



Site Name: Donegal Bay (Murvagh) SAC

Site Code: 000133

This site occupies the inner part of Donegal Bay, immediately to the south-west of Donegal Town. It contains the estuary of the River Eske and a number of other significant rivers. The area is underlain by Carboniferous limestone and shale, although blown sand and other recent deposits obscure much of the solid geology.

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):

- | |
|--|
| [1140] Tidal Mudflats and Sandflats |
| [2130] Fixed Dunes (Grey Dunes)* |
| [2170] Dunes with Creeping Willow |
| [2190] Humid Dune Slacks |
| [1365] Common (Harbour) Seal (<i>Phoca vitulina</i>) |

Most of the site consists of intertidal habitats, notably mud- and sandflats, sea inlets and bays, tidal rivers, estuarine channels and sandy beaches. These areas are generally unvegetated but are obviously nutrient-rich, as extensive beds of shellfish occur in parts of the bay. The following macro-invertebrate species are common throughout much of the bay: *Arenicola marina*, *Hediste diversicolor*, *Scrobicularia plana* and *Macoma balthica*.

Along some parts of the shore, saltmarsh has developed. Dominant plants there include Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*). Sea Arrowgrass (*Triglochin maritima*), Sharp Rush (*Juncus acutus*) and Saltmarsh Rush (*J. gerardi*) are also common, while brown seaweeds (*Fucus* spp.) are abundant lower down the shore profile.

On the stable parts of some of the shingle and boulder beaches, Common Scurvygrass also occurs, along with Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*) and Sea-milkwort (*Glaux maritima*).

Sand dunes, including fixed dunes, occur in parts of the site, especially at Murvagh. Intact sections contain Sea Sandwort (*Honkenya peploides*) and Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) in the young dunes, with abundant Marram in the fixed dunes. These stable areas are frequently species-rich, with abundant Field Wood-rush (*Luzula campestris*), a well-developed moss community including *Thuidium tamariscinum* and *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*, and herbs such as Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus*

corniculatus), Wild Thyme (*Thymus praecox*), Heath Dog-violet (*Viola canina*) and Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*). Dune slacks also occur and in one slack the Red Data Book species Round-leaved Wintergreen (*Pyrola rotundifolia*) occurs. Typical species of dunes with Creeping Willow occur at Mullanasole and include: Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*), Sand sedge (*Carex arenaria*), Red Fescue, Lady's Bedstraw, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil and Mouse-ear Hawkweed (*Pilosella officinarum*) along with other typical species of fixed dune including: False Oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius*), Selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*), Wild Thyme and the mosses *Hypnum cupressiforme*, *Rhytidiadelphus triquetrus* and *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*. The Common Twayblade orchid (*Listera ovata*) occurs throughout this habitat. Other species present include: Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Marram Grass and the moss *Pleurozium schreberi*.

Both Common Scoter and Brent Goose are found in the greater Donegal Bay area, from Bundoran north to Murvagh. The Bay provides one of the most important sites in the country for the Common Scoter, with peak numbers of approximately 1,500 individuals in 1984/85 - 1986/87. This species uses large wintering grounds making counts difficult, but in recent years peaks of 662 birds (1995/96) and 1,073 birds (1997/98) have been recorded in the area. Other wintering species of note from the site include Ringed Plover 175, Oystercatcher 119 and Dunlin 221 (data based on 18 counts from 1984/85 - 1986/87). Small numbers (up to 50) of Greenland White-fronted Goose from the Pettigo flock fed at Inishpat Island in the 1980s, but have rarely done so in recent years.

The site supports a population of Common Seal (maximum count of 148 in the all-Ireland survey of 2003). This species is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive.

Land use in the area consists of boating and fishing in the bay, with a little shellfish aquaculture. Grazing occurs on terrestrial habitats, while recreational pressures are severe on parts of the dunes. A large part of the dune system is excluded from the site due to its development as a golf course and to the presence of conifer plantations. Despite these pressures, the site is of international importance due to the presence of a wide range of habitats, including four listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, an important seal colony and the occurrence of significant bird populations.