

**Site Name: Ballymacoda (Clonpriest and Pillmore) SAC**

**Site Code: 000077**

This coastal site stretches north-east from Ballymacoda to within about 6 km of Youghal, Co. Cork. Though moderate in size, it has a good diversity of coastal habitats, including several listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive.

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):

- [1130] Estuaries
- [1140] Tidal Mudflats and Sandflats
- [1310] *Salicornia* Mud
- [1330] Atlantic Salt Meadows
- [1410] Mediterranean salt meadows (*Juncetalia maritimi*)

The site comprises the estuary of the Womanagh River, a substantial river which drains a large agricultural catchment. Part of the tidal section of the river is included in the site and on the seaward side the boundary extends to the low tide mark. The inner part of the estuary is well sheltered by a stabilised sandy peninsula (Ring peninsula). Intertidal mudflats and sandflats, which form part of the overall estuarine habitat, are well represented. The sediment types vary from muds to muddy sands in the inner part, to fine rippled sands in the outer exposed part. The macro-invertebrate fauna of the intertidal flats is well-developed, with the following species occurring: *Corophium volutator*, *Hediste diversicolor*, *Arenicola marina*, *Macoma balthica*, *Scrobicularia plana*, *Cerastoderma edule* and *Lanice conchilega*. In the more sheltered areas the intertidal flats are colonised by mats of green algae (mostly *Enteromorpha* spp.), with brown seaweeds occurring on the rocky shores of the shingle spits.

The main channel is flanked by saltmarshes and wet fields, much of the latter being improved for agriculture. The saltmarshes are mainly classified as Atlantic salt meadows, with such species as Sea Purslane (*Halimione portulacoides*), Lax-flowered Sea Lavender (*Limonium humile*) and Sea Milkwort (*Glaux maritima*). A large area of Mediterranean salt meadows is found on the island at Clonpriest East. This saltmarsh is well-established and has a well-developed topography with a highly representative vegetation cover. There is some saltmarsh dominated by dense Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*). This is a typical grassy upper Mediterranean salt meadow community and is located along the terrestrial grassy ridge and represents one of the upper saltmarsh communities in the overall saltmarsh zonation. The habitat is not

grazed and a generally tall sward height is present. Other species present include frequent Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and smaller amounts of Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Saltmarsh Rush (*Juncus gerardii*), Common Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia officinalis*), Sea Milkwort, Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*) and Sea Arrowgrass (*Triglochin maritima*). Curled Dock (*Rumex crispus*) is also present on some mounds.

A similar community is also found in the established saltmarsh along the west side of The Duck. This community also contains Parsley Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe lachenalii*) and Distant Sedge (*Carex distans*). Sea Rush occasionally extends its distribution into a transitional zone landward of the Mediterranean salt meadow that is dominated by Common Couch (*Elymus repens*). There is also some mosaic type vegetation present with less frequent cover of Sea Rush inter-mixed with a mid-marsh *Armeria-Plantago* sward. The Sea Rush clumps are present on small grassy tussocks with Red Fescue and Sea Milkwort. Other species present in this vegetation community include Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*), Lax-flowered Sea Lavender, Saltmarsh Rush and Sea Purslane (*Atriplex portulacoides*). This community has a well-developed salt pan topography. Small amounts of Common Cordgrass (*Spartina townsendii*) are found within this community within some of the pans.

A rarer sub-type of Mediterranean salt meadow with Borrer's Saltmarsh-grass (*Puccinellia fasciculata*) as an indicator species is present at this site. This is a very notable population of this rare species, which is listed on the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015 and is also listed in the Red Data book. The species is only found from seven 10km<sup>2</sup> squares along the Barrow Estuary, Wexford and Dublin shorelines since 1960. The Borrer's Saltmarsh-grass is present in a narrow band of saltmarsh developing along the upper extent of tidal inundation in the area behind the embankment.

Part of the site is also a Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds; the main interest of the area lies in its waterfowl, with flocks of up to 20,000 regularly present during winter (e.g. 5 year mean peak, 1995/96-1999/00 = 24,784). A total of 107 wetland species have been recorded from this site. Of particular note is that the site supports an internationally important population of Black-tailed Godwit (899, average peak 1995/96-1999/00). In addition, it supports nationally important populations of a further 15 species (all figures are average peaks for the 5 winters 1995/96 to 1999/2000): Shelduck (150), Wigeon (1,232), Teal (1,170), Ringed Plover (236), Golden Plover (14,480), Grey Plover (688), Lapwing (5,893), Knot (378), Sanderling (147), Dunlin (4,410), Bar-tailed Godwit (792), Curlew (1,621), Redshank (511), Greenshank (24) and Turnstone (191). The presence of large flocks of Golden Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit is of particular note as these species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. A range of other species have populations of regional or local importance, including Brent Goose (100), Shoveler (29) and Oystercatcher (682). The site is also notable for supporting large concentrations of gulls in autumn and winter. Principal species are Black-headed Gull (2,320), Common Gull (1,220), Lesser Black-backed Gull (6,285), Herring Gull (128) and Great Black-backed Gull (455).

Much of the land adjacent to the estuary has been reclaimed and is subject to intensive agriculture, with cattle grazing and silage being the most common land uses. However, many of these fields remain marshy and are important feeding and roosting areas for wildfowl, Golden Plover and Lapwing. The most serious threat to the site is water pollution, primarily from slurry spreading.

Ballymacoda is a fine example of an estuarine complex, with intertidal flats well represented. The site is of high conservation importance because several of the habitats present are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. However, there is also considerable ornithological interest; Ballymacoda is one of the most important bird sites in the country and supports a higher number of waders than any other Co. Cork estuary of its size. It also contains important numbers of Golden Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit, two E.U. Birds Directive Annex I species, an internationally important population of Black-tailed Godwit, and nationally important numbers of a further 13 bird species.