A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange glow. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of reeds and a tall, thin pole. In the middle ground, two people are silhouetted against the water. The overall scene is peaceful and contemplative.

***"We are the first generation to know we are in a biodiversity crisis and the last generation that can do anything about it."***



# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Vision Statement

*Envision a future where people and healthy ecosystems thrive together, creating a county rich in biodiversity and resilient to climate change.*

## 1.2. Aims

To achieve this vision, Westmeath County Council (WCC) in partnership with communities, conservation groups, landowners, local residents, businesses, and state agencies, will work to protect, restore, and enhance natural ecosystems across the county. By embedding climate resilience into our actions, we aim to protect Westmeath's natural environment so that it can continue to support both people and nature for generations to come.

## 1.3. Objectives of the Plan

The strategic objectives of this Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) are to:

- Support biodiversity and enhance climate resilience.
- Raise awareness, understanding, and engagement with biodiversity.
- Promote biodiversity monitoring and research.
- Integrate biodiversity considerations across all areas of WCC operations.
- Encourage and support community-led initiatives for biodiversity conservation.

## 1.4. Role of the Biodiversity Action Plan

The Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) 2025–2031 provides a structured approach for conserving and enhancing biodiversity at the local level. It sets out WCC's commitment, in collaboration with key stakeholders, to implement clearly defined actions over the five-year duration of the plan.

This plan builds upon the previous County Biodiversity Action Plan (2014–2020), reflecting updated priorities for biodiversity conservation at local, national, and international levels. It aligns with the 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023–2030, developed under the guidance of the Heritage Council's Local Authority Biodiversity Officer Programme.

Effective action begins with a thorough assessment of biodiversity opportunities and challenges within the county. We face significant challenges in creating a climate-resilient county and achieving no net biodiversity loss by 2030. This plan provides the framework to review progress, build on past achievements, and refocus future biodiversity efforts.

The BAP comprises five key sections:

1. **Vision:**  
Outlines the aims, vision, and role of the BAP.
2. **Biodiversity in Westmeath:**  
Overview of the county's natural heritage, key habitats, species and biodiversity importance.
3. **Key Challenges & Opportunities:**  
Identifies threats and opportunities for conservation.
4. **Strategic Objectives & Actions:**  
Defines objectives and specific actions for biodiversity conservation.
5. **Implementation & Monitoring:**  
Details timelines, responsibilities and a framework for tracking progress.

## 1.5. Plan Preparation Process

### 1.5.1. The BAP Process

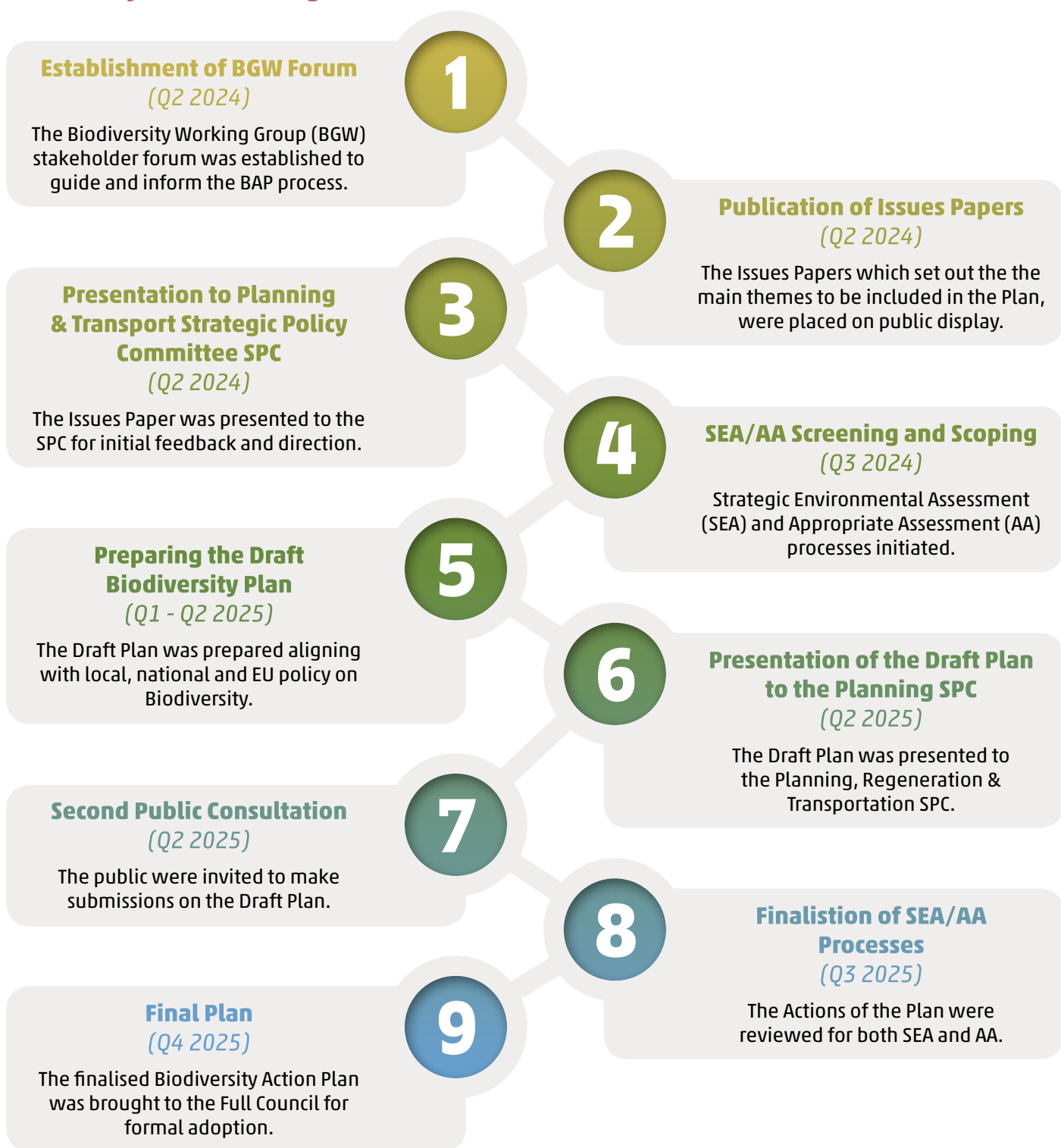
The plan was developed collaboratively with the Heritage Council and stakeholders, and involved extensive public consultation, including information sessions in Mullingar, Athlone, Moate and Castlepollard. Efforts were made to include diverse voices from all sectors, notably young people and older adults.

During the six week consultation on the Biodiversity Issues Papers, 24 people attended meetings, 30 written submissions were received via the online portal, and 22 questionnaires were completed in-person. Feedback from this consultation was critical in shaping the objectives and actions of the plan. Additional stakeholder consultations at pre-draft and draft stages ensured alignment with local, regional, and national policies, including the Westmeath County Development Plan.

#### Public Consultation Issues:



## Biodiversity Action Plan Stages:



Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Appropriate Assessment (AA) screenings evaluated potential impacts of the BAP on sensitive ecosystems and Natura 2000 sites, confirming that the proposed actions support conservation without negative impacts.

## 1.5.2. Role of the Biodiversity Working Group

A Biodiversity Working Group was established in Westmeath in 2024, bringing together a wide range of disciplines and expertise in line with the Heritage Council's Biodiversity Working Group Guidelines, to oversee and guide the development of the plan. The plan follows the key stages and indicative timeline set out in the Heritage Council's guidelines.

The primary role of this working group is to provide guidance and expertise throughout the planning, implementation, monitoring and review phases of this BAP. The BWG is also tasked with reviewing existing biodiversity data, identifying key conservation priorities, recommending strategies and actions, and monitoring the implementation of the BAP. The working group liaises between the Local Authority and various stakeholders, thus ensuring community participation in the implementation of the plan.

## 1.6. Biodiversity Policy Context

We are now at a pivotal point in the journey towards biodiversity recovery, with ambitious global targets aiming to halt biodiversity loss by 2030. Within our lifetime, we have witnessed profound transformations in the natural world, unprecedented weather events, widespread deforestation, the degradation of wetlands and grasslands, and the decline of rivers and lakes into poor ecological condition. These changes are not remote, they are occurring here in Westmeath. It is now essential that we prioritise the restoration of nature in these critical areas, with the goal of returning at least 30% of damaged ecosystems to a healthy state.

Our Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) must align with the frameworks and policy objectives set out at global, national, and local levels, including the EU Birds Directive, EU Habitats Directive, EU Water Framework Directive, and the National Planning Framework 2025. The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and the Sustainable Development Goals provide the overarching vision for nature conservation, sustainable development, and ecosystem restoration, all of which underpin the direction of our County's Biodiversity Action Plan.

Ireland's participation in the European Union's Nature Restoration Law further underscores our commitment to restoring biodiversity. This law requires member states, including Ireland, to take specific restoration actions, which are integrated into our national strategies such as the 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023-2030 (NBAP). The NBAP requires that all local authorities have responsibility to implement and report on specific biodiversity targets. This means that our local efforts to restore and protect natural habitats must align with the targets and actions set at the national level, and we are required to track and report our progress in this regard.

By doing so, we ensure that our actions are not only effective at the local level but also contribute to Ireland's statutory obligations under the EU's Nature Restoration Law. Our five-year plan reflects this responsibility by setting out clear objectives with locally tailored actions ensuring we contribute meaningfully to the targets of halting and reversing biodiversity loss by 2030.

The wellbeing of our environment, our communities, and future generations depends on the actions we take now.

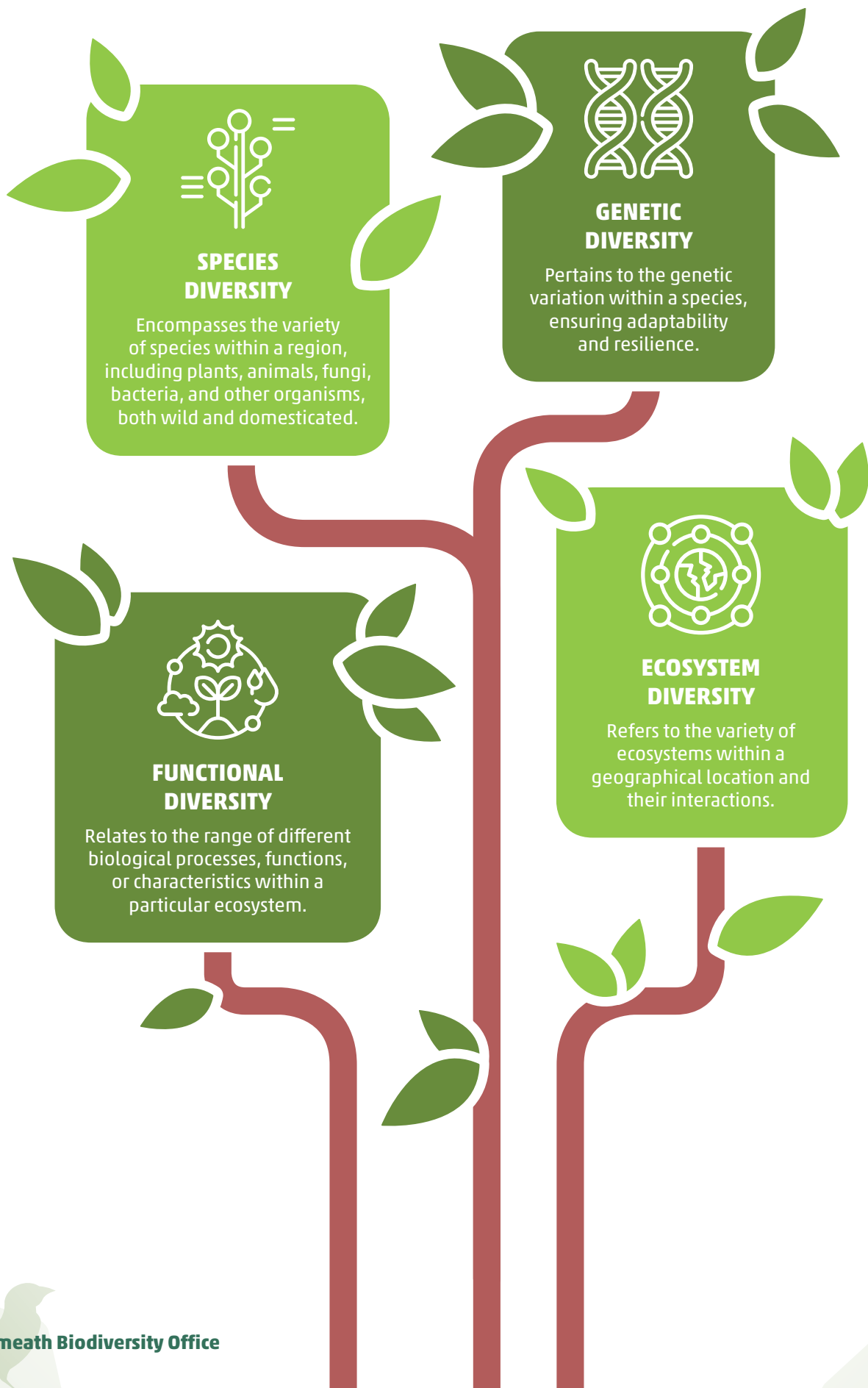
## 1.7. Understanding Biodiversity

### 1.7.1. What is Biodiversity?

Biodiversity is the variety of life on Earth, in all its forms and all its interactions. It is the wealth and diversity of all living things we see throughout our county. It comprises everything from tiny microorganisms, insects, birds, and mammals to plants, fungi, and larger ecosystems like our rich wetlands, bogs, hedgerows, eskers, grasslands, rivers, woodlands, parks, and our green open urban spaces.

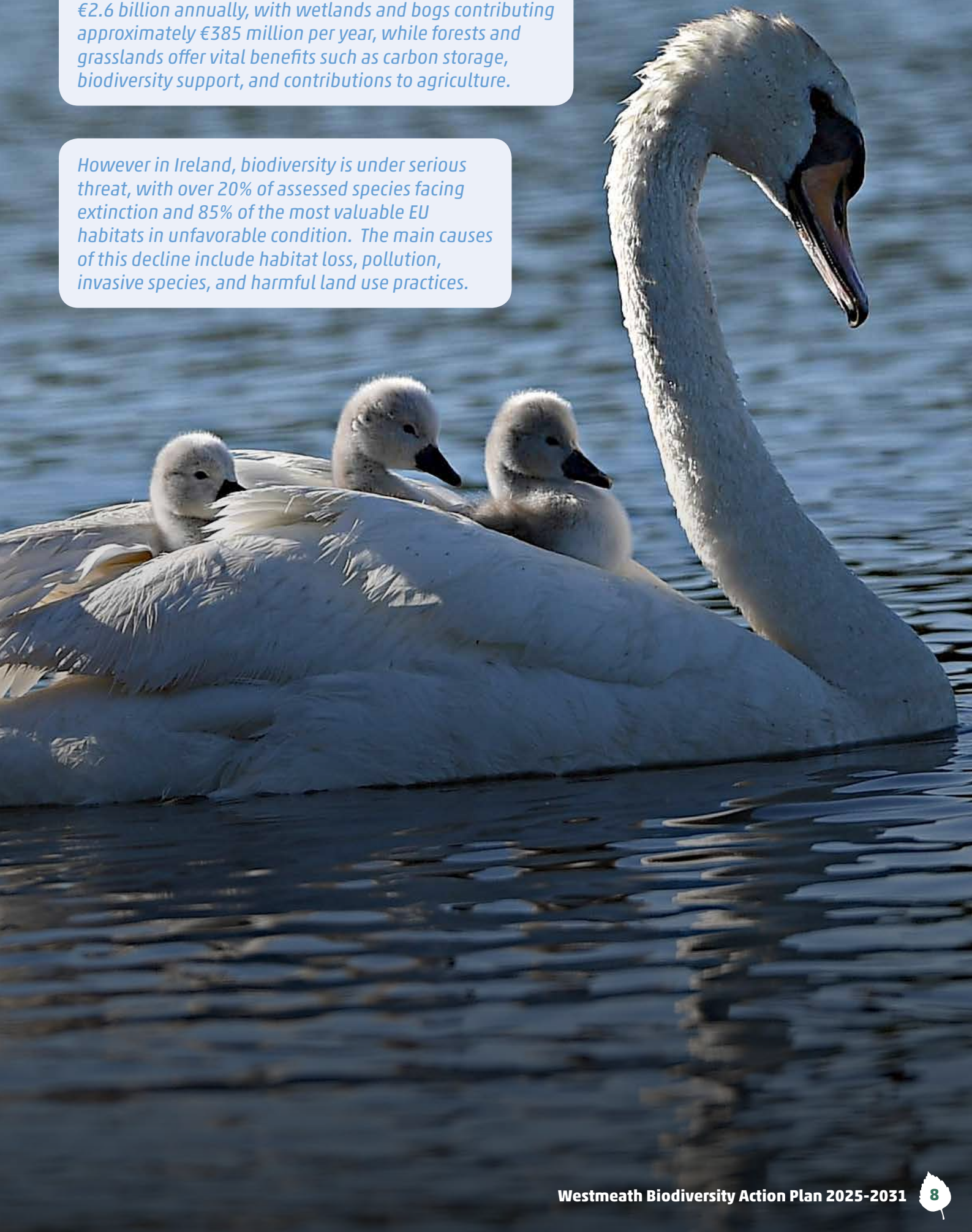
In essence, biodiversity encompasses the incredible diversity of life, including humans, and it is not limited to rare or endangered species but also includes the more familiar species that shape our everyday environments. Biodiversity extends further to include the genetic variation within species (i.e. genetic diversity) and the variety of ecosystems or habitats they form (i.e. habitat diversity). These range from the smallest garden lawn to ancient woodlands and the vast expanses of oceans. Together, these elements create the intricate web of life that supports and sustains our planet.

**Biodiversity, or biological diversity, refers to the variety of all living things on Earth, including:**



*Ireland's ecosystem services are estimated to be worth €2.6 billion annually, with wetlands and bogs contributing approximately €385 million per year, while forests and grasslands offer vital benefits such as carbon storage, biodiversity support, and contributions to agriculture.*

*However in Ireland, biodiversity is under serious threat, with over 20% of assessed species facing extinction and 85% of the most valuable EU habitats in unfavorable condition. The main causes of this decline include habitat loss, pollution, invasive species, and harmful land use practices.*



## 1.7.2. Why is Biodiversity Important?

Protecting our Biodiversity is important for many reasons. Biodiversity gives us food, fuel, medicine, purification of air and water and stabilises the earth's climate. Pollinating insects such as hoverflies, bees, moths and butterflies ensure that we get crops every year. Our trees and woodlands act as sinks for carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) that would otherwise contribute to global warming. The larger the biodiversity is, the more stable the environment is, which means that it is more resistant to pressures and change. As a result, people, farm animals, crops and soils are healthier, water and air are cleaner, and pests and diseases are reduced. Our physical and spiritual well-being also benefit from interacting with biodiversity. Habitats such as lakes and rivers enhance our landscape character and in turn attract tourism from activities such as fishing, nature recreation and water-based activities, providing employment in the local economy. There is also increasing evidence that both the quality and quantity of the biodiversity of the green spaces around us have a huge impact on both our physical and mental health.

The ecosystems here in Ireland provide essential goods and services that have significant economic value that contributes to human well-being and economic prosperity in this country.

### Examples of Ecosystem Services:

#### REGULATING SERVICES



#### SUPPORTING SERVICES



#### PROVISIONING SERVICES



#### CULTURAL SERVICES





Chapter 2

# Westmeath Biodiversity

# Chapter 2: Westmeath Biodiversity

*Westmeath boasts a rich natural heritage, stretching from the northern hills through the drumlin-studded landscapes and tranquil lakes, all the way to the River Shannon.*

*The County supports a wide range of diverse habitats and species encompassing wetlands, woodlands, hedgerows, rivers, grasslands, bogs, canals and eskers.*

## 2.1 The Landscape of Westmeath

Westmeath's landscape is rich and varied, shaped by its celebrated lakes, rivers, raised bogs, wetlands, woodlands, and eskers. Known as the "Lake County," this part of Ireland is home to some of the nation's most important freshwater habitats, with Lough Ennell, Lough Owel, Lough Derravaragh, and Lough Ree standing out as key natural assets.

At a landscape scale, Westmeath's ecological network includes both designated sites and the natural features that connect them. These comprise Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs), proposed NHAs, Nature Reserves, and County Biodiversity Areas (CBAs), as well as ecological corridors such as hedgerows, tree lines, watercourses, scrub, and small wetlands. While designated sites are subject to specific planning and conservation requirements, it is equally important that these connecting features are protected and integrated into development design, as together they form the spatial ecological network of the County.

Wetlands are an important feature of the landscape in the county, ranging from lakes and turloughs to fens, bogs and floodplains. These habitats help to purify water, mitigate flooding, and provide important refuges for a wide variety of wildlife. They are crucial for migratory and resident bird species, support rare aquatic plants, and provide breeding grounds for amphibians, fish and invertebrates. Seasonal wetlands, such as the turlough at Dún na Sí, Moate add further diversity by creating unique habitats that change with the seasons.

The county contains five wetlands that have been internationally designated as Ramsar sites, recognising their importance for wetland conservation. In addition, Lough Derravaragh and the River Shannon Callows (Portumna – Athlone), Lough Ennell and Lough Owel are designated as Important Bird Areas (IBAs) due to their significance for migratory and resident bird species.

The county's rivers including the River Inny, River Brosna, River Blackwater and River Shannon along with the Royal Canal, weave through the landscape, creating important ecological corridors that allow species like otters, kingfishers, freshwater mussels, and aquatic insects to move between habitats. Important eskers and raised bogs, including Cloncrow Bog, Crosswood Bog, Carn Park Bog, and Garriskil Bog, form part of a vital natural mosaic. These wetlands and bogs store significant amounts of carbon, playing an essential role in climate regulation and providing habitats for species such as curlew, snipe, and hen harrier. Westmeath's remaining raised bogs are among the last strongholds of this rare habitat type in Ireland, making their protection vital for both biodiversity and climate resilience.

Although not extensively forested, Westmeath contains important areas of native and semi-natural woodland, including Portlick Woods, Mullaghmeen Forest, and the woodlands of the Belvedere Estate. Portlick Woods, located along the shores of Lough Ree near Glasson, is dominated by oak, hazel, ash, and holly, and supports a range of woodland species including bats, woodland birds, and ground flora such as bluebells and wood anemones. Mullaghmeen Forest located near Castlepollard, also provides valuable habitat for native bird and mammal species, contributing further to the county's woodland biodiversity. Together, these woodlands offer important breeding and foraging sites and play a role in supporting ecosystem services such as air purification, carbon storage, and recreation.



The county's rural landscape is richly interwoven with ancient hedgerows, which act as ecological corridors, windbreaks, and nesting and feeding sites for birds, insects and small mammals. Hedgerows also contribute significantly to genetic diversity through the variety of native shrubs and trees they contain. Westmeath is part of the Esker Riada system, a network of sand and gravel ridges left behind by retreating glaciers which today supports dry, species-rich grasslands and continues to offer well-drained soils for traditional grazing and farming practices.

Westmeath's landscape not only supports agriculture, fishing, forestry, and eco-tourism but also enriches the county's identity, offering opportunities for recreation, angling, walking, birdwatching, education, citizen science and a deeper connection to nature. Protecting and enhancing these diverse habitats will be key to ensuring a thriving, resilient, and sustainable future for Westmeath and its communities.

## 2.2 Designated sites for nature conservation in County Westmeath

The quality of existing natural heritage assets in Westmeath is reflected in the significant number of EU designated conservation sites across the County. In this regard, there are 17 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and 11 Special Protection Areas (SPAs); collectively known as Sites of Conservation Importance (SCIs). These sites carry priority habitats and species and are referred to as the Natura 2000 Network and are legally protected under the EU Habitats Directive.

At a national level, there are nine Natural Heritage Areas (NHA's) in Westmeath, which cover nearly 7.6% of the County. In addition, there are 32 proposed (pNHAs), which are places where plants and animals exist in a relatively natural state. Many of these sites overlap with Natura 2000 areas, reflecting the ecological significance and diversity of the habitats they contain. These protected areas safeguard a wide range of habitats including raised bogs, fens, turloughs, and species-rich grasslands as well as rare and threatened species of flora and fauna.

*Five of the designated lakes - Loughs **Glen, Derravaragh, Iron, Owel, and Ennell** - are listed under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, particularly for their significance as habitats for waterfowl.*

*Lough **Derravaragh** and the **River Shannon Callows** (Portumna - Athlone), and Loughs **Iron, Glen and Ree** are also identified as Important Bird Areas (IBAs) due to their support of significant wildfowl populations. These designations highlight the critical importance of these lake habitats for bird conservation.*

Supporting the conservation objectives of EU and national designated sites will be an important part of this Biodiversity Action Plan.

## 2.3 EU Designated Sites

### Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) under the EU Habitats Directive

Under Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive, specific habitats must be protected within Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). In Ireland, these include raised and blanket bogs, turloughs, heaths, lakes, rivers, and native woodlands. The ecological quality and condition of these habitats are critical factors in SAC designation.

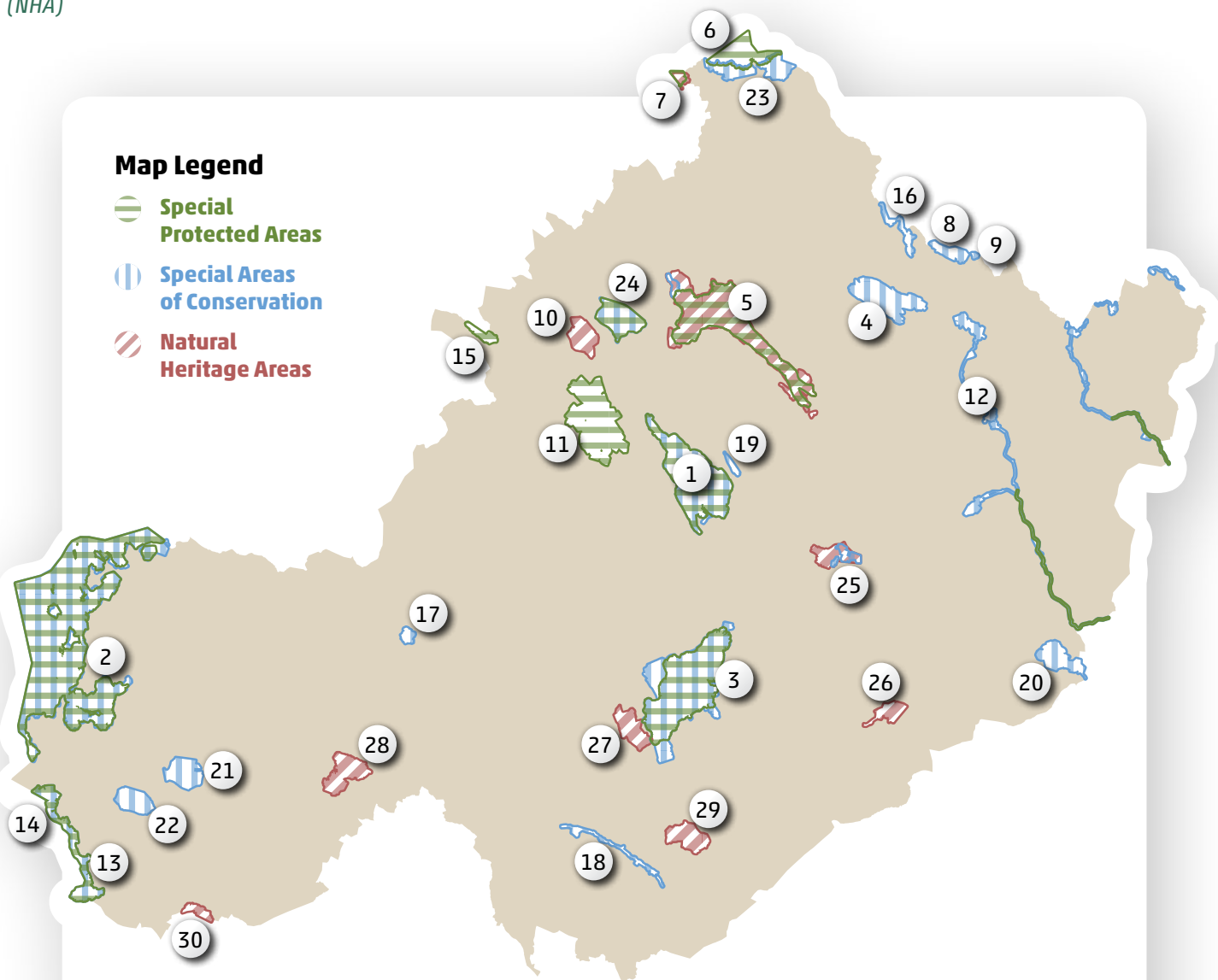
In Westmeath, Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) protect a range of important habitats including transition mires, alkaline fens, hard water and oligotrophic lakes, rivers with floating vegetation, calcareous springs, species-rich grasslands and esker ridge systems. These designations are vital for the conservation of biodiversity at both national and European levels. Notable SACs in the county include Scragh Bog SAC, one of Ireland's best examples of transition mire, Garriskil Bog SAC and Carn Park Bog SAC, which protect areas of active raised bog, and the Middle Shannon Callows SAC, an important floodplain habitat supporting breeding waders and wintering birds. Other key sites include Lough Lene SAC, which protects hard water lake habitat, and the Split Hills and Long Hill Esker SAC, recognised for its species-rich grasslands. These SACs play a critical role in safeguarding rare habitats and species such as the white-clawed crayfish, and marsh fritillary butterfly, Pollan, Narrow-leaved Helleborine, and Varnished Hook-moss.

### Special Protection Area (SPAs) under the EU Birds Directive

The EU Birds Directive requires that Member States designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) to safeguard rare and vulnerable bird species, regularly occurring migratory species and their habitats, particularly wetlands that attract significant numbers of migratory birds annually. Annex I of the Directive lists species requiring special conservation measures due to factors such as rarity, vulnerability or specific habitat needs. Westmeath is home to several SPAs that play a vital role in supporting these bird species throughout the year.

The designated SPAs in the County include Lough Derravaragh, Lough Ennell, Lough Owel, Lough Iron, Lough Sheelin, Lough Ree and parts of the Middle Shannon Callows. These sites provide essential wetland habitats, offering feeding and resting areas, particularly during the winter months for key species such as the Whooper Swan, Corncrake, Pochard, Tufted Duck, and Great Crested Grebe. Table 2 lists the Natura 2000 sites in Westmeath.

Table 1: Natura 2000 Sites (Special Areas of Conservation – SAC and Special Protection Areas – SPA) and Natural Heritage Areas (NHA)



- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <b>1.</b> Lough Owel                   | <b>11.</b> Lough Iron                            | <b>21.</b> Carn Park Bog                     |
| <b>2.</b> Lough Ree                    | <b>12.</b> River Boyne and River Blackwater      | <b>22.</b> Crosswood Bog                     |
| <b>3.</b> Lough Ennell                 | <b>13.</b> River Shannon Callows                 | <b>23.</b> Moneybeg and Clareisland Bogs     |
| <b>4.</b> Lough Lene                   | <b>14.</b> Middle Shannon Callows                | <b>24.</b> Garriskil Bog                     |
| <b>5.</b> Lough Derravaragh            | <b>15.</b> Glen Lough                            | <b>25.</b> Wooddown Bog                      |
| <b>6.</b> Lough Sheelin                | <b>16.</b> White Lough, Ben Lough and Lough Doon | <b>26.</b> Milltownpass Bog                  |
| <b>7.</b> Lough Kinale and Lough Lough | <b>17.</b> Ballymore Fen                         | <b>27.</b> Nure Bog                          |
| <b>8.</b> Lough Bane                   | <b>18.</b> Split Hills and Long Hill Esker       | <b>28.</b> Ballynagrenia and Ballinderry Bog |
| <b>9.</b> Lough Glass                  | <b>19.</b> Scragh Bog                            | <b>29.</b> Cloncrow Bog (New Forest)         |
| <b>10.</b> Lough Garr                  | <b>20.</b> Mount Hevey Bog                       | <b>30.</b> Clonydonnin Bog                   |

## 2.4 National Designated Sites

### Natural Heritage Areas

County Westmeath contains several other areas of importance for nature conservation. Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) are designated under the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000 to protect habitats, species, and geological features of national importance. There are currently nine NHAs in Westmeath. One well-known example is Scragh Bog NHA, located near Mullingar, which is considered one of the best remaining examples of a transition mire in Ireland that supports rare plant species and important wetland habitats.

In addition, there are thirty-two proposed Natural Heritage Areas (pNHAs) in the County. While not yet legally designated, these sites are recognised for their ecological value and receive a degree of protection through planning and environmental policy. Together the NHAs and pNHAs play a vital role in preserving the County's rich natural heritage. Table 3 lists the pNHA's in the County.

Table 2: Proposed Natural Heritage Areas (pNHA) within County Westmeath

Site No.	Site Name	EU Destination
000216	River Shannon Callows	SAC 000216, SPA 004096
000440	Lough Ree	SAC 000440, SPA 004064
000556	Lough Shesk	
000672	Aghalasty Fen	
000673	Ballynafid Lake and Fen	
000676	Carn Park Bog	SAC 002336
000678	Crosswood Bog	SAC 002337
000679	Garriskil Bog	SAC 000679, SPA 004102
000681	Hill of Mael and the Rock of Curry	
000685	Lough Ennell	SAC 000685, SPA 004044
000686	Lough Glore	
000687	Lough Iron	SPA 004046
000688	Lough Owel	SAC 000688, SPA 004047
000689	Lough Sewdy	
000690	Lough Sheever fen / Lough Slevin complex	
000692	Scragh Bog	SAC 000692
000896	Derrygolan Esker	
000918	Rahugh Ridge (Kiltober Esker)	
000987	Lough Sheelin	SPA 004065, SAC 002340
001584	Mount Hevey Bog	SAC 002342
001687	Glen Lough	SPA 004045
001711	Ardan Wood	
001713	Ballynagarbry	
001721	Lough Bane	
001731	Walshestown Fen	
001732	Waterstown Lake	
001775	Murphy's Bridge Esker	
001810	White Lough, Ben Loughs and Lough Doo	SAC 001810
001814	Lough Naneagh	
001831	Split Hills and Long Hill Esker	SAC 001831
002103	Royal Canal	
002104	Grand Canal	

## 2.5 County Biodiversity Areas

County Westmeath contains numerous County Biodiversity Areas (CBAs) that are essential for maintaining the ecological network of the county, even though they are not protected under national or international legislation. These areas include wetlands, rivers, woodlands, hedgerows, parks, railway corridors, canal paths, and small patches of woodland, all of which act as ecological corridors and stepping stones through the landscape. They provide food, shelter, and breeding grounds for a wide range of species and are critical for maintaining connectivity between larger designated sites. While lacking formal legal protection, these LBAs offer valuable opportunities for local conservation and access to nature close to towns and villages.

Article 10 of the Habitats Directive requires Member States to encourage the management of landscape features of major importance for wild flora and fauna. The Council recognises the importance of these sites and is committed to their conservation and sustainable management. To support this, the Council intends to undertake habitat mapping across the county to identify areas of local biodiversity value.

A county-wide wetland survey conducted between 2020 and 2024 identified 493 wetland sites across Westmeath, covering approximately 17% of the county's land area. Of these, 51 sites were deemed of county-level value for biodiversity conservation. These wetlands are vital habitats for a range of species and contribute significantly to the ecological health of the region.

Examples of County Biodiversity Areas (CBAs) include Aghalasty Fen and Dún na Sí Turlough, Moate. These LBAs are integral to the ecological fabric of Westmeath, serving as critical habitats for various species and contributing to ecological corridors that facilitate wildlife movement, such as the Old Rail Trail Greenway.

The development of the County Biodiversity Areas (CBAs) green network, linking wetlands, hedgerows, watercourses, riparian zones, and small woodlands across Westmeath and into neighbouring counties, will create a resilient landscape for biodiversity.

## 2.6 Habitats in County Westmeath

Habitats in Ireland are usually classified in one of two ways. The first method is the Fossitt classification system, developed by Fossitt in 2000. This is the most commonly used system in Ireland. It gives each habitat type a unique code for example, the code WN7 is used for a type of habitat known as Bog Woodland.

The second method comes from European legislation, the EU Habitats Directive. This directive includes a list of important natural habitat types in Annex I, which are considered to be of high conservation value across Europe. Each Annex I habitat is also assigned a code for instance, 7230 is the code used for Alkaline fens, a type of wetland with calcium-rich water and distinctive plant life.

Although the Fossitt system and the Annex I list use different codes, they describe similar habitat types and are often aligned.

A habitat is a natural area where certain plants, animals and other organisms live and thrive. The types of organisms found in a habitat are influenced by a combination of biotic factors such as the presence of predators, competition, or human activity and abiotic factors like sunlight, moisture levels, and the type of soil. These factors together shape the environment and determine which species can survive there.

In County Westmeath, a wide variety of habitats can be found. Some are natural, such as oligotrophic lakes, which are deep, clear lakes with low nutrient levels, raised bogs, which are wetland areas formed from accumulated peat, and eskers that are long winding ridges of gravel and sand left behind by melting glaciers. Alongside these, there are also more familiar, human-influenced habitats like flower beds, hedgerows, and stone walls, which also provide important homes for many species.

A full list of Annex I habitats recorded in Westmeath is provided in Table 3, highlighting the diversity and ecological importance of the County.

Table 3: Habitats specified in EC Habitat Directive Annex I recorded in County Westmeath

Code	Habitats
3140	Hard oligo-mesotrophic waters with benthic vegetation of Chara spp.
3150	Natural eutrophic lakes with Magnopotamion or Hydrocharition-type vegetation
3180	* Turloughs
3260	Water courses of plain to montane levels with the Ranunculion fluitantis and Callitriche-Batrachion vegetation
6210	Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (* important orchid sites)
6410	Molinia meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils (Molinion caeruleae)
6510	Lowland hay meadows (Alopecurus pratensis, Sanguisorba officinalis)
7110	* Active Raised Bog
7120	Degraded raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration
7140	Transition mires and quaking bogs
7150	Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion
7210	* Calcareous fens with Cladium mariscus and species of the Caricion davallianae
7220	* Petrifying springs with tufa formation (Cratoneurion)
7230	Alkaline fens
8240	* Limestone pavements
91A0	Old sessile oak woods with Ilex and Blechnum in British Isles
91E0	* Alluvial forests with Alnus glutinosa and Fraxinus excelsior (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae)
91D0	* Bog Woodland

\* Indicates priority habitat types



## 2.6.1 Lakes & Rivers

Westmeath, often referred to as “the Lake County,” is renowned for its picturesque lakes, holding the highest concentration of lakes of any county within Leinster. Lough Ree, shared with Roscommon and Longford, is Ireland’s third-largest lake. Other major lakes include Lough Ennell, Lough Owel, Lough Derravaragh, Lough Sheelin, Lough Lene, and Lough Bane, most of which lie within the River Shannon catchment.

These lakes and associated rivers, including significant waterways like the River Shannon, River Brosna, and River Inny, support a diverse range of aquatic life. This includes fish species such as salmon, trout, perch, and pike, alongside a wide array of birdlife. Riparian (waterside) vegetation supports an abundant diversity of insect life such as mayflies and caddisflies, crucial to maintaining the ecological balance of these freshwater ecosystems.

Many of Westmeath’s lakes and wetlands are designated as wetlands of international importance (Ramsar Sites) under the Ramsar Convention (see Table 4). These include Lough Derravaragh, Lough Owel, Lough Ennell, Glen Lough, and Lough Iron.

Table 4: Ramsar Sites in County Westmeath

<p><b>Lough Derravaragh</b> Ramsar site 847 SPA, 1120ha</p>	<p>A raised or cutaway bog with a shallow, alkaline lake and extensive reedbeds and swamps. Vegetation includes various aquatic plants dominated by reeds and sedges, several of which have a restricted distribution in Ireland, and deciduous woodland composed of native species. The site supports nationally important numbers of several species of waterbirds and provides valuable habitat for otter.</p>
<p><b>Lough Ennell</b> Ramsar site 848 SPA, 1404ha</p>	<p>A large, steep-sided lake fringed by calcareous grassland, wet marshy areas, reedbeds and mixed woodland. The site is of significance as a highly productive lake rich in its range of lower plants and invertebrate species. Its lakeshore habitats provide important refuges for waterbirds, as well as supporting rare or endemic flora.</p>
<p><b>Glen Lough</b> Ramsar site 849 SPA, 81ha</p>	<p>A lake dominated by freshwater marsh and including reed swamp, wet and dry grassland vegetation, cutaway bog colonised by heath vegetation, scrub, wet willow woodland, exposed rock and fen. The site supports large numbers of Dabbling ducks and internationally significant numbers of Whooper swan.</p>
<p><b>Lough Iron</b> Ramsar site 850 SPA, 182ha</p>	<p>The site, a long narrow lake with fringing marsh and woodlands surrounded by intensively farmed agricultural land, is one of the most important waterbirds sites in the Midlands. In addition to supporting large numbers of snipe and duck, there are internationally important numbers of Greenland White-fronted geese and Whooper swans wintering at the site that feed on the surrounding farmland. The marsh areas support numerous rare plant species.</p>
<p><b>Lough Owel</b> Ramsar site 851 SPA, 1032ha</p>	<p>One of the best examples of a large, spring-fed calcareous lake in Ireland. The lake and fringing wetlands support an outstanding array of rare plant species as well as bird and fish populations of considerable interest. Adjacent farmland is feeding grounds for the Greenland White-fronted goose.</p>



Several lakes and rivers in the county are designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) due to their rare and significant aquatic habitats:

- Hard oligo-mesotrophic lakes (clear, low-nutrient waters supporting rare stonewort species), including Lough Owel, Ennell, Lene, and Bane.
- Natural eutrophic lakes (nutrient-rich waters with diverse species assemblages), with Lough Ree as a prime example.
- Turloughs, unique seasonal lakes characteristic of Ireland, are found near Moate and at Scragh Bog SAC.
- Petrifying springs, moss-rich habitats forming limestone-based tufa deposits, occur notably at Ballymore Fen and within the River Boyne SAC.

In addition, the River Blackwater, recognized both as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Special Protection Area (SPA), is significant for its important aquatic habitats and associated birdlife.

Furthermore, the Royal Canal, designated as a proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA), traverses Westmeath and serves as a vital wildlife corridor, supporting bats, birds such as kingfishers and grey wagtails, and fish including bream and perch.

### 2.6.2 Peatlands & Wetlands

Westmeath is home to two important types of peatland, raised bogs and fens. These ecologically valuable habitats support a wide range of biodiversity and play a key role in climate action by acting as natural carbon stores.

Raised bogs are dome-shaped peatlands that developed in former lake basins and shallow hollows. They depend solely on rainfall for water and nutrients, and are characterised by deep, acidic peat soils. Typical vegetation includes Sphagnum mosses, sedges, and heathers. While the majority of raised bogs in Ireland have been lost or degraded, Crosswood and Cloncrow Bogs, are now part of active restoration and rewetting efforts under broader conservation initiatives.

Transition mires and quaking bogs are special peatlands that sit between acidic bogs and alkaline fens, often forming soft, floating carpets of moss and sedges. These rare and fragile habitats can be found at Lough Owel, Scragh Bog, and Ballymore Fen.

Westmeath is particularly rich in fen habitats, hosting a variety of nationally and internationally important sites that represent the full range of fen types found in Ireland. Alkaline fens are peatland wetlands fed by mineral-rich water, often found in limestone areas, and commonly form part of a mix with other wetland habitats. You can find these fens at sites like Lough Ree, Lough Owel, Scragh Bog, Lough Ennell, Ballymore Fen, and along the River Boyne and River Blackwater.

Cladium fens, also known as rich fens or flushes, grow on flatter ground and are often dominated by Saw sedge (*Cladium mariscus*), a tall, stiff wetland plant. These rare habitats can be seen at Lough Sheever fen, the Lough Slevin complex, Twy Lough and Bog, Clonyrina Fen, and Waterstown Lake.

Together, these fen habitats play a vital role in supporting biodiversity, storing carbon, and regulating water, but they are increasingly under pressure from drainage, pollution, and land use change making their protection and careful management more important than ever.

Over the past few years, Westmeath County Council has carried out a detailed survey of wetland habitats across the county, including those within designated conservation areas such as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs), and proposed NHAs (pNHAs). This survey helps us understand and protect the county's rich variety of wetlands including fens, bogs, and marshes which are vital for biodiversity, water quality, and climate resilience.

A total of 498 wetland sites mapped and 86 sites were field surveyed covering 30,000 hectares. It is now estimated that wetlands cover approximately 307 km<sup>2</sup>, or 16.7% of Westmeath's land area. This represents a decrease from the 2020 estimate and highlights the pressures these habitats continue to face.

Over one-third of Westmeath's wetlands are considered internationally important for nature conservation. In addition to these designated areas, 43 sites have also been identified as important at county level.

The information collected through this survey will inform the biodiversity actions listed in Chapter 4. It will help identify opportunities to restore these habitats and support their inclusion in the County Biodiversity Areas (CBA) network. This data will also be valuable in guiding future initiatives, such as farm biodiversity plans and restoration schemes, subject to availability of funding.

### 2.6.3 Eskers

Eskers are long ridges of gravel and sand left behind by glaciers, and in Westmeath, they support unique woodlands and grasslands rich in wildflowers and rare plants. A 2005 study found that the County's eskers host over two hundred and twenty plant species and twenty-seven different habitats. Notable sites include Split Hills and Long Hill Esker SAC—home to the rare Bird's-nest Orchid—and Rahugh Ridge, which is almost entirely covered in native woodland.

However, intact eskers are now rare, as many have been historically quarried for sand and gravel. This activity continues in some parts of Westmeath, leading to the loss of these special landscapes and the ecosystems they support. Quarrying removes the entire habitat and poses a risk to groundwater due to the porous nature of esker soils. To safeguard their biodiversity and geological value, quarrying on eskers should be avoided wherever possible.

### 2.6.4 Semi-natural Woodland

Native woodland is scarce in Westmeath, but several important examples remain. True native or near-natural woodland, such as Ardan Wood near Kilbeggan, is extremely rare and likely ancient in origin, with native trees like oak, hazel, and holly, and a rich ground flora. Most other woodlands in the county are classed as semi-natural, made up largely of native species but shaped by past human activity such as planting or grazing.

Semi-natural woodlands are scattered across the county, often along lakeshores, rivers, and eskers. Portlick Forest, beside Lough Ree, is a good example on public land, while the nearby Portlick Millennium Forest was planted to restore native trees. Mullaghmeen Forest, the largest planted beech woodland in Ireland, also includes areas of native species and supports diverse flora and fauna. Historic demesne woodlands at Belvedere House and Tullynally Castle combine native and exotic trees. Though not all are fully natural, these woodlands are vital for biodiversity, support carbon storage, and play a role in climate action and ecosystem health.

### 2.6.5 Hedgerows

Hedgerows are a key feature of Westmeath's countryside, supporting wildlife, marking boundaries, and shaping the landscape. They act as vital habitats and corridors, helping birds, mammals, and insects move safely across the land. Hedgerows also provide important benefits like storing carbon, preventing soil erosion, and supporting pollinators. In farming, they serve as natural fences and shelter for livestock. Many hedgerows are historically significant, marking old land divisions and linking back to ancient woodland. Their value both ecological and cultural makes them an essential part of the county's natural heritage.

A 2024 survey of hedgerows in south Westmeath found that many are in decline, mainly due to the impact of Ash Dieback. Ash trees make up the majority of hedgerow trees in the area, and most are now dead or dying. This has led to an increase in ivy growth, which takes advantage of extra light but is also a sign of poor tree health. The survey also highlighted issues with excessive fertiliser use, which encourages fast-growing weeds like nettles and thistles, crowding out native hedgerow plants.

Additionally, poor management practices are a significant concern, with many roadside hedgerows being excessively cut, while internal field hedgerows are frequently neglected losing their structural integrity. These pressures diminish the ecological value of hedgerows, underscoring the need for improved care and management.



### 2.6.6 Grasslands

Grasslands form a valuable component of Westmeath's landscape and biodiversity. They occur along floodplains, lakeshores, canals, and eskers, ranging from dry, flower-rich grasslands on limestone soils to wetter meadows with rushes and orchids. Important examples include areas along the shores of Lough Ree, the Split Hills and Long Hill Eskers, and the River Shannon Callows.

Many grasslands rely on traditional farming methods, such as grazing and hay-cutting, to remain open and maintain their biodiversity. Without these practices, grasslands quickly become overgrown by scrub and woodland, leading to a loss of valuable habitat. Although often overlooked, grasslands are vital habitats, supporting diverse wildflowers, insects such as bees and butterflies, and birds. They also contribute significantly to Westmeath's green infrastructure network.

At Belvedere Estate near Mullingar, species-rich grassland is currently managed with biodiversity as a priority. Recognised for its ecological value, the site is included in the NPWS National Grasslands Trail 2025 publication. Given its existing management, high habitat quality, and potential for seed collection and ecological monitoring, Belvedere Estate offers significant opportunities as a demonstration site. These activities align closely with the strategic actions outlined in this Biodiversity Action Plan, simultaneously benefiting wildlife conservation, climate mitigation through carbon storage, and improved soil health.

### 2.6.7 Urban Green Spaces

Urban areas in Westmeath's towns and villages contain valuable green spaces that act as satellite habitats, offering food, shelter, and important links between urban wildlife areas. Nature can thrive in parks, canals, greenways, graveyards, stone walls, roadside verges, hedgerows, and residential estates. These spaces support swifts, bats, bees, butterflies, birds, frogs, and even otters along waterways like the Royal Canal. Many public green spaces, including those in housing estates, are now being managed for biodiversity. Community spaces and estates also play a key role when planted with native species and managed without pesticides. Tidy Towns groups and residential communities can make a big difference for both biodiversity and climate by planting trees, growing pollinator-friendly plants, and managing green areas in a nature-positive way. These local actions support national goals like the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan and help create healthier, greener towns for both people and wildlife.



## 2.7 Overview of important & protected species

Westmeath is home to several rare and threatened plant species that are legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order 2022. These include specialised wetland, woodland and grassland species such as the slender green feather-moss (*Drepanocladus vernicosus*), short-leaved water starwort (*Callitriche truncata*), narrow-leaved helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*), meadow barley (*Hordeum secalinum*), and slender bog-cotton (*Eriophorum gracile*). Many of these grow in sensitive habitats like bogs, fens, and species-rich meadows, and some are found in important conservation areas such as the Lough Ree, Scragh Bog and Lough Ennell SACs. It is an offence to uproot, cut, or damage these protected species without a license. Protecting these plants is essential for conserving the county's botanical heritage and the unique habitats they depend on.

A wide variety of protected and rare wildlife can be found across the county's diverse habitats. Amphibians such as the common frog and smooth newt, along with Ireland's only native reptile, the common lizard, are present in wetlands, grasslands, and woodlands. Mammals like the red squirrel, pine marten, otter, hedgehog, and stoat are widespread in both rural and urban areas. The return of the pine marten has supported the recovery of red squirrels by helping reduce populations of the invasive grey squirrel. Eight bat species have been recorded in the county, including Leisler's, Daubenton's, and pipistrelles, all protected under Irish and EU law.

Local lakes and rivers provide important habitats for aquatic species such as the protected white-clawed crayfish, pollan, Atlantic salmon, and European eel. Wetlands and lakes like Lough Ree, Lough Ennell, and Lough Derravaragh are key sites for wintering and breeding birds, supporting species such as whooper swan, goldeneye, lapwing, and wigeon. Once a stronghold for breeding waders, the Shannon Callows have experienced population declines in recent years. Conservation efforts are ongoing through initiatives like the Corncrake LIFE Project and the Breeding Waders EIP to support the recovery of these species.

Westmeath also supports many species listed in Ireland's Red Data Books, which highlight plants, animals, and insects at risk of extinction. These include birds like the curlew, barn owl, and yellowhammer; plants such as meadow barley and green-winged orchid; and important pollinators like several wild bee species, which are declining due to habitat loss and pesticide use. A number of butterflies are also under threat, including the endangered small blue, the vulnerable large heath and marsh fritillary (found, for example but not limited to, Scragh Bog SAC and Lough Derravaragh NHA), and near-threatened species like the small heath, dingy skipper, grayling, and wood white. Protecting flower-rich habitats, hedgerows, bogs, and open grasslands is essential to their survival. With its mix of woodlands, waterways, wetlands, and countryside, Westmeath plays a vital role in safeguarding Ireland's native biodiversity and natural heritage.

This Biodiversity Action Plan has regard to the richness of Westmeath's natural environment and sets out practical steps to safeguard this important asset for future generations. Over the next five years, we will identify, map, and promote County Biodiversity Areas (CBAs) alongside protected sites and other ecologically valuable habitats with the aim of strengthening a connected green network across the county.

Chapter 3

# Challenges and Opportunities for Biodiversity in Westmeath



# Chapter 3: Challenges and Opportunities for Biodiversity in Westmeath

*Westmeath, like many regions in Ireland, faces several key challenges when it comes to preserving and enhancing biodiversity. This chapter explores the challenges that exist for biodiversity protection and enhancement and the opportunities we have to respond effectively through local action.*

## 3.1 Key Challenges

Balancing development with nature conservation remains a key challenge in Westmeath, especially as housing, economic development and infrastructure expand. While necessary, these developments must be carefully planned to avoid further loss of habitats, particularly those located in the vicinity of protected areas. Many local habitats have already been degraded through drainage, land intensification, and past management. Restoration such as rewetting bogs, managing invasive species, or bringing back native vegetation requires long-term effort, funding, and strong collaboration. Much of the county is farmed land, and nature-friendly practices like hedgerow protection or wet meadow management must be supported if they are to become more widely adopted. Poor water quality remains a serious pressure on biodiversity, but improving it depends on coordinated action across sectors and catchments. Data gaps also limit our ability to protect nature, with many species and habitats still under-recorded. Meanwhile, climate change adds complexity, as extreme weather and shifting seasons impact wildlife and increase the need for healthy, connected and resilient ecosystems.

### 3.1.1 Habitat Loss and Fragmentation

While designated sites such as SACs and NHAs offer protection for many important habitats and species, the surrounding landscapes that are often equally rich in biodiversity remain under significant pressure. As a result, semi-natural habitats such as hedgerows, species-rich grasslands, wet meadows, and woodlands are being lost or fragmented. This affects pollinators that rely on continuous corridors of flowering plants, and birds such as barn owls, yellowhammers, and snipe that need connected areas to feed, nest, and breed. Bats also depend on linked treelines and hedgerows to forage and navigate the landscape. When these connections are broken, it becomes harder for wildlife to move, survive, and thrive. Protecting these stepping-stone habitats is key to maintaining a resilient and healthy natural environment across the county.

### 3.1.2 Pollution

Water pollution is a major threat to biodiversity in Westmeath's lakes, rivers and wetlands. Runoff from agriculture and urban areas, along with untreated or poorly treated wastewater, introduces nutrients and pollutants into freshwater systems. This leads to eutrophication, where an excess of nutrients, particularly nitrogen and phosphorus, causing algal blooms, oxygen depletion, and the decline of sensitive aquatic species. Several rivers and lakes in the county are now classified as having poor ecological status, and water extraction for public supply, agriculture, and industry places further pressure on flows and habitats, especially during dry spells. Species such as the white-clawed crayfish are especially vulnerable to deteriorating water quality, reduced flows, and disease. Fish species including brown trout, pike, perch, and the protected European eel also rely on clean, oxygen-rich waters for survival and are at risk when aquatic systems become degraded. Algal blooms have occurred in Lough Ennell, while Lough Owel, home to one of Ireland's most important crayfish populations, remains at risk despite previous improvements in wastewater treatment. Declining water quality also affects wetland birds and invertebrates, threatening the health of entire aquatic ecosystems. Without stronger protection and coordinated management, these freshwater systems will continue to degrade, with lasting consequences for biodiversity across the county. This trend reflects national findings identified in the Environmental Protection Agency's *State of the Environment Report 2024*, which highlights nutrient pollution, habitat loss, and water-quality decline as critical pressures on Ireland's freshwater ecosystems.

### 3.1.3 Invasive Species

Invasive and non-native species are a growing threat to biodiversity in Westmeath. Aquatic invaders such as zebra mussels and the more recently detected quagga mussels are now established in Lough Ree, Lough Sheelin and along the River Shannon. These species outcompete native freshwater mussels, alter nutrient cycling, and can damage aquatic habitats by changing sediment and water conditions. Their spread also affects water quality and the overall health of lake and river ecosystems. On land, invasive plants like Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam, and giant hogweed are present in parts of Westmeath. These species spread rapidly along riverbanks, roadsides, and disturbed areas, displacing native vegetation and increasing erosion. Some, like giant hogweed, also pose risks to human health. Invasive mammals and fish, including mink, grey squirrel, and non-native trout strains, further disrupt ecosystems by competing with or preying on native species. Once established, invasive species are difficult and costly to control. Early detection, coordinated action, and public awareness are essential to reduce their spread and protect Westmeath's natural habitats.

### 3.1.4 Climate Change

Climate change has already disrupted nature in Westmeath. Changes in temperature and rainfall are affecting the timing of bird migration, with some species arriving earlier or shifting their routes. Plants are flowering earlier in the spring, which can cause mismatches between food availability and the needs of pollinators and other wildlife. More frequent flooding and summer droughts are placing added stress on sensitive habitats. Wetlands and bogs are crucial for storing carbon and supporting biodiversity and are particularly vulnerable to drying out or damage from fluctuating water levels. These visible changes highlight the urgent need not only to protect and restore natural areas, but also to adapt by managing habitats in ways that build long-term climate resilience.

### 3.1.5 Drainage and Peatland Degradation

Westmeath's bogs and wetlands have been significantly impacted by historical drainage for agriculture, peat extraction and forestry. These activities lower water tables, leading to habitat loss and reduced carbon storage. In addition, the ongoing maintenance of rivers through arterial drainage has damaged many riparian zones and further altered ecosystems that are already fragile. These changes continue to affect biodiversity, water quality, and the natural functioning of wetland habitats across the county.

### 3.1.6 Lack of Awareness and Engagement

A limited understanding of biodiversity among the general public and landowners, can lead to unintentional damage to habitats or missed opportunities for conservation. Without greater awareness of the role nature plays in healthy ecosystems, everyday actions such as removing hedgerows, over-tidying gardens, or intensively managing green spaces can negatively impact wildlife. These knowledge gaps make it harder to assess the health of ecosystems as a whole or to understand how changes in one habitat may impact another. Building ecological awareness at all levels, including within the Council, is essential to supporting more nature-friendly decisions across the county.

### 3.1.7 Under-resourced Conservation Efforts

Limited funding for biodiversity monitoring, habitat restoration, community projects, or awareness campaigns significantly hinders the ability to deliver on key priorities and reach the area's most in need of support. It also constrains the capacity to fulfil statutory obligations, such as those outlined in the National Biodiversity Action Plan and other national or EU commitments. To address these challenges, it is essential to proactively seek and secure multiple funding streams local, national, and EU so that biodiversity conservation efforts are adequately resourced and can be scaled to meet growing needs. Without sufficient resources, sustaining long-term initiatives, raising public awareness, or responding effectively to biodiversity and climate challenges becomes increasingly difficult.

Notwithstanding the pressures facing biodiversity in Westmeath, there is growing momentum for action. With biodiversity and climate now firmly at the forefront of both national and local priorities, the county is better placed to respond to these challenges. Recognising the issues allows us to focus efforts, strengthen partnerships, and support local action where it is needed most. This plan marks a turning point in how Westmeath values and manages its natural heritage. The following section explores the opportunities ahead and sets out a pathway for building a more resilient, nature-focused future.

# Biodiversity and Climate Change

Biodiversity is one of our biggest allies in reducing the impact of climate change. Healthy ecosystems need to be conserved to increase resilience to climate impacts. As we transition to a biodiversity rich and climate neutral economy by 2050 the Biodiversity Action Plan must tackle climate breakdown at a local level.

**Create Ecosystem resilience**

**Bring Nature to Urban Areas**

**Create Green Areas for Trees, Plants and Pollinators**

**Protect Wetlands, Peatlands, Forestry, Grasslands**

**Rewilding & habitat restoration**

**Connect Wildlife Areas linking Green Corridors**

**Nature based solutions for rainfall**

## Change in precipitation

- Decrease in crop yields, vulnerable to disease, stress, invasives
- Reduction in water quality & increase in water stress



## Changes in air temperatures & seasonal patterns

- Shift in migration patterns of fish, birds, moths, butterflies, and insects
- Change in species distribution
- Vulnerable to diseases
- Invasive alien species expansion
- Plants and trees flowering too early
- Change in crop yields



## Increased extreme weather events

- Extreme heavy rainfall
- Increase in river flow, pollution risk
- Damage from winter storms, flooding, summer wildfires & drought



## Warming ocean temperatures

- Change in species distribution
- Sea level rise risk to river ecosystems

## 3.2 Opportunities for Biodiversity in Westmeath

Despite the challenges, there are many meaningful and achievable opportunities to enhance biodiversity in Westmeath. These lie in better coordination, community involvement, smarter use of data, and integrating biodiversity into how we manage land, water and public spaces. Public understanding of the importance of nature is growing, as is the desire to protect and restore it. New national and EU policies bring with them increased support and funding for biodiversity projects. Crucially, Westmeath has active communities, farmers, landowners, schools, and organisations already playing a role in protecting and enhancing local biodiversity. By building on this momentum and working in partnership, we can support nature-based solutions that benefit both wildlife and people, while strengthening the resilience of local communities and the environment.

County Biodiversity Areas (CBAs) across Westmeath include valuable habitats such as wetlands, remnant raised bogs, eskers, small woodlands, species-rich grasslands, riparian corridors, and natural parklands. Although these sites may lack formal statutory protection, they remain essential for biodiversity and are often recognised and valued locally.

As part of this Biodiversity Action Plan, Westmeath County Council will identify, map, and integrate these LIBAs alongside existing designated sites such as SACs, NHAs, and Ramsar wetlands, forming a comprehensive County Ecological Network Map. This ecological network will clearly identify areas of high biodiversity value, enhance wildlife corridors, and reveal where connectivity between habitats can be improved. Strengthening and expanding this network is critical for reducing habitat fragmentation and supporting the natural movement of aquatic animals, birds, mammals, insects, and plants across the county.

Recent initiatives, including the County Hedgerow and the Semi natural Grassland Surveys, the County Wetland Surveys (mapping 493 wetland sites), and Breeding Waterbird Surveys at Lough Ennell, Lough Owel, and Lough Derravaragh, have already provided important baseline information. Ongoing conservation efforts such as invasive species control at Belvedere House and Gardens and Bogganfin, biodiversity management along the Old Rail Trail Greenway, Swift monitoring in Mullingar, and habitat management for the Marsh Fritillary butterfly at Coolure Demesne are actively supporting and enhancing the county's ecological network.

Building on these foundations, Westmeath has significant opportunities to strengthen biodiversity action countywide.

### Successes So Far in Westmeath

Over the past five years, Westmeath has made significant progress in biodiversity action, delivering a wide range of impactful projects:

- Invasive species management at Belvedere Estate and removal of invasive plants from calcareous species-rich grasslands at Bogganfin, Athlone.
- County Barn Owl Project launched, with new nest boxes installed and increasing barn owl populations.
- Biodiversity awareness projects by Transition Year students, including the construction of barn owl boxes for use in the local community.
- County Hedgerow Survey to be completed 2025; to assess and help raise awareness to protect the quality, extent of hedgerow networks.
- County Wetland Survey (2020–2024) identifying and mapping 493 wetland sites across Westmeath.
- Breeding waterbird surveys carried out on Lough Ennell, Lough Owel, and Lough Derravaragh to monitor important wetland bird populations.
- Development of a Bee Pollinator Trail along the Old Rail Trail Greenway at Streamstown in partnership with the National Biodiversity Data Centre.
- A County wide semi natural grassland survey including three management plans on council owned land at Belvedere, Bogganfin Athlone & Coolure for nature restoration management plans
- Conservation grazing and scrub control introduced at Coolure Demesne to protect calcareous wet grasslands and support the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, with ongoing volunteer-led monitoring.

The above projects lay the groundwork for continuing this important work in the years ahead.

### 3.2.1 Growing Local Action through Communities and Volunteers

There is strong and growing public interest in biodiversity, with many community groups, schools, and volunteers already taking action. Projects aligned with the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, local biodiversity plans, and native provenance planting schemes are producing real results. Supporting these efforts through small grants, technical advice, and recognition will help them grow, especially where they align with county priorities.

### 3.2.2 Building on Existing Projects and Partnerships

Several biodiversity-focused projects are underway, including native woodland planting, wetland restoration through Just Transition funding, and species monitoring by NPWS and the National Biodiversity Data Centre. Strengthening partnerships with NGOs, state agencies, farmers, and community groups will allow the Council to connect efforts, represent local needs, and inspire wider participation through pilot projects.

### 3.2.3 Using Public Land and Spaces for Nature

Council-owned lands, including parks, greenways, verges, playgrounds, and underused spaces, offer significant opportunities for native tree planting, pollinator corridors, wildflower meadows, and demonstration projects. These sites are also valuable for engaging communities directly with nature.



### 3.2.4 Supporting Nature-Friendly Land Management

Even without large scale habitat creation, small changes in land management such as delayed mowing, no pesticide zones, wildflower margins, hedgerow planting, and bird and bat box installation can deliver major biodiversity benefits. Community green spaces, churchyards, sports fields, school grounds, and amenity areas offer practical opportunities for nature-friendly management.

### 3.2.5 Filling Knowledge Gaps through Local Recording

Engaging residents, schools, and local groups in wildlife recording is a cost-effective way to build Westmeath's biodiversity knowledge base. Linking with initiatives such as butterfly monitoring, FIT counts, bee tracking, and garden bird surveys through the National Biodiversity Data Centre will help close data gaps and inform conservation decisions.

### 3.2.6 Embedding Biodiversity in Council Work

There is growing recognition within Westmeath County Council of the need to integrate biodiversity into planning, climate action, transport, and community development. This Plan provides a roadmap for doing so, supported by practical tools such as staff training and guidance documents to ensure biodiversity is part of everyday decision-making.

The above opportunities highlight the urgent need to take action on both biodiversity and climate in Westmeath through shared responsibility and coordinated effort.

### 3.3 Nature Restoration on Council-Owned Lands

Westmeath County Council continues to demonstrate its commitment to biodiversity enhancement and nature restoration across council-owned lands. The following examples highlight practical conservation and climate action being implemented at key sites in the county.

#### Belvedere House, Garden & Park

Belvedere Estate is recognised as part of Ireland's National Grassland Trail network, with extensive meadows managed for biodiversity. These high nature value grasslands are maintained through reduced mowing, late-season cutting, and habitat-sensitive management. The Estate also undertakes invasive species control and annual monitoring of the Barn Owl, alongside recording other key species. An entomology survey has been completed to assess invertebrate diversity within the grasslands. Belvedere has also established a polytunnel pilot project to grow native trees from locally collected seed, developing a small-scale nursery to supply planting for the estate and wider community. These measures support biodiversity, contribute to climate resilience, and engage the public in practical nature restoration.



**Clockwise from left:** Biodiversity officer, Belvedere Invasive Species Management Cherry Laurel & Japanese Knotweed treatment, Grasslands Trail Booklet, Belvedere, Belvedere BSBI field trip summer 2025, Tree Nursery 2000 acorns planted, The HUB National Learning Network planting trees.

### Coolure Demesne, Castlepollard

At Coolure Demesne, Castlepollard, the Council manages species-rich calcareous and wet grasslands through conservation grazing and selective scrub clearance to maintain habitat diversity and ecological balance. A survey of semi-natural grasslands has been undertaken to document habitat quality and species composition. Ongoing monitoring of the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, together with regular bird and bat surveys, provides important data on the site's ecological health. These actions support nationally important habitats and species, enhance ecosystem resilience, and contribute to both biodiversity and climate objectives along the shores of Lough Derravaragh.

### Bogganfin, Athlone

Bogganfin is a council-owned green space beside the River Shannon, supporting species rich calcareous and wet grasslands with notable plants such as Blue Fleabane and Wild Marjoram. Part of the site lies within the Lough Ree SPA, highlighting its conservation value. A site-specific management plan is being prepared to guide grassland management and restoration. The area provides important refuge for wildlife in an urban setting and will also serve as a location for citizen science recording. Invasive Cotoneaster is being mechanically removed as part of ongoing nature restoration efforts, while the site continues to function as a valued amenity space for Athlone.



While Belvedere, Coolure and Athlone are featured here as examples, they represent just three of many council-owned sites actively managed for biodiversity and climate resilience across Westmeath. These three initiatives highlight the Council's commitment in restoring and maintaining high-value habitats that benefit both people and nature.

**Clockwise from left (Coolure):** Cinnabar Moth, Marsh Fritillary Butterfly, Marsh Fritillary Webs, Fox, Coolure Calcareous Grassland, Common Blue Butterfly.

**Clockwise from left (Bogganfin):** Five-Spot Burnet moth, Marmalade Hoverfly, Bogganfin Calcareous Grassland, Pyramidal Orchid, Wild Thyme, Common Spotted Orchid, Bogganfin Grasslands.

**The National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023–2030 highlights the vital role that local authorities play in conserving biodiversity and coordinating action at a local level. A County Biodiversity Action Plan provides a focused response to the specific biodiversity issues facing Westmeath.**



Effective action begins with a clear understanding of the challenges and pressures on biodiversity in the county. This plan sets out a framework for protecting and restoring biodiversity through targeted actions that can be delivered locally.

Ireland faces serious challenges in halting biodiversity loss and building a climate-resilient future. Achieving no net loss of biodiversity by 2030 requires urgent, coordinated action. This plan sets priorities for action now, while also helping to inform the direction of future work.

Chapter 4

# Objectives and Actions



# Chapter 4: Objectives and Actions

*This chapter sets out the objectives and actions that will guide Westmeath's biodiversity work over the next five years. These objectives and actions have been developed through a structured process that included a review of national and EU policy, legal obligations, and input from the Westmeath Biodiversity Working Group. They are necessary to achieve the vision of the plan to envision a future where people and healthy ecosystems thrive together, creating a county rich in biodiversity and resilient to climate change and provide a clear framework for its delivery.*

*The objectives and actions respond directly to the challenges and opportunities outlined in previous chapters, including the need to protect the county's rich and varied biodiversity.*

*They also form the basis for annual reporting under the Council's Biodiversity Duty, in line with Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan, and contribute to the fulfilment of statutory obligations under the Wildlife Acts, and the EU Birds and Habitats Directives, and other relevant national and EU legislation which require public authorities to conserve biodiversity and support climate adaptation and resilience in the delivery of their functions.*

## 4.1 Strategic Objectives

This Biodiversity Action Plan builds on the foundation of Westmeath's 2014–2020 plan, with a renewed focus on implementation and measurable outcomes. It reflects the work undertaken to date and sets out the next steps needed to continue protecting and enhancing biodiversity at a local level. The Plan aligns with the Westmeath County Development Plan 2021–2027 and the Westmeath Climate Action Plan 2024–2029, ensuring consistency with wider county-level objectives for sustainable development, climate action, and environmental protection.

This chapter introduces five Strategic Objectives that will guide delivery of the Plan over the next five years. Each objective is supported by a set of specific actions, informed by local knowledge, existing initiatives and the requirements set out in national policy. The strategic objectives are as follows:

1. Support Biodiversity & Build Climate Resilience
2. Raise Biodiversity Awareness in Communities
3. Support Research & Monitoring of Biodiversity Practices
4. Incorporate Biodiversity into All Council Activity
5. Encourage Nature Conservation Projects

Each Strategic Objective is supported by a set of actions. Some actions are marked with an asterisk (\*) to indicate a statutory obligation under Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan. Actions are also ranked by priority for implementation over the five-year period, with a score of 1 indicating high priority and 3 indicating lower priority.

## 4.2 Support Biodiversity and Build Climate Resilience

This objective focuses on actions that protect and restore biodiversity while also supporting climate resilience. It includes restoring and rewetting peatlands and wetlands to improve carbon storage and water management, planting native woodlands in appropriate locations, and conserving species-rich grasslands. The Council will continue to support the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan and develop pollinator-friendly corridors across the county. Nature-based solutions such as riparian buffer zones, wetlands, urban trees, and green infrastructure will be encouraged in both new developments and public spaces. A review of Council-owned lands will help identify areas suitable for biodiversity enhancement, and public education and community involvement will be central to delivering these actions.

## Support Biodiversity and Build Climate Resilience

No.	Actions	Targets	Indicators	Resources/Partners	Score	Deadline
1.1	Support the restoration and rewetting of peatlands and wetlands in Westmeath, in consultation with the community, where appropriate, to improve carbon capture, water management, and biodiversity.	Assist projects at key sites like Crosswood, Cloncrow, Mount Heavey, Carn Park, and Lough Ennell Fen, and help identify and map new ecologically valuable areas.	Progress will be measured by the number of supported sites, updates to the digital database, and reported improvements in biodiversity, habitat quality, and water regulation.	NPWS, Community Groups, State Agencies, Community Wetlands Forum, Hares Corner, LAWPRO, BnM.	1	Ongoing 2031
1.2	Support the planting of native woodlands using climate-resilient tree species in suitable urban and rural locations, following principles like "right tree, right place."	Encourage establishing Native woodlands to sequester carbon and provide habitats for a wide range of species, while also improving ecosystem resilience to climate change.	Progress will be measured by the number of supported planting sites, area covered by native trees, and improvements in habitat quality, biodiversity, and climate resilience.	Westmeath County Council, Farming for Nature, Hedgerow Ireland, Tidy Towns, Community Groups, Businesses. Woodlands of Ireland, Native Woodlands Trust Creation of Woodlands on Public Lands Scheme currently underway.	1	*1 2031
1.3	Continue to support the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan by developing and maintaining pollinator-friendly corridors across urban and rural areas	Create connected habitats that allow pollinators to move more freely across the landscape, reducing the impacts of habitat loss and increasing resilience to climate change	Progress will be tracked through the number of pollinator initiatives supported, mapped corridors created or maintained, and recorded improvements in pollinator activity and habitat connectivity	Westmeath County Council, National Biodiversity Data Centre, Community Groups, Tidy Towns, Women & Men's Sheds.	2	*1 Annual
1.4	Support the restoration and conservation of species-rich grasslands to improve carbon capture and boost biodiversity.	Maintain and review existing sites while identifying and supporting new species-rich grasslands. Encourage reduced chemical use and promote sustainable grazing practices.	Measured by number of existing species-rich grassland sites supported, and new sites identified and restored to boost carbon sequestration and biodiversity.	Westmeath County Council, IFA, DFAM, Farming for Nature, Hedgerow Ireland, Tidy Towns, Community Groups, Businesses.	1	2031
1.5	Implement and support Community-Based Public Education on Biodiversity and Climate Change.	Support citizen science to track climate change impacts on biodiversity. Create and support existing educational programs and campaigns linking biodiversity to climate action.	Number of projects and initiatives developed/ supported and no of communities engaged.	Westmeath Climate & Biodiversity section, LAWPRO, Tidy Towns, Community Groups, Schools, Housing estates, Child care services, Public Participation Network, Library services.	2	2031
1.6	Support nature-based solutions and green infrastructure such as riparian buffer zones, rewilded riverbanks, wetlands, urban trees, green roofs and walls, and mini ponds in development	Promote projects that reduce flood risk, store carbon, and protect or enhance habitats. Encourage and advise on buffer zone planting and fencing, especially in community and council-led initiatives	Progress will be measured by the number of supported projects, green infrastructure features installed or enhanced, and observed benefits for flood mitigation, biodiversity, and carbon storage	Westmeath County Council, Tidy Towns, Community groups, IFI, Westmeath Community Development, LAWPRO, Sports Clubs.	1	2031
1.7	Support a review of Westmeath County Council lands to identify areas suitable for biodiversity enhancement and climate action.	Develop an Action & Enhancement Plan for suitable sites identified through the review process.	Measured by the number of suitable locations identified, and the development of the Action & Enhancement Plan.	WCC	2	Year 1-2
1.8	Work with LAWPRO and Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) to develop strategies for protecting and enhancing river wildlife corridors and riparian zones.	To protect our essential river wildlife corridors and riparian zones.	The number of WCC engagements and strategic goals.	WCC, LAWPRO, IFI	3	Annual

### 4.3 Raise Biodiversity Awareness in Communities

Fostering biodiversity awareness, understanding, and engagement focuses on strengthening public knowledge of nature and supporting meaningful community involvement. It includes promoting available biodiversity resources and funding opportunities, as well as recognising and celebrating the efforts of local communities in creating and managing spaces for nature. Information sharing through the Westmeath PPN and the development of a biodiversity directory and community forum will help connect individuals and groups doing this important work. A county-wide biodiversity conference will provide a platform for learning, networking, and collaboration. Creative engagement will also play a role, with biodiversity-themed events supported through partnerships such as Creative Ireland. Training for Westmeath County Council staff and Elected Members will build internal capacity, while local libraries will continue to play a key role in delivering and promoting biodiversity education and resources throughout the county.

#### Raise Biodiversity Awareness in Communities

No.	Actions	Targets	Indicators	Resources/ Partners	Score	Deadline
2.1	Promote biodiversity awareness by highlighting available resources and funding opportunities.	Support individuals, community groups, and NGOs in accessing funding, building capacity, and strengthening collaboration across the county.	Track annual totals of press releases, social media posts, mailouts, grant applications, engagement sessions, and PPN newsletters focused on biodiversity to measure outreach and network growth.	WCC	3	Annual
2.2	Highlight and celebrate community efforts in creating and managing spaces for nature, and share biodiversity information through local networks and public communications.	To recognise the achievements of community groups and continue to provide supports and assistance.	Measure progress by the number of community biodiversity plans or projects featured on council media platforms each year.	WCC, Leave No Trace (LNT)	2	Annual
2.3	Create an online directory of organisations and groups involved in biodiversity work and support the development of a community biodiversity forum	To strengthen connection, communication and collaboration between all stakeholders.	Creation of an on-line Directory of Biodiversity Stakeholders. No of community forum meetings.	WCC, Community Groups	2	Ongoing
2.4	Host a Biodiversity Conference in County Westmeath.	To create a networking and learning opportunity for all.	Biodiversity Conferences hosted over the lifetime of the plan.	WCC	2	Within 5 years
2.5	Work with Creative Ireland and local initiatives to deliver biodiversity-themed arts events, celebrating collaboration between communities and Westmeath's Heritage, Arts, Climate, Biodiversity, Library, and Archives teams.	Enhance the reach and appeal of biodiversity outreach through creative and accessible events that showcase the work of Local Authorities and the Heritage Council.	Success will be measured by the number of biodiversity-themed arts events held and the level of community engagement in promoting biodiversity through the arts.	WCC and other	2	Annually
2.6	Identify training needs and deliver biodiversity-focused training for Westmeath County Council staff and elected members.	Ensure all staff and officials understand the importance of biodiversity, relevant legal obligations, and best practices for protection and enhancement	The number of training events including workshops delivered within the lifetime of the plan.	WCC	1	Annually
2.7	Support the Westmeath libraries delivering and promoting biodiversity education and resources.	Foster inclusive, community-based biodiversity learning by using libraries as hubs to reconnect people with nature.	The number of biodiversity-themed events hosted by libraries.	WCC	2	Annual

## 4.4 Support Research and Monitoring of Biodiversity Practices

Promoting monitoring and conservation research will help build a stronger understanding of Westmeath's biodiversity and ensure local actions are based on sound evidence. This objective includes carrying out a biodiversity gap analysis to identify where information is missing on habitats, species, and conservation status. Research projects will be commissioned to address these gaps. Strengthening connections with researchers, universities, and partner organisations will support this work, along with continuing to share data from Council-supported projects on public platforms. The plan also includes identifying County Biodiversity Areas (CBA), developing an ecological network across the county, and improving connectivity in collaboration with neighbouring local authorities. All biodiversity projects under this plan will be monitored, helping to build a clear picture of what's working and where further action is needed.

### Support Research & Monitoring of Biodiversity Practices

No.	Actions	Targets	Indicators	Resources/ Partners		Deadline
3.1	Review what we know and don't know about Westmeath's biodiversity, including habitats, species, and protected areas.	Identify knowledge gaps, assess key pressures, and set research priorities. Conduct horizon scanning for emerging policies and projects affecting biodiversity	Completion of gap analysis, identified research priorities, and integration of data into the ecological network GIS.	WCC, NPWS, National Biodiversity Data Centre, Birdwatch Ireland, Bat Conservation Ireland	1	Year 1-2
3.2	Support new studies and surveys to fill knowledge gaps and improve our understanding of local biodiversity.	Complete targeted research projects over the next five years to improve understanding of Westmeath's biodiversity.	Number of research projects initiated and completed, with findings linked to priority knowledge gaps	WCC and others	2	2031
3.3	Maintain and develop links with researchers, educational institutes, organisations and authorities to promote biodiversity and climate.	Facilitate collaboration and knowledge-sharing between academic and biodiversity stakeholders.	Number of active collaborations, new links formed, and biodiversity network activities recorded annually	NPWS, EPA, Teagasc, Climate Action Regional Office, 3rd level institutes	2	Ongoing
3.4	Continue to share biodiversity information from Council-supported projects on platforms the public can access.	To promote and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and biodiversity data sets.	The number of data sets shared with relevant bodies.	WCC, NBDC, NPWS	3	Ongoing
3.5	Develop an ecological network of the county and work to increase connectivity across the networks and collaborate with neighbouring Local Authorities.	To identify, enhance and protect key biodiversity sites and their linkages in the county.	Creation of an ecological network GIS highlighting important habitats, species locations, and connectivity over the lifetime of the plan.	WCC and others.	2	Ongoing
3.6	Identify and map County Biodiversity Areas (CBA) in line with Heritage Council guidelines.	Identify and highlight CBAs in County Westmeath.	Produce a CBA GIS layer to inform key decisions and policy.	Heritage Council & Westmeath Council	2	2026
3.7	Establish a baseline and monitor all biodiversity projects under the Westmeath Biodiversity Action Plan (WBAP).	Ensure each project includes a clear monitoring plan, with results used to inform future initiatives.	Number of projects monitored following relevant guidance documents and national standards.	WCC, Heritage Council, NPWS	2	Annual

## 4.5 Incorporate Biodiversity into All Council Activity

The promotion of biodiversity measures across all sectors of Westmeath County Council is essential to ensuring that nature is considered in everyday decisions and long-term planning. This objective focuses on strengthening how biodiversity is embedded in the Council's work from land management and development to parks, infrastructure, and public engagement. Actions include delivering on the Council's commitments under the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, reducing pesticide use, enhancing parks and green spaces, and safeguarding habitats for birds, bats, and invertebrates. A biodiversity and climate audit of Council lands will inform future work, alongside the development of an Invasive Alien Species Strategy and support for tree and hedgerow management. The Council will continue to use its digital platforms to promote biodiversity initiatives and ensure that planning and project delivery work towards no net loss of biodiversity.

### Incorporate Biodiversity into All Council Activity

No.	Actions	Targets	Indicators	Resources/ Partners	Score	Deadline
4.1	Promote integration of biodiversity into all relevant aspects of the work of Westmeath County Council.	To deliver on a whole-of-council approach to the biodiversity crisis, creation of a biodiversity checklist for project managers.	Establishment of a cross-departmental biodiversity working group, number of meetings held annually, checklist completion, and number of initiatives implemented.	WCC, IFI, NPWS	2	Ongoing
4.2	Make the most of available funding to support biodiversity projects in Westmeath	To provide resources required to meet the biodiversity conservation obligations of the county.	The number of WBAP actions fully resourced.	WCC	1	Ongoing
4.3	Undertake actions to meet and deliver on requirements as set out by the All Ireland Pollinator Plan Council Partner agreement.	To support and promote All-Ireland Pollinator Plan Actions for Councils and monitor resulting changes.	Number of Westmeath County Council pollinator projects, GIS mapping of pollinator-friendly areas, and annual monitoring established at key sites.	WCC, National Biodiversity Data Centre, NPWS	2	* <sup>1</sup> Annually
4.4	Promote the reduction of pesticide use on WCC property in line with the EU Biodiversity Strategy.	Adopt a formal policy to reduce chemical pesticide use by Council staff and contractors, implement alternative practices, and trial no-spray zones.	Annual measurement of pesticide use, percentage reduction recorded, number of no-spray zones established, and reporting on alternatives trialled.	WCC in collaboration with others	3	* <sup>1</sup> Annually
4.5	Develop and implement an Invasive Alien Species (IAS) Strategy for County Westmeath.	Identify, prioritise, and control IAS on council lands, establish a system for mapping and monitoring, and promote a culture of biosecurity among staff.	Number of IAS control projects initiated, areas mapped and monitored, and council staff trained in biosecurity measures.	WCC, National Biodiversity Data Centre, IFI, Others	3	* <sup>1</sup> Ongoing -2031
4.6	Continue to restore and enhance biodiversity of WCC parks and public green open spaces.	Improve habitat quality in recreational areas while creating opportunities for the public to engage with and learn about biodiversity.	The number parks and public spaces managed for biodiversity	WCC in collaboration with others	3	Annually
4.7	Conduct a biodiversity and climate audit of Westmeath County Council landbanks and assets.	Support climate and biodiversity goals by assessing the conservation value and restoration potential of council-owned lands.	Key areas identified for climate adaptation, mitigation, and biodiversity.	WCC, Climate Action Regional Office	2	2031
4.8	Safeguard existing habitats for nesting sites and foraging areas for birds, bats and invertebrates in conservation projects and developments.	Promote wildlife-friendly practices, including artificial lighting guidelines, and collaborate with building owners to protect existing nesting sites.	Number of biodiversity friendly guidance documents developed, and number of local authority developments and engagements incorporating conservation measures annually.	WCC in collaboration with others	1	Ongoing
4.9	Continue to develop the Biodiversity Office's projects and resources on WCC digital platforms.	To maximise the potential of digital platforms and technologies to circulate biodiversity information and materials.	The annual total number of users and page views and accounts reached.	WCC	3	Ongoing
4.10	Support the implementation of the forthcoming WMCC Tree Management Policy and promote best practice in the management of trees and hedgerows across the county.	To protect trees and hedgerows in County Westmeath for the benefit of biodiversity, landscape character and mitigating climate change.	Number of landscape projects with a percentage increase in native tree use above the benchmark. Number of suppliers providing local/native species.	WMC (Roads, Environment, Parks, Planning), Biodiversity Officer, Heritage Council & Others	2	2031
4.11	Promote the cultural and natural value of green and blue spaces such as parks, rivers, lakes, and wetlands in towns and villages across the county, in line with national biodiversity actions.	Support inclusive design, community engagement, and integration of cultural services to enhance the use and appreciation of Green Blue Urban Environment in local biodiversity planning.	Number of plans including actions to enhance Green and Blue Urban Environments biocultural value, and support for biodiversity actions in the Mullingar Green Infrastructure Strategy and Settlement Area Plan.	WCC, LNT, Community, NGOs & Other	3	* <sup>1</sup> 2027
4.12	Ensure Westmeath County Council moves towards no net loss of biodiversity through planning strategies, mitigation, offsetting, and investment in blue-green infrastructure.	Reduce biodiversity loss from development and promote shared responsibility for conservation and restoration.	Use national habitat and species monitoring data (e.g. NPWS reports, distribution maps of key species) to track biodiversity outcomes.	WCC	1	2031

## 4.6 Encourage Nature Conservation Projects

Actions for encouraging and facilitating biodiversity conservation initiatives are key to protecting species and habitats across the county. These actions support the use of locally sourced native trees and plants and encourage communities to develop their own Local Biodiversity Action Plans. The Council will promote and engage with national and regional programmes such as Farming for Nature, Hedgerows Ireland, and Species Action Plans. Additional priorities include working with the Environment Section to promote responsible pet ownership, supporting citizen science initiatives, and contributing to habitat restoration through the Water Framework Directive. Recommendations from recent biodiversity surveys will guide efforts to protect legally protected and Red List species. The Council will also support community-led habitat enhancement projects that contribute to local conservation and climate resilience goals.

### Encourage Nature Conservation Projects

No.	Actions	Targets	Indicators	Resources/ Partners	Score	Deadline
5.1	Promote the use of locally sourced native trees, shrubs, and plants in biodiversity projects.	Engage with local provenance suppliers annually and support community groups in developing native plant nurseries.	Number of local provenance suppliers and community run nurseries established	WCC in collaboration with others, landowners and farmers.	3	*1 Ongoing
5.2	Support local communities with the creation & implementation of Biodiversity Action Plans.	To encourage effective action on biodiversity initiatives within the community.	Number of BAPs produced by Tidy Towns, communities, colleges, churches, nursing homes, sports clubs, pre-schools and schools.	WCC in collaboration with others.	1	Ongoing
5.3	Support and promote the Farming for Nature and Hedgerows Ireland initiatives through resources, awareness, and ongoing engagement with the farming community.	Encourage biodiversity-friendly farming practices and identify suitable council-owned sites for hedgerow demonstration and trial projects.	Number of engagements and initiatives implemented with the farming sector, and increased participation and use of resources.	WCC, NGO'S, Farming communities, Teagasc, IFI and Macra an Feirme and others.	3	Ongoing
5.4	Support and collaborate with national and regional projects, including Species Threat Response Plans and All-Ireland Species Action Plans, among others.	Engage with initiatives such as the EIP Breeding Waders Project, Lough Ennell Catchment Management Plan, Lough Ree Biosphere, and Just Transition Fund peatland restoration projects.	Number of national and regional projects supported or collaborated on.	Tóchar NPWS, Breeding Waders Project, European Innovation Partnership, Birdwatch Ireland, NPWS, Community Work Ireland	1	Ongoing
5.5	Work with the WCC Environment Section to advocate for responsible pet and animal ownership to protect ground-nesting birds and other wildlife.	Promote awareness of the impacts of pets on wildlife, particularly during sensitive breeding seasons	Increased public awareness of wildlife mortality and its effect on population dynamics, as measured through engagement and feedback. Promote awareness campaign on social media platforms, education, signage for vulnerable areas.	WWM	2	Ongoing
5.6	Promote citizen science initiatives through organisations like the National Biodiversity Data Centre, Bat Conservation Ireland, Irish Peatland Conservation Council, and BirdWatch Ireland.	Encourage local communities to participate in biodiversity monitoring and species recording.	Number of local communities actively recording species groups through recognised citizen science programmes.	WCC, National Biodiversity Data Centre, Tidy Towns, Schools, NGO, individuals	2	Annually
5.7	Support initiatives under the Water Framework Directive that help restore biodiversity and habitats for fish and other aquatic species.	To protect and improve the status (including biology, water quality, instream and riparian habitat and hydromorphology) of all waters in Co. Westmeath.	Number of projects and initiatives carried out in collaboration with the Local Authority Waters Programme and other key stakeholders.	WCC, IFI, LAWPRO, EPA	2	Annually
5.8	Implement recommendations from recent county biodiversity surveys and support the conservation of legally protected and Red List species with significant populations in Westmeath.	Enhance and protect local and national biodiversity by acting on survey findings and prioritising species such as Pollan, Narrow-leaved Helleborine, Marsh Fritillary, and Varnished Hook-moss.	Numbers of recommendations implemented from county surveys and other national and regional surveys findings.	WCC, NPWS, IFI and others	1	Annually
5.9	Support the proposed UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Lough Ree & Environs.	To facilitate the implementation of the Lough Ree UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.	Number of collaborations held with the Biosphere partnership.	WCC, NPWS and adjoining Local Authorities Biosphere Partnership	3	Within the life time of the plan.



Chapter 5

# Delivering the Plan

# Chapter 5: Delivering the Plan

*This Action Plan provides a clear and practical framework for protecting and enhancing biodiversity in the county over the next five years.*

*The following chapter sets out how this framework will be delivered highlighting who is involved, how progress will be monitored, and the supports in place to ensure meaningful outcomes.*

## 5.1 Coordinating Delivery

The delivery of this Biodiversity Action Plan will be led by Westmeath County Council, with implementation coordinated across relevant departments and in collaboration with external partners. The Council's Biodiversity Officer will serve as the key point of contact and internal coordinator, supporting delivery of actions and ensuring biodiversity is a key consideration across the organisation. The objectives and actions outlined in this plan have been designed to be achievable and measurable, building on existing work and aligning with national policy frameworks. The role of the Council will include direct project delivery, coordination of stakeholders, provision of technical support, and tracking of progress.

## 5.2 Funding and Resources

The implementation of this plan will require a combination of financial, human, and technical resources. Westmeath County Council will continue to seek funding through national programmes such as the NPWS Local Biodiversity Action Fund and the Heritage Council's biodiversity grant schemes. Where relevant, opportunities for EU funding, private sponsorship, and collaborative applications with NGOs, Educational institutions, or neighbouring local authorities will also be pursued. The Council will provide guidance to local groups and landowners interested in applying for biodiversity-related funding. Securing sufficient financial resources is essential to ensuring actions are delivered in a timely and impactful way.

## 5.3 Partnership and Collaboration

Delivering meaningful biodiversity outcomes depends upon strong collaboration. The Council will continue to work closely with local community groups, landowners, state agencies, environmental NGOs, researchers, and educational institutions. Partnerships will play a key role in co-delivering actions, sharing knowledge, and ensuring that local capacity is supported. The Westmeath Biodiversity Working Group will continue to act as an advisory body, supporting coordination and promoting inclusive, cross-sector engagement. Collaboration with neighbouring local authorities will also be pursued, particularly where habitat networks or species conservation require regional coordination.

## 5.4 Supporting Communities and Stakeholders

Community engagement is central to the success of this plan. Westmeath County Council will support local communities, landowners, schools, and volunteer groups who wish to undertake biodiversity projects. This support may include training opportunities, technical guidance, help identifying funding, and sharing of good practice. The Council will also recognise and celebrate community-led initiatives that contribute to the objectives of this plan. Through practical support and partnership, communities can play an active role in restoring habitats, recording species, and raising awareness about nature in their local areas.

## 5.5 Communication and Outreach

Raising awareness and maintaining public engagement will be essential throughout the life of the plan. Westmeath County Council will provide regular updates on biodiversity actions and progress through its website, social media, and local communication channels. Community stories and successful projects will be shared to inspire wider participation. The Council will also continue to work with libraries, schools, and the Public Participation Network (PPN) to promote biodiversity education and engagement. Links with the Arts, Climate, Heritage, and Library teams will help integrate biodiversity messages into wider public programming. Through ongoing outreach and communication, the Council aims to build a shared understanding of the importance of biodiversity and encourage long-term stewardship across the county, ensuring that engagement is inclusive, accessible, and reflective of its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

The Council will also support national awareness campaigns such as Biodiversity Week and Heritage Week, using these opportunities to engage the public, celebrate local action, and highlight the value of nature in Westmeath. Events during these weeks, including guided walks, talks, workshops, and creative activities, will play an important role in encouraging community involvement and learning.

# Community Engagement





## 5.6 Monitoring, Reporting and Review

Annual progress reviews will be carried out by Westmeath County Council to assess implementation of the actions set out in this plan. These reviews will contribute to the Council's reporting obligations under Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan and will help identify what is working well, what needs adjustment, and emerging opportunities. Monitoring will include both internal evaluation and consultation with partners. At the end of the five-year period, a full review will be undertaken to evaluate overall progress and inform the development of the next County Biodiversity Action Plan. Where possible, biodiversity data from Council-supported projects will be shared with relevant national bodies and platforms to contribute to the broader evidence base.

## 5.7 Celebrating Success and Learning

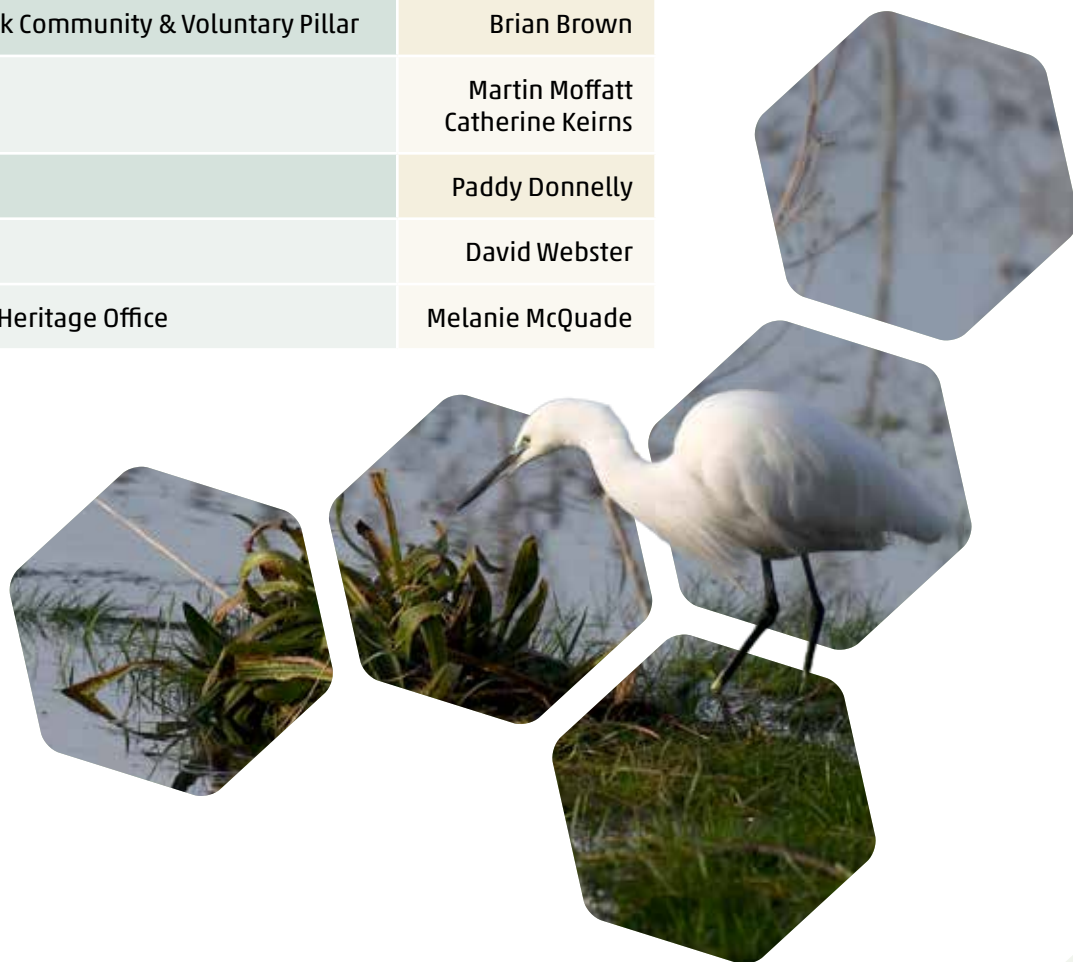
Recognising and sharing success is an important part of sustaining biodiversity work. Westmeath County Council will continue to highlight achievements whether through community actions, Council projects, or collaborative initiatives and promote the learning that comes from both successes and challenges. By sharing these stories and insights, the Council hopes to foster continued engagement, inspire new ideas, and support a learning culture around biodiversity at both local and county level.



## Appendices

### Biodiversity Working Group

Representative Body	Contact Details
Local Authorities Water Programme	David Quinn Basil Manian
National Parks & Wildlife Service	Triona Finnan Damien Murtagh
Midlands Bat Conservation Group	Aine Fenner
Bryological Society Ireland	George Smith
EIP Breeding Waders	Owen Murphy
Community Wetland Forum Ltd	Eugene Dunbar
Birdwatch Ireland	Tom O' Callaghan
Westmeath County Council Climate	Ruth Holton
Westmeath County Council Climate	Hannah Gilligan
Westmeath County Council Forward Planning	Orla McGann
Elective Council Member	Clr Bill Collentine
Public Participation Network Community & Voluntary Pillar	Brian Brown
Inland Fisheries Ireland	Martin Moffatt Catherine Keirns
Irish Farming Association	Paddy Donnelly
Teagasc	David Webster
Westmeath County Council Heritage Office	Melanie McQuade



## Key Policy, Law and Data Sources Relevant to Westmeath

### EU and National Environmental Policy & Legislation

Title	Description	Link
EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030	EU-wide plan to reverse biodiversity loss, restore degraded ecosystems, and protect 30% of land and sea.	<a href="#">Link</a>
EU Nature Restoration Law (2024)	Legally binding restoration targets for Member States to restore 20% of land and sea by 2030.	<a href="#">Link</a>
EU Birds Directive (2009/147/EC)	Protects all wild bird species in the EU and designates SPAs.	<a href="#">Link</a>
EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC)	Protects habitats and species of EU interest and designates SACs.	<a href="#">Link</a>
Ireland's 4th National Biodiversity Action Plan (2023–2030)	National roadmap for biodiversity conservation and restoration.	<a href="#">Link</a>
All-Ireland Pollinator Plan (2021–2025)	Framework to protect pollinators and their habitats across the island of Ireland.	<a href="#">Link</a>
The Wildlife Act 1976 (as amended)	Ireland's core wildlife conservation law, including protection of species and habitats.	<a href="#">Link</a>
Flora (Protection) Order 2022	Legally protects 157 plant species under the Wildlife Act.	<a href="#">Link</a>
National Planning Framework (Project Ireland 2040)	Sets Ireland's long-term spatial and environmental planning vision.	<a href="#">Link</a>
Invasive Alien Species of Union Concern (EU Regulation 1143/2014)	EU regulation requiring monitoring, control, and eradication of high-risk invasive alien species.	<a href="#">Link</a>

## Westmeath County Plans and Strategies

Plan/Strategy	Description	Link
Westmeath County Development Plan 2021–2027	Sets the overall planning framework for land use, housing, heritage, and environmental management in Westmeath.	<a href="#">Link</a>
Westmeath Strategic Heritage Plan 2024–2030	Outlines goals and actions to conserve and promote natural, built, and cultural heritage in the county.	<a href="#">Link</a>
Mullingar Local Area Plan (2024–2030, in preparation)	Local land use and development framework for Mullingar town. Public consultation phase underway.	<a href="#">Link</a>
Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan (2024–2030, in preparation)	Joint LAP between Westmeath and Roscommon County Councils for Athlone urban area.	<a href="#">Link</a>
Westmeath Climate Action Plan 2024–2029	Sets out actions to build a climate-resilient, low-carbon and biodiversity-rich county through community engagement and nature-based solutions.	<a href="#">Link</a>

## Data and Mapping Tools

Tool	Description	Link
NBDC Biodiversity Maps	Mapping of species records and habitats across Ireland.	<a href="#">Link</a>
NPWS Designated Sites Viewer	Interactive map of SACs, SPAs, and NHAs in Ireland.	<a href="#">Link</a>
EPA Geoportal	Environmental data including air, water, and soil quality.	<a href="#">Link</a>
Catchments.ie	Data and tools for river catchments and water quality.	<a href="#">Link</a>

## Photograph credits

John McCauley, Owen Murphy, Gordon Wycherley, Christina Sweeney, Alan Lauder, Mick Flannigan, Eugene Dunbar.

## Graphic Design & Printing

Mind's i Graphic Design Ltd. [www.mindsi.ie](http://www.mindsi.ie)

**The success of this Biodiversity Action Plan will depend on a collective effort to protect, conserve, and restore biodiversity across the county. We are in the midst of a biodiversity crisis that threatens the natural systems we rely on, as highlighted at the beginning of this plan.**

***“We are the first generation to know we are in a biodiversity crisis and the last generation that can do anything about it”—a powerful reminder.***



**This plan is Westmeath's response to that call. Its delivery will rely on collaboration across all sectors, with the Council, communities, and partners working together to protect and enhance biodiversity. Through targeted, locally led actions, the plan aims to make a real and lasting impact. The actions we take now will shape the natural legacy we leave for future generations.**









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