



**Site Name: Three Castle Head to Mizen Head SAC**

**Site Code: 000109**

The headlands of Three Castle Head and Mizen Head lie at the end of the Schull/Goleen peninsula in West Cork, and are the most south-westerly part of the Irish mainland. They consist of two ridges of Old Red Sandstone separated by a low-lying area which culminates in Dunlough Bay.

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):

[1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs [4030] Dry Heath
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There are two main types of sea cliff present; one results from the almost vertical bedding of the sandstones, where slabs of rock hang above the sea, while the other is composed of the ends of the rock strata, where the rock is much more friable, allowing pockets of scree and soil to develop.

The main vegetation on the hills is a peaty heath where grazing restricts the cover of the woody species and leads to a dominance of Carnation Sedge (*Carex panicea*), Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*) and, locally, Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*). Lousewort (*Pedicularis sylvatica*) and Heath Milkwort (*Polygala serpyllifolia*) are also present. A few depressions occur where Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*), Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*) and Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) are noticeable, and there are often *Sphagnum* mosses (e.g. *Sphagnum auriculatum*). The hill at Three Castle Head has the more varied topography with some quite sheltered hollows and ponds. Spotted Rock-rose (*Tuberaria guttata*) and Pale Dog-violet (*Viola lactea*), two threatened species listed in the Irish Red Data Book, are a feature of the rock outcrops here. Pale Dog-violet is legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999.

Dun Lough and the other lakes in this site have a sparse vegetation with Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) and Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*). In sheltered places Broad-leaved Pondweed (*Potamogeton natans*), Lesser Marshwort (*Apium inundatum*), Marsh St. John's-wort (*Hypericum elodes*) and Water-plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*) occur. Eared Willow (*Salix aurita*) and Marsh Violet (*Viola palustris*) are also present.

Towards the coast the vegetation changes, with Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Plantains (*Plantago coronopus*, *P. maritima*) and Cat's-ear (*Hypochoeris radicata*) becoming

abundant. There are clumps of Irish Spurge (*Euphorbia hyberna*), sometimes in very exposed sites, and sometimes Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*) and small amounts of Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*). Just at the cliff line, Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*) and Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*) can be found. The cliff top is also the location for a prostrate form of Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) which winds through the other plants with mats of stems, unseen until they flower in May. Occasional plants of Juniper (*Juniperus communis*), a rare species in Cork, can also be found here.

The lowland between the headlands includes fields with unfertilised grassland, partly affected by sea spray. There are patches of seepage with Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*), the sedges *Carex nigra* and *C. flacca*, Brookweed (*Samolus valerandi*) and the moss *Scorpidium scorpioides*.

The site is extremely important for Chough, with 29 pairs recorded during the 1992 survey. This represents one of the highest densities in the country for this species which is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. The bird uses the heath and grassland areas for foraging. Seabirds nest along the coast, particularly at Illaunnacaheragh. Pre-1990 counts give total numbers of Fulmar (266), Cormorant (14), Shag (20), Herring Gull (264), Lesser Black-backed Gull (80), Great Black-backed Gull (80), Kittiwake (306), Puffin (2-4), Guillemot (133) and Razorbill (23).

The Three Castle Head to Mizen Head site contains two habitats listed under Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive – vegetated sea cliffs and dry heath - and supports two Red Data Book plants - Spotted Rock-rose and Pale Dog-violet. Furthermore, these headlands provide nesting areas for a variety of seabirds and feeding grounds for Choughs.