

Irish Species Project - Cowslip - Laois - 2014-2015

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The Botanical Society of Ireland carried out a Cowslip (*Primula veris*) survey in Laois as part of the Irish Species Project. The main objectives of this project were to improve our understanding of the distribution of several selected plant species of particular interest and to stimulate recording activity, obtaining records of selected species

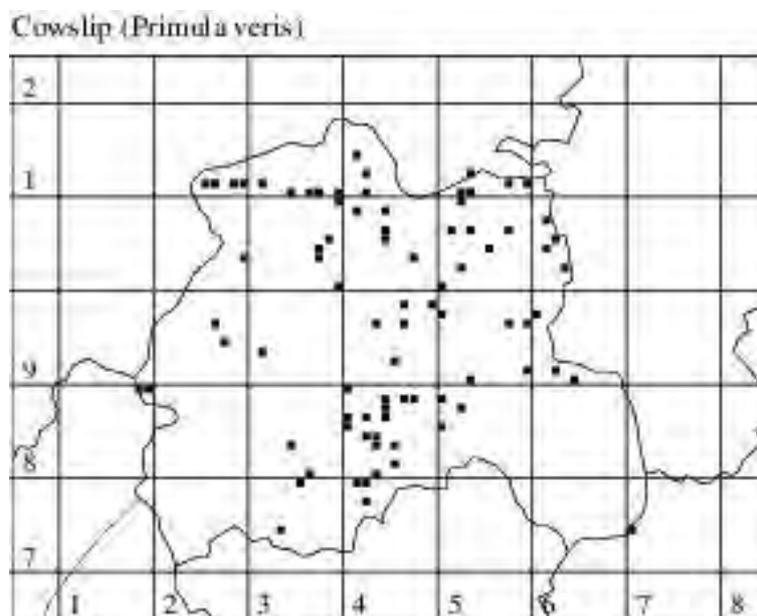
(http://www.bsbi.org.uk/Irish_Species_Project_John_Faulkner.pdf). The selected species, including Cowslip, were scarce but not rare, thought to be in decline and easily identifiable. Cowslips are a typical species of calcareous grassland and have a widespread distribution in the midlands of Ireland including Laois. This is to be expected as Laois has limestone bedrock and is predominately made up of Limestone-based sub-soils and soils, although not all regions.



Cowslip (*Primula veris*)

We took part in this survey. Part of the survey was to re-visit locations in Ireland where Cowslips had previously been recorded, and see if the plants were still there and how they were doing. The site we had to check was in Ballydavis Townland, north-east of Portlaoise. The previous record was made in 1987 by Peter Foss. This site was not located again (the area being dominated by improved grassland and farmland). However, we decided to spend some time making records of Cowslip from around the county. I planned to collect records when driving around the county and on my commute back and forth to work, taking different routes home. We also circulated a message on the Co. Laois Heritage Facebook page about our survey.

We collected 83 records of Cowslips in total and several individuals who had seen our request on Facebook also sent us records from their locality around the county (see Map 1 showing all records collected during the survey as well as some recorded collected during the Laois Habitats Survey 2005-2009). These included records such as 'on the road verge at Poorman's Birdge, Abbeyleix,' and 'in the graveyard at Emo'. Cowslips are quite well distributed through Co. Laois, although there are still some gaps. New records were collected from three hectads (10 km² grid squares) where there had previously been no records of Cowslip. Records were also collected from hectads where there had been no records since 1969 or for a longer period. Fewer records in the SW and SE part of the county can be partially attributed to surveyor bias as these areas were visited less frequently or not at all. Some gaps can be attributed to environmental factors, such as the upland area of the Slieve Bloom Mountains (sandstones), which is covered in bog, heath and conifer plantation. However, some still turned up on a roadside verge where imported road material (from Limestone quarries of the lowlands?) or more probably 'imported' glacial till, may have influenced distribution. A large gap is also present in the SE of the county and this is influenced by the pre-dominance of intensive cereal production and other agriculture in this part of the county (Barrow floodplain) and unsuitable sub-soils found over the Castlecomer Plateau (sandstone and shale based). There are fewer potential habitats for Cowslip in the lowlands of the Barrow floodplain as much of the land is intensively improved farmland. However, no doubt there are more records waiting to be made and it is planned to continue recording Cowslip and collect records from un-visited parts of Laois.

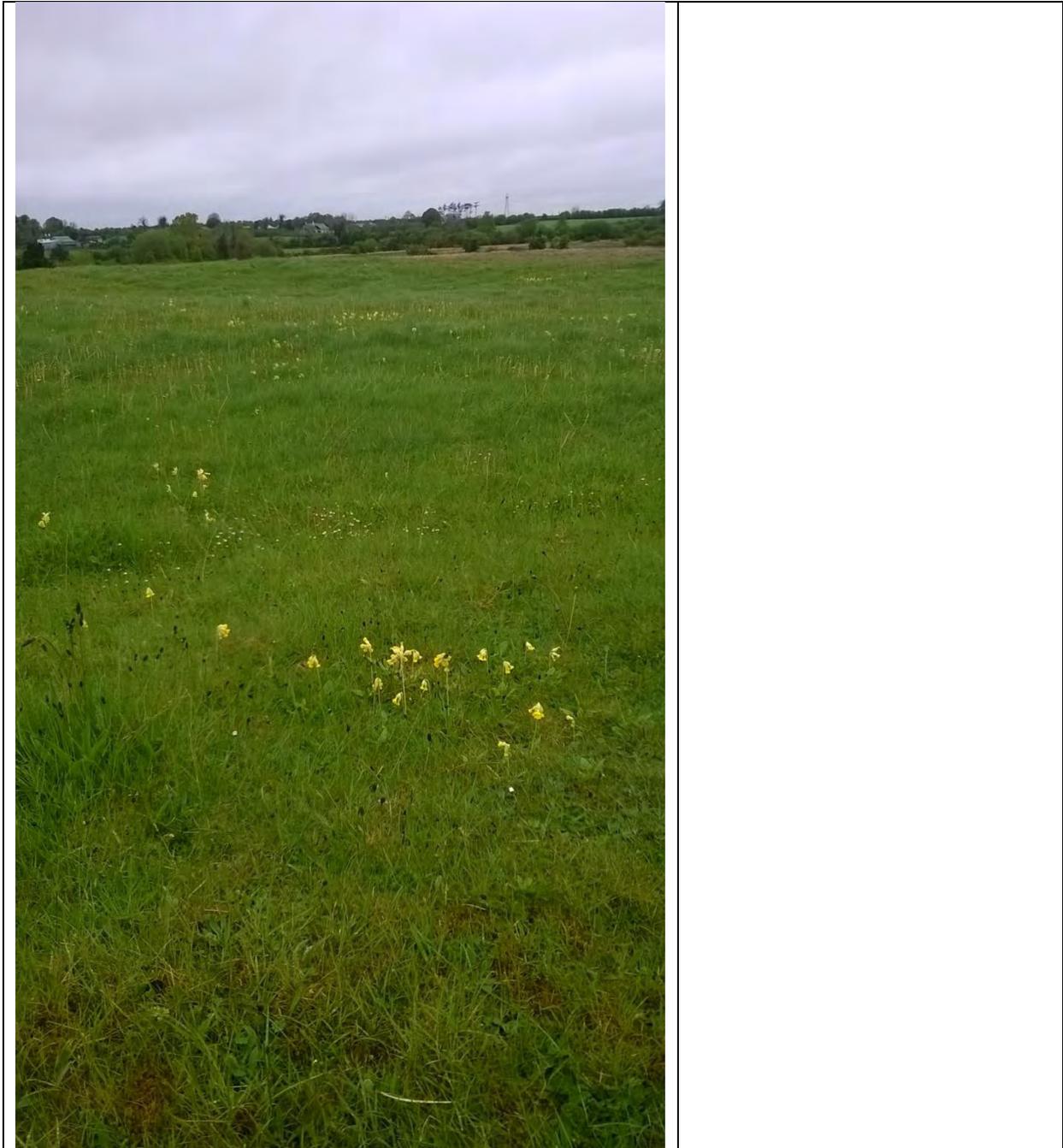


Map 1 of Cowslip records collected during 2014-2015.

The majority of records collected in 2014 and 2015 were on road-side verges, particularly on verges where grass is maintained or has an open sward. This obviously reflects the recording effort and the time spent driving around Laois. Other records came from un-managed grassy banks along roadsides, in graveyards, in private lawns, along the canal and verges along railways. They are also present (and locally frequent) on Bord na Mona cutaway on sites (Coolnamona and Coolnacarten) where underlying sub-soils (mainly limestone-based mixed till glacial material) have been exposed and are being colonised by typical calcareous grassland species.

It seems that Cowslips are now quite rare in agricultural grassland, mainly as a result of more intensive agriculture. Only one old pasture with Cowslips was recorded in Abbeyleix (see picture). However, it was more difficult during recording to pin-point old meadows where Cowslips could be present and this is why the more easily recorded records along road-sides dominated. It is

interesting that Cowslips have now colonized the lawn of the new school (South School) in Abbeyleix (open only 5 years). Cowslips are also quite well distributed on verges along the N7 motorway opened in 1997. So perhaps they still have opportunities to remain part of the flora of Co. Laois in grassland and emerging habitats that will not be intensively managed in the future. Many thanks to all those who contributed records.



Cowslips in meadow outside Abbeyleix.