

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: SKERRIES ISLANDS SPA

SITE CODE: 004122

The Skerries Islands are a group of three small uninhabited islands situated between 0.5 km and 1.5 km off the north Dublin coast. Shenick Island and St. Patrick's Island are of similar size, with Colt Island being somewhat smaller. Shenick Island is of most interest geologically, being composed of Ordovician volcanic siltstones and shales on the boundary between the Carboniferous and the Silurian. All are low-lying islands, with maximum heights from 8 m to 13 m above sea level. There are the remains of a Martello Tower on Shenick Island and an early christian church on St. Patrick's.

St Patrick's Island and Colt Island have low cliffs, while Shenick Island has more extensive expanses of intertidal rocky shore and sand flats. Shenick also has a shingle bar and is connected to the mainland at low tides. The vegetation of the islands is dominated by rank grasses, brambles and species such as hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*). The seas surrounding the islands, to a distance of 200 m, are included in the site.

The islands are of importance for both breeding seabirds and wintering waterfowl.

A survey of breeding seabirds on St Patrick's Island, the main seabird island, in 1999 recorded the following: Fulmar (10 pairs), Cormorant (558 pairs), Shag (100 pairs), Lesser Black-backed Gull (1 pair), Herring Gull (150 pairs) and Great Black-backed Gull (50 pairs). Shenick Island has breeding Fulmars (25 pairs in 1999), Herring Gulls (120 pairs in 1996) and Great Black-backed Gulls (25 pairs in 1996). Large gulls also breed on Colt Island but there has been no census in recent years. The Cormorant population, which was only established in the early 1990s, is of National Importance and when taken together with the nearby associated colonies on Lambay and Ireland's Eye, this group comprises about 35% of the total Irish population and is of International Importance. The Shag population is also of National Importance as are the Herring Gull and Great Black-backed Gull populations. Other breeding birds include Shelduck, Ringed Plover and Oystercatcher (several pairs of each).

In winter, the islands regularly support a range of waterfowl species. The following counts are the average annual peaks over the five winters 1995/96 to 1999/00: Cormorant (391), Brent Goose (242), Wigeon (205), Mallard (240), Oystercatcher (463), Ringed Plover (66), Golden Plover (240), Grey Plover (15), Lapwing (238), Purple Sandpiper (46), Dunlin (42), Snipe (27), Curlew (327), Turnstone (242), Black-headed Gull (110), Herring Gull (560), Great Black-backed Gull (250). The Brent Goose population is of International Importance, while the populations of Cormorants, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone are of National Importance. The islands are also a regular wintering site for Short-eared Owls, with several recorded in most winters.

The birds of the Skerries Islands have been monitored regularly since the 1980s. Shenick Island became a BirdWatch Ireland Reserve in 1987 and some management for the benefit of the birds has taken place.

The Skerries Islands SPA is of high ornithological importance for both breeding seabirds and wintering waterfowl, with six species having populations of National Importance. In addition there is an internationally important population of Brent Goose. Golden Plover and Short-eared Owl, EU Birds Directive Annex I species, occur regularly in winter.