

Habitat and Heritage on Granamore Hill

23 August 2025

When members of the West Wicklow Environmental Network gathered at the foot of Granamore Hill, near Hollywood, on Saturday 23 August for the WWEN's annual Heritage Week outing, the bright tormentil flowers underfoot provided a striking reminder of the interconnectedness of livelihood and landscape.

A member of the rose family, the yellow tormentil, abundant in the Wicklow Hills and long celebrated for its curative powers, was the first botanical plant to be illustrated in a published work in Ireland. However, the 1729 pamphlet in which tormentil appeared showcased neither the plant's visual attractiveness nor its nature value but instead focused exclusively on its industrial potential in the tanning of leather.

The story of tormentil is a story of the deep and complex interdependence between humans and their natural environment, a story brought further to life over the course of a wonderful morning (and – for an especially enthusiastic few – afternoon) by Granamore farmer Denis Halpin, Brian Dunne from ACRES Leinster, Ruairí Mac an Tuile of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Helen Lawless of the WWEN and Mountaineering Ireland

Denis Halpin, who grew up at the foot of Granamore, is one of the farm shareholders on Granamore Commonage, once part of the estate of Lord Waterford and now falling within the boundaries of Wicklow Mountains National Park. Denis led the WWEN group through time in a heritage walk that took in an imposing mass rock, the ruins of a pre-famine cottage and the traces left in the landscape by centuries of farming and human habitation. The group saw the best of the Wicklow Hills in the rich plant and animal life of the heath and bog habitats, sampling fraochans and bogberries and observing frogs, bees and butterflies among the purple heather and yellow gorse while overhead red kites, buzzards and even a hovering kestrel kept watch over the hill.

The group also bore witness to the wind-borne encroachment of sitka spruce from nearby commercial forestry, to the overabundance of bracken and the dearth of mature native trees, and to the gashes in the hillside where harmful human and animal activity has stripped the surface of the bog, lowering the water table and destabilising the peat, leading to erosion and landslides and resultant loss of carbon into the area's rivers.

Denis Halpin is one of a number of local farmers who has been working with agricultural and ecological experts to address damaged and vulnerable habitats on Granamore Hill and to implement a model of farming and land management that aims for a balance and positive symbiosis between farming and biodiversity. Agri-environment expert Brian Dunne outlined to the WWEN group the aims and structure of the ACRES project and its forerunner SUAS, both designed to encourage and empower farmers to protect and enhance biodiversity on their land. The programmes operate through actions by farmers that include the sustainable management of heather and gorse, grazing management and the well-planned planting of native trees for biodiversity, water quality and ground stability. These agri-environmental schemes and their practical implementation on Granamore Hill are an active illustration of

the mutual benefits of farming for and with nature and of the inter-dependence of people and place in the Wicklow Uplands.

In the afternoon a smaller group made its way further up the hill to view the bog restoration work being led by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) with support from volunteers from Mountaineering Ireland and Rewild Wicklow. The NPWS and volunteer teams have constructed a series of stone, wood and natural fibre dams – more than 2,000 across four sites in the Wicklow Mountains, with over 600 on Granamore Hill – to slow water and prevent peat loss from the damaged bog. Ruairí Mac an Tuile of NPWS and Mountaineering Ireland Volunteer Paul Barron explained how these gully dams, built from materials dropped ahead of time by helicopter, slow the flow of water and trap the peat, allowing new life to establish and grow. Some of the gully dams visited by the WWEN group were built less than a year ago and hugely encouraging results – including the retention of peat at the dams, water gathering in pools at dam sites and the (re)growth of sphagnum moss and the reappearance of pond insects in these newly formed pools – are already visible. There are long years ahead before the water table returns to a level needed to assure the future of the bogs and to protect the stability and biodiversity of Granamore Hill but these early positive developments bring much-needed hope to those who care for, care about and depend on both Granamore Hill and the wider area of Wicklow's uplands.