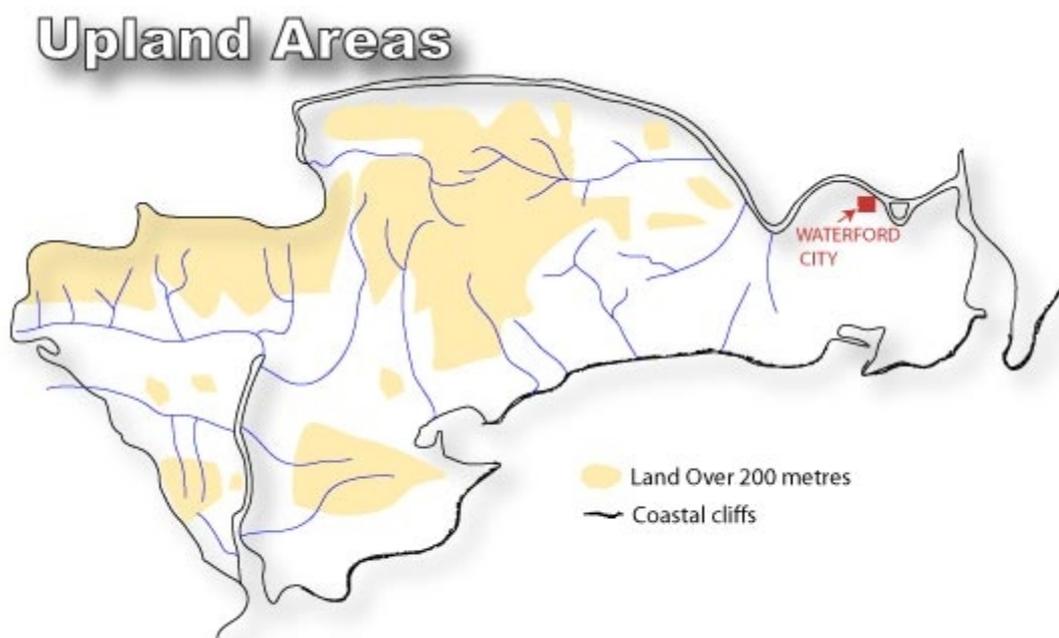


## Upland areas



There are three mountain ranges in County Waterford. The **Knockmealdown mountains**, divided by one of the most beautiful mountain passes in the country, lie in the north-west of the county, on the border with Tipperary which holds the main part of the range. The **Comeragh** and **Monavullagh mountains**, or the Comeraghs as both ranges are collectively known, form a large isolated massif in the heart of Waterford surrounded by rich agricultural land. Although Old Red Sandstone is the predominant rock formation in these mountain ranges, the topography is strikingly different. The flat, almost featureless central plateau of the Comeraghs is ringed by several superb corries, due almost entirely to ice-action or glaciation. By contrast, the Knockmealdowns consist of an impressive row of peaks surrounded by extensive heather moorland with few deep glens or corries.

During the Glacial Period, ice and snow was slow to melt in some mountain ranges, particularly on north- and east-facing slopes, and these glaciers, in slipping slowly down the mountain sides, gouged out rocks and boulders, resulting in precipices at the valley tops and often along the sides with deep basins below. The material scooped out was deposited across the valley lower down and the ice and water residue was retained, forming the spectacular corries found in the Comeraghs. There are no less than 16 corrie lakes in the Comeragh range and one in the Knockmealdowns; all occur at around 400 metres in the coums backed by lofty cliffs.

The higher reaches of the Waterford mountain ranges are to be visited more for their scenery than for their birdlife. The mountain tops, whether the Comeragh plateau or the Knockmealdown ridges, can be bleak, windswept places, even in summer, and are frequently enveloped in mist. It is possible to walk for hours and see very little apart from Meadow Pipit, Skylark and very rarely Red Grouse. Occasionally, a Raven, an early breeder in the Comeraghs, will call and tumble overhead. Once in a while a rarity will appear and there are odd records of Snow Bunting in the Comeraghs in winter. No doubt occasional Dotterel pass through, autumn vagrants from Scottish and northern European breeding grounds (with several records from the 19th century). In early summer, flocks of fast-flying Swifts skim the peat hags of the Comeragh plateau and in late summer, groups of Rooks often leave the lowlands to feed around the mountain slopes. In the autumn, small parties of Golden Plover occasionally appear over the tops, probably on passage to the Waterford wetlands lower down.

The mountain slopes are more productive in terms of birds, the more so as one descends. Boulder-strewn grassy slopes are haunts of Wheatears in summer. Where the Heather *Calluna vulgaris* is dense and bushy, the diminutive Wren will be seen, or more usually heard, throughout both ranges. Stonechats breed on the more vegetated slopes, but always in small numbers. Choughs have been recorded mainly around Coum Mahon and Coumshingaun (Comeragh mountains) in summer, probably wandering non-breeding birds. Scree slopes with plenty of plant cover nearby are habitats used by Ring Ouzels, present in both the Knockmealdowns and the Comeraghs, though these birds are rarely seen. A good supply of young Heather is required by Red Grouse; in the Comeraghs the best areas are the Knockanaffrin and Monavullagh ridges, and they are best found at dawn or dusk in the breeding season when their noisy call will usually

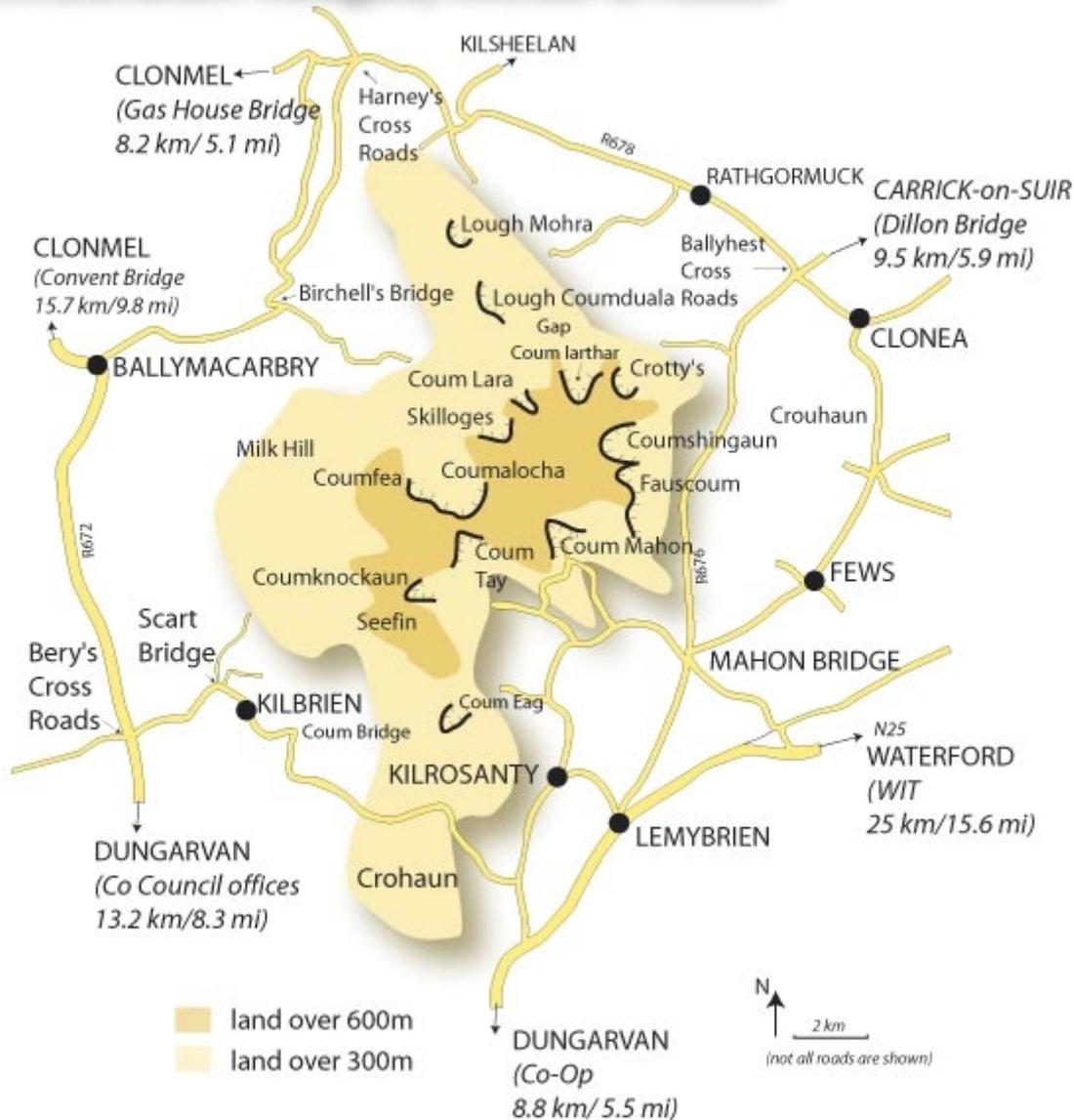
reveal their presence. The northern end of the Comeraghs, in the Nire valley, and the east and west ends of the Knockmealdowns are flat and boggy, a habitat that suits breeding Curlew and Snipe. By contrast, the high inaccessible corrie cliffs of the Comeraghs provide secure, spectacular and mostly undisturbed nesting sites for Peregrine Falcons and Ravens. Kestrels are occasionally seen hovering in search of small prey on the slopes of both ranges, and some pairs breed in the forests in old nests of Hooded Crows. Occasionally, a Merlin will breed in one of these stick nests at the forest edge but these are rare birds in the Waterford mountains. The habitat in the Knockmealdown range is somewhat more suitable for this elusive and fast-flying raptor, but there are annual records from the Comeraghs. Hen Harriers prefer young forestry plantations for breeding and the few early spring records from both ranges suggest that birds are prospecting for breeding sites. However, few if any pairs remain to breed in the Comeraghs, though small numbers remain in the Knockmealdowns.

For most of the year, the soil in both ranges is waterlogged, which, over the centuries, has resulted in extensive blanket bog formation on the mountain plateaus and gentle slopes above 200 metres. The high annual rainfall and humidity in these upland areas combined with peat formation, leaching and infertile soils ensures that the corrie lakes are deficient in nutrients. Biologically, the upland lakes in Waterford are unproductive so that birds are few and none are very permanent. Grey Herons and Cormorants can often be seen, usually singly, and occasionally small flocks of gulls will roost on the lakes. There are one or two breeding records of Mallard near the Comeragh lakes but these are exceptional. Slightly more common at lake edges and in the fast-flowing streams rushing down the valleys is the Irish Dipper, often seen bobbing up and down on mid-stream rocks. Because of the acidic nature of the water, aquatic larvae and nymphs are scarce, so consequently, Dipper territories are large and the species is nowhere numerous. Similarly, Grey Wagtails will often be seen in the streams lower down the valleys, probably more numerous than the Dipper, but are rare at high altitude.

Below 300 metres, Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* grows profusely with Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and the occasional Rowan tree *Sorbus aucuparia* scattered along the hillside. These isolated Rowan trees are often occupied by breeding Hooded Crows. Further down, Holly *Ilex aquifolium* appears and Gorse *Ulex europaeus* is extensive. The foot of the mountain is the best place for birds as it has sufficient vegetation to provide food and shelter from the harsh mountain weather. It is a zone relatively untouched by modern agricultural practices, apart from the grazing of sheep, and at the lower altitudes Cuckoos may be found. Nightjars are also possible in the forest clearings at the edge of the Waterford mountains, but, being nocturnal, they can be particularly hard to find and are seldom seen. Redpolls, Siskins, Long-eared Owls, Woodcock and many other species will be present in the forests and clearings at the lower altitudes in both Knockmealdowns and Comeraghs, though many of these, concealed in the tree canopy, will be hard to detect. Sika deer are also likely in some forestry plantations.

For the botanist, St. Patrick's Cabbage *Saxifraga spathularis* grows profusely in both ranges, particularly at the higher altitudes and the Mossy Saxifrage *S. hypnoides* is also found. With some searching Marsh Hawksbeard *Crepis paludosa* and the Welsh Poppy *Mecanopsis cambrica* will be located, and the Irish Spurge *Euphorbia hyberna* occurs in the Nire Valley. Less wanted perhaps is the expanding bank of Rhododendrons *R. ponticum* around Bay Lough in the Knockmealdowns. Many of the Waterford coums support an excellent heath vegetation with a rich bryophyte flora, characteristic of upland areas with high annual precipitation. Lichens are particularly abundant, with the *Cladonia* species most conspicuous, and some rarities like *Menegazzia terebrata* and *Mycoblastus sanguinarius* have been recorded in the Comeraghs.

## COMERAGH villages, coums & roads



### Comeragh & Monavullagh Mountains

*Habitat:* Upland moorland, crags and lakes; conifer forests on the slopes.

*Main interest:* Upland nesting birds; coniferous forest birds.

*Regular/annual:* Red Grouse, Wheatear, Siskin, Crossbill.

*Scarcer species & rarities:* \*Goshawk, Hobby, Dotterel, Long-tailed Skua, Nightjar, Black Redstart, Ring Ouzel.

*Access and suggested walks:*

The best starting point for the various walks possible in the Comeragh and Monavullagh mountains is from Mahon Bridge. From Waterford, this can be reached by turning off right just beyond the railway crossing almost four km south-west of Kilmacthomas and continuing on for about three km. From Dungarvan, either turn off left just before Lemybrien, from where Mahon Bridge is five km to the north-east, or continue on the main Cork-Waterford Road and turn left just before the railway crossing mentioned above, about five km from Lemybrien. From Carrick-on-Suir take the main Dungarvan road to Ballyhest Cross Roads (10 km), from where the northern end of the Comeraghs can be visited by turning north-west (right) as described later. Otherwise, continue southwards for the coums on the east and south faces of the range. From Clonmel the Nire Valley can be reached by taking the Ardfinnan/Dungarvan road to

Ballymacarbry (15 km) and continue east as described later. The northern side of the Comeraghs can be visited by taking the Rathgormuck road and then to Ballyhest Cross Roads (19 km). Go south from there for the east and south side of the Comeraghs.

### **Farbreaga**

The most direct route to this coum is to go south-west at the shop at Mahon Bridge, and continue on through the village of Kilrossanty five km away. Take the next right turn about three km further on, signposted for Kilbrien and continue up that road until the top of the hill is reached. From Dungarvan, take the main Cork-Waterford road and turn left either before or after the forest beyond the Pike, almost nine km from Dungarvan town, and proceed as for Kilbrien.

On the south side of the road here is Crohaun, which has suitable habitat for many upland birds. At 350 metres, the short walk north-west to the top of the coum is a gentle ramble over boggy terrain. Although not indicated on the 1/2" map, there are high cliffs here, precipitous and dangerous in places. The peak to the north is Seefin at 730 metres, and the col between Seefin and Farbreaga is known as the Barnanmaddra Gap. It is also possible to reach Farbreaga from the road that passes close to Coum Mahon/Coum Tay, a tiring walk across bogland, through Bracken and Gorse with a forestry plantation on the way; probably the best route though, for those in search of birds.

### **Coum Mahon/Coum Tay**

Continue straight up north-west past the shop at Mahon Bridge for just over 3 km and take the sharp right turn at the signpost for the Mahon Falls (farmhouse on the right hand side). There are two car-parking bays on either side of that uphill road, once you pass through the forest and over the cattle grid. The upper one is best for access to the Falls proper.

There is a path all the way in to the waterfalls which makes Coum Mahon the easiest part of the Comeraghs to reach. This ease of access, however, means that this enchanting coum can become quite congested with both cars and people, particularly on weekend afternoons in good summer weather, so avoid at these times. It is possible to climb up at the falls (right-hand or east side) and head south-west from there across to Coum Tay, a distance of over two km across the blanket bog. Alternatively, park your car at the third car-park at the top of the steep road, just a short distance from the Coum Mahon carpark, and walk up the ridge separating the two coums, which also affords excellent views of the Mahon Valley, and head north-west once on top. It is also possible to go straight in from that car-park and access Coum Tay from below. A turret of rock, Leacanthimlay, lies on the west side of Coum Tay, and further south, in around the corner, lies Coumknockaun, one of the smallest of the Comeragh coums, seldom visited. If up top at Coum Tay, a short five minute walk north across the plateau and through the peat hags will provide breathtaking views of the Nire Valley with the Knockanaffrin ridge to the north-east and the Coumalocha directly below at the base of the cliffs. Coumfea, probably out of sight to the north-west, is not too far away and worth a visit.

### **Foilanprisoan/Fauscoum/Coumshingaun**

*Access:* Foilanprisoan, Fauscoum and Coumshingaun can be reached from Killooney forest, some four km north of Mahon Bridge or 7.5 km south of Ballyhest Cross Roads on the Carrick-on-Suir road.

From the carpark at Killooney forest, follow the path to a clearing in the forest. From here, go left for Foilanprisoan/Fauscoum and right for Coumshingaun. There is no defined path in any direction but the walk up to the base of the cliffs at Foilanprisoan or the coums at Fauscoum and Coumshingaun is reasonably straightforward. It is possible to reach the top of the mountain from the extreme left (south side) of Foilanprisoan and walk north from there across to Coumshingaun, passing Foilanprisoan and Fauscoum on the way. This, however, is a long and strenuous walk (around five hours), not to be taken lightly. It is also possible to walk the Coumshingaun horseshoe by climbing up to the plateau by the southern ridge and walking clockwise around the coum from there (three to four hours). However, great care is needed at the west end of the southern ridge where a tricky scramble is required to reach the top, recommended only for those with climbing experience. The view of the coum and the surrounding countryside is simply incredible on a clear day and makes the effort worthwhile. The climb down (or up) at the east end on the northern ridge is safe and without difficulty, or, Crotty's Rock, further north, can be reached relatively easily in 10 to 15 minutes. Due east of Coumshingaun on the far side of the road is Croughaun Hill, heavily afforested, with some nice walks and a good variety of tree-dwelling birds.

Coumshingaun is arguably the finest glacial corrie lake in Ireland and is worth a visit purely for the magnificent lake surrounded by sheer and impressive cliff-faces.

Coumshingaun can be reached more directly from the avenue on the east side of the road about two km further north of the entrance to Kilclooney forest (4.5 km south of Ballyhest Cross Roads). From here, cross the gate on the west side of the road, walk over the shallow stream and continue on up to the ditch. Once over that, there is a well-worn grassy path which leads more or less all the way into the coum, although the path does become less defined nearer the coum proper. This is the best access route for those with family parties interested only in reaching the lake at Coumshingaun and with no intention of climbing up top.

The slope on the way up is all moraine, with boulder after boulder, impressive left-overs from receding glacial ice-waters. On a good day in summer, the lake is majestically beautiful, set in a natural amphitheatre of splendour and silence. It is not possible to walk completely around the lake, unless you are prepared for some scrambling at one point, best left to the experienced climber (there are some excellent rock routes of varying grades in Coumshingaun). There is a cliff in Coumshingaun known as *Carraig an Fhiolair* - "Rock of the Eagle", which probably relates to the use of Coumshingaun as a breeding site by eagles up to 1855, though there is some confusion as to whether the species concerned was the Golden or the White-tailed Eagle.

Fauscoum is perhaps unspectacular by comparison, with steep-sided slopes, few cliffs and little water, and is rarely visited but is equally enthralling, nonetheless. The highest point in the Comeraghs lies overhead on the plateau at 800 metres. Just around the corner on the south side of Fauscoum lie the high-rising cliffs of Foilanprisoon, seldom visited too but spectacular and sun-drenched all day in warm summer weather.

### **Crotty's Rock/Coum Iarthar**

About eight km north of Mahon Bridge on the Dungarvan-Carrick Road, there is a turn off left, three km south-west of the Ballyhest Cross Roads where the Rathgormack and Clonea roads meet the Carrick-Dungarvan road. This narrow road ends in a cul-de-sac at a farmhouse at Coolnalingady where there is limited car-parking by the side of the road. Crotty's Rock, straight up, and Coum Iarthar, further west, can be reached by walking south-west up the slope from the stream further along the lane.

A water-pipe runs all the way down the mountain, and, if located, provides the most direct route to Crotty's Lake. There are two levels in this enclosed coum; at the lower level is the lake, good for trout fishing, and higher up is a grassy ramp backed by steep-sided cliffs with two dominating pinnacles on the east side. The easternmost crag is Crotty's Rock, so called after a famous outlaw, William Crotty, hanged in Waterford in 1742, whose wife apparently jumped to her death from this rock some time after.

From the lake the walk to the top up the slope on the west side, nearest the entrance to the coum, is steep but safe. Once up top, Coum Iarthar is but a short 10 minute walk to the west. This coum is also referred to as the Boolas, probably an abbreviation of Boolacloghagh, the highest point in the townland. In the distance, to the north-west, lies the Knockanaffrin Ridge separated from Coum Iarthar by a low pass known as the Gap. From the plateau at Crotty's Rock, Coumshingaun can be reached by walking due south, which takes about 15 minutes and is recommended. On the way, Iske Solais, an appropriately named stream, cascades down the mountainside through a deep glen between the two coums.

### **Lough Coumduala/L. Mohra**

Lough Coumduala, or Quinlan's Lake, the source of the Clodiagh river, and Lough Mohra may be the least impressive of the Comeragh coums but, nevertheless, the Knockanaffrin Ridge, which takes in both coums along its length, offers an invigorating walk with splendid views on either side.

At the northern end, a good starting point is the ridge near Harney's Cross Roads, above Glenpatrick. This lies about 10 km north-west of Rathgormuck village which can be reached by turning left at the Ballyhest Cross Roads, 11 km north of Mahon Bridge. Alternatively, take the first left turn after Rathgormuck and then the second left turn on that road which ends in a cul-de-sac; there is a path into the Gap, also a good point from which to walk the Knockanaffrin Ridge from its southern end.

The Knockanaffrin Ridge can be walked in about four hours and on a good day breathtaking views may be obtained of the surrounding countryside. Lough Mohra and Lough Coumduala, on their own, are best reached from Curaheen, by taking the first left turn north-west of Rathgormuck and continuing on this winding road until it turns sharply right. Coumduala is to the south-west (one hour) and Lough Mohra is a slightly longer walk (over one hour) to the north-west.

### **The Nire Valley**

From Rathgormuck, go north-west for just over 9 km to Harney's Cross Roads and take a left turn there. Continue south, uphill and downhill, for four km and veer left at that junction. A short distance further on (1.7 km), cross the white bridge over the Nire river, veer left there and the Nire carpark is then five km away. From the southern end of the range, it is probably best to go to Ballymacarbry from Kilbrien and turn right there at Melody's pub, and right again about five km away at the white bridge, up along the Nire river to the aforementioned carpark. From Dungarvan or Clonmel, take the main Dungarvan-Clonmel road to Ballymacarbry and go east from there.

The Nire Valley can now be explored on foot in any direction from this point. To the south-east from the car park lie the Sgilloge Loughs. There are two lakes here, Lough Coumstelloge More and L. C. Beg (these names have become anglicised over the years, hence the different forms of spelling). The cliffs rise steeply from the edge of the lakes and a small waterfall cascades down from the top. The Coumalocha, to the south, entails a longer walk from the carpark to this massive coum, the widest in the Comeraghs. The almost rectangular Lough Coumfea should also be visited, a short distance due west of the Coumalocha. The Knockanaffrin Ridge, to the north-east, can also be reached from the Nier carpark; Coum Iarthar and Crotty's Rock lie almost due east through the Gap.

## Knockmealdown Mountains

*Habitat:* Upland moorland, crags and lakes; conifer forests on the slopes.

*Main interest:* Upland nesting birds; coniferous forest birds.

*Regular/annual:* Hen Harrier, Red Grouse, Wheatear, Siskin, Crossbill.

*Access:* The Knockmealdown Mountains lie in the north-west of the county and can be reached by heading north from Lismore (the road by the petrol station, north of Lismore bridge). There is an An Oige youth hostel on this road at Glengarra or Cappoquin (go east out of the town and take the Mount Melleray road but do not turn right for Mt. Melleray further on; continue on north-east). If the eastern end of the Knockmealdowns are to be investigated, then it is best to take the Mt. Melleray road and head north beside the Glennafallia river up to Knocknafallia at 400 metres.

*Further details:*

The roads out of Lismore and Cappoquin meet near a bridge over a stream, where there are vigorous stands of Rhododendrons. From here to the Vee, on the Waterford-Tipperary border, the extensive forestry plantations and moorland on either side of the road are worth investigating for upland birds. There are many possible walks around the slopes, with the added advantage of the road nearby. Knockmealdown, not far from the road and a safe walk, at just over 800 metres is the highest peak in Waterford, with excellent views from the top. The area around Monard and the Three Doons is good habitat for Hen Harriers with several records in recent years. For those capable of a long strenuous walk (5 hours or more), the journey across the Knockmealdowns, beginning at Knockmeal in the eastern end of the range, past the peaks at Knocknafallia, Knocknagnauv, Knockmealdown and ending at Sugarloaf Hill, just above the Vee road, is interesting and varied. On the Tipperary side of the border lies Bay Lough which has a narrow path leading down to it and is worth a visit.