

**Site Name: Sheep's Head SAC**

**Site Code: 000102**

Sheep's Head in Co. Cork is a narrow peninsula with a north-east to south-west orientation, bounded on the northern side by Bantry Bay and on the southern side by Dunmanus Bay. The site extends from near Ahakista in the east, to the Sheep's Head lighthouse in the west. A rocky ridge of sandstone, supporting heath vegetation, runs the entire length of the peninsula. The heath vegetation extends from the summits of the ridge to the seashore on the more exposed northern side, but grades into enclosed farmland in the south.

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):

[4010] Wet Heath
[4030] Dry Heath
[1024] Kerry Slug ( <i>Geomalacus maculosus</i> )

The rocky parts of the peninsula are covered by dry heath, where Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*), Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and some Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) form a compact canopy moulded by the wind. On ledges with some trapped soil, Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*) are more common, with some Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Common Dog-violet (*Viola riviniana*) and, locally, Burnet Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*) - species that are characteristic of this community over much of the south coast. The Pale Dog-violet (*Viola lactea*), a rare and legally protected (Flora (Protection) Order, 1999) species listed in the Irish Red Data Book, has also been recorded from this area.

The western extremity of the headland is marked by numerous rocky ribs on which the Spotted Rock-rose (*Tuberaria guttata*), a threatened species listed in the Irish Red Data Book, reaches spectacular numbers. It grows in open rocky places with Sheep's-bit (*Jasione montana*), Early Hair-grass (*Aira praecox*) and English Stonecrop (*Sedum anglicum*).

Where water accumulates, especially in the depressions between the ridges of sandstone, peat develops more thickly and here wet heath or even small pockets of blanket bog are found. These areas are characterised by the growth of mosses, especially bog mosses (*Sphagnum* spp.). Other typical species of the wet heath are Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*), Heather, Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*) and Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*). The wet heath often merges into fen or swamp vegetation in the vicinity of lakes. In such situations

Bog Pondweed (*Potamogeton polygonifolius*), Marsh St. John's-wort (*Hypericum elodes*) and Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) are found. Some of the species present suggest that there can be nutrient input from the slopes above, or from sea spray. Deeper basins have remained as lakes, such as Lough Akeen and Lough Doo, which are largely free of marginal vegetation. Laharandota Lough lies in a more circular depression and has shallow peaty edges where cutting has much enlarged the water area. Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*) and Eared Willow (*Salix aurita*) characterise these parts, along with Bottle Sedge (*Carex rostrata*), Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) and Ragged-Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*). In the vicinity of this lake a laneway is colonised by the uncommon Sand Spurrey (*Spergularia rubra*).

Some small patches of fen peat and hillside flush occur throughout the site. These more mineral-rich areas are characterised by Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*), Purple Moor-grass, sedges (*Carex flacca*, *C. pulicaris*, *C. echinata*) and a range of more calcium-loving mosses such as *Campylium stellatum*, *Aneura pinguis* and *Bryum pseudotriquetrum*.

Small stands of deciduous woodland occur near the disused copper mine in Killeen North townland. These are dominated by Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*), Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and Rusty Willow (*Salix cinerea* subsp. *oleifolia*), with a ground layer of Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.), Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*), Irish Spurge (*Euphorbia hyberna*) and Hard Fern (*Blechnum spicant*), amongst others.

The site is of note for holding a population of Kerry Slug (*Geomalacus maculosus*), a species that is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive and one that has a remarkably disjunct distribution in Europe, being known only from south-west Ireland, north-west Spain and northern Portugal. At Sheep's Head the species is particularly associated with open areas of rocky wet heath and grassland.

Sheep's Head is an important ornithological site and much of it is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive. It supports an important population of Chough, a species that is listed on Annex I of this Directive. The birds are found in pairs and flocks, and the main concentration of the species at Sheep's Head is near the tip of the peninsula, where an estimated 12-13 pairs were recorded in a survey in 2002/03. Roosting is confined to the southern side of the end of the peninsula, with small numbers (up to eight birds) gathering occasionally. The site overlaps with the breeding territory of a pair of Peregrine, a species that is also listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Black Guillemot nest on the coast and the population found on Sheep's Head and the nearby Mizen Head Peninsula is of national importance; several other seabird species also use the site, but in small numbers, including Fulmar, Shag, Great Black-backed Gull and Herring Gull.

Sheep's Head is notably unaffected by over-grazing though it does support some cattle and sheep. The main conservation value of the area is the presence and good condition of both dry heath and wet heath, habitats that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, as well as the population of the Annex II species, Kerry Slug.

The presence of two Red-listed plant species, Pale Dog-violet and Spotted Rock-rose, is of note. Sheep's Head is also an important ornithological site, most notably for the population of Chough that it supports.