SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: DOWNPATRICK HEAD

SITE CODE: 000494

Downpatrick Head, in Co. Mayo, is formed of yellow-coloured Carboniferous sandstone which is bedded horizontally and stands as vertical cliffs around the headland and its outlier, Doonbrista. Apart from this stack, the sea has eroded several narrow gashes – some of them are still roofed as caves, occasionally with blow-holes.

The vegetation around exposed sites is predominantly a plantain sward and it gives way eastward to fescue grassland with Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) and Distant Sedge (*Carex distans*). Southwards, acid grassland is found beyond a 'flushed' belt of Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*), Meadow Thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*), and eyebright (*Euphrasia* spp.).

The site is chiefly noted for its seabird colony, which has a documented history going back to the 1890s. In 1981 the following were recorded: Fulmar, 118 pairs; Kittiwake, 1,185 pairs; and Guillemot, 740 individuals.

Razorbill numbers had declined from 46 individuals in 1972 to 7 individuals in 1980, but increased to 20 individuals in 1987. In 1981, c.10 pairs of Herring Gull and c.5 pairs of Great Black-backed Gull were nesting on Doonbrista. In 1987 17 pairs of Great Black-backed Gull and 3 individual Shags were recorded.

Downpatrick Head provides some spectacular and accessible coastal scenery which illustrates marine erosion and the structure of sedimentary rocks. Its nesting seabirds are visible, especially on Doonbrista and the eastern side of the Head. The site therefore has considerable education value.

6.11.2009