

Site Name: Inagh River Estuary SAC

Site Code: 000036

The Inagh River Estuary is an estuarine channel that flows westwards to the sea from Ennistimon, in the south-west of Co. Clare. The site includes the estuaries of both the Inagh and Dealagh Rivers. These channels meander through a wide, flat valley, which is sheltered from the sea by an extensive sand dune system to the west. Low undulating hills surround the valley, giving it a secluded nature. The soils vary from gleys to peats.

The site is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) selected for the following habitats and/or species listed on Annex I / II of the E.U. Habitats Directive (* = priority; numbers in brackets are Natura 2000 codes):

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| [1310] <i>Salicornia</i> Mud |
| [1330] Atlantic Salt Meadows |
| [1410] Mediterranean Salt Meadows |
| [2120] Marram Dunes (White Dunes) |
| [2130] Fixed Dunes (Grey Dunes)* |

A diverse mosaic of habitats occurs within the site, ranging from coastal dune system, estuarine channel and its associated saltmarsh habitat, to freshwater and terrestrial habitats further inland. The bulk of the site is made up of low-lying wet grasslands.

Saltmarsh occurs along the tidal section of the valley. Common species here include a mixture of Plantains (*Plantago maritima*, *P. coronopus*) and Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), with lesser amounts of Sea Milkwort (*Glaux maritima*), Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*) and glassworts (*Salicornia* spp.). In places the glassworts extend out onto the intertidal sands.

Owing to golf course development, only a small area of intact sand dune remains within the site. Some Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) dunes occur at the tip of the sandy peninsula near O'Brien's Bridge. These support species such as Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*), Sand Couch (*Elymus farctus*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and Sea Sandwort (*Honkenya peploides*). A small area of fixed dunes occurs north of the channel. The nutrient-poor soils here support a diverse flora which includes Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Quaking-grass (*Briza media*) and Early Marsh-orchid (*Dactylorhiza incarnata*).

Two small areas of deciduous woodland are found further inland towards Ennistimon town. A wet woodland, dominated by Willows (*Salix* spp.) and Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*), occurs south of the river adjacent to Ivy Cottage. A narrow band of dry deciduous woodland, known as "The Glen", supports a mixture of Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) with occasional Oak (*Quercus* sp.) and Elm (*Ulmus* sp.). A scenic waterfall located at Ennistimon town adds to the interest and diversity of the site.

An expanse of wet grassland vegetation dominates much of the valley floor supporting an abundant cover of Rushes (*Juncus* spp.), along with lesser amounts of Sedges (*Carex* spp.), Plantains, Clover (*Trifolium* spp.), Buttercups (*Ranunculus* spp.) and Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*). These grasslands provide ideal feeding and sheltering grounds for wildfowl, and a range of bird species commonly use this area. A small flock of Greenland White-fronted Goose formerly used the site during the winter months. The main waterfowl species now using the area are Wigeon (754), Teal (115), Mallard (67), Oystercatcher (148), Ringed Plover (53), Lapwing (657) and Curlew (211) (data for winters 1995/96 to 1997/98). Part of the site has been managed as a Wildfowl Sanctuary since 1989.

This is a large site with a range of coastal, tidal and terrestrial habitats that are of considerable ecological interest, five of which are listed under Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The extensive and relatively secluded low-lying wet grasslands provide a natural and legally protected refuge for wildfowl.