SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: ERNE ESTUARY/FINNER DUNES

SITE CODE: 000139

The Erne Estuary/Finner Dunes occupies the area immediately west of Ballyshannon, Co Donegal and is an amalgamation of two former Areas of Scientific Interest, the Erne Estuary and Finner Dunes. The area is underlain by Carboniferous limestone, shale and sandstone, but recent blown sand and other deposits mask much of the solid geology under the site.

Much of the site is composed of a complex of intertidal habitats such as mud and sand flats, sandy and shingle beaches and sea bays, but in places a fringe of saltmarsh occurs on the shoreline. Common plants in these situations are Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*), Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*) and Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*). Brown seaweeds (*Fucus* spp.) are often abundant on rocks low down the shore.

A large area of sand dunes occupies the southern side of the site. Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) is very evident there. Younger dunes support Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*), Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*) and an abundance of the moss *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*. Parts of the stable dunes are herb-rich, with Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Wild Pansy (*Viola tricolor*), Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) and White Clover (*Trifolium repens*) among the common plants. A scrub of Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) is developing on the older dunes, while wetland communities occur in wetter dune hollows. Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*), Marsh-marigold (*Caltha palustris*) and Marsh Horsetail (*Equisetum palustre*) are frequent in these localised wetlands.

Small areas of cliff, heath, fen and reed-bed give further habitat diversity to the site.

The site is particularly important as a feeding area for waterfowl. Two species occur at nationally important levels, namely Red-breasted Merganser (32, average peak 1984/85 - 1985/86) and Sanderling (93, average peak 1984/85 - 1986/87). Other birds present in significant numbers include Cormorant (41), Wigeon (60), Teal (73), Long-tailed Duck (15), Oystercatcher (96), Ringed Plover (35), Lapwing (44) and Dunlin (61). (All average peaks are from 11 counts made over 2 seasons between 1984/85 and 1985/86).

In addition to these winter figures a very large congregation of Red-breasted Merganser occupies the area in late Summer during the annual moult, with 350 recorded on 24/8/85 and 657 on 16/8/86. Cormorants are also present in large numbers in autumn, with 250 recorded on 25/8/85. The Long-tailed Ducks are probably part of the same flock recorded for Bundoran. There was an additional count of 100 Sanderling on 17/12/87, giving a three year peak of 93.

Erne Estuary/Finner Dunes contains good examples of a number of coastal habitats and, furthermore, provides important feeding grounds for several waterfowl species.

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