



Site Name: Durnesh Lough SAC

Site Code: 000138

This site is situated on the southern side of Donegal Bay, and is about 10 km north of Ballyshannon. The underlying geology of the area is limestone but this is covered by a thick layer of clay drift deposits in the form of drumlins.

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):

[1150] Coastal Lagoons* [6410] <i>Molinia</i> Meadows
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Durnesh Lough is a large, sedimentary lagoon, which is separated from the sea by a barrier that is composed partly of drumlins and partly high sand dunes with the remains of a cobble barrier in places. The lagoon formerly had a natural outlet to the sea but the outlet is now an artificial channel and pipe running under the sand dunes which appears to allow a certain amount of seawater to enter. The lagoon is shallow (0.5 - 1.5 m deep), oligohaline (0 - 7 ppt) and the substrate is mostly clean sand with finer organic sediments in sheltered areas. The aquatic flora is diverse and interesting, with two species of Tasselweed (*Ruppia cirrhosa*, *R. maritima*) and the Red Data Book charophyte *Chara canescens*. The fauna is also diverse, with 48 taxa recorded including six lagoonal specialists and at least two rare species *Gammarus chevreuxi* (Order Amphipoda) and *Cordylophora caspia* (Order Hydroida). Based on geomorphology, flora and fauna, the lagoon has been ranked amongst the best ten lagoons in the country.

As mentioned above, the lagoon is shallow with both stony and muddy shores. In the stony areas, Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) and Common Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris*) are the dominant plants. In the muddy areas, the emergent vegetation is much more dense and varied, and includes Bulrush (*Typha latifolia*), Common Club-rush, Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*), Mare's-tail (*Hippurus vulgaris*) and Reed Canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*).

Extensive reedbeds occur beside the lough. These are dominated by Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), Bulrush, and Common Club-rush. Areas dominated by Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) are also present here.

Large areas of wet grassland occur adjacent to the lake. These areas are liable to flooding and abundant species include Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*), Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*), Marsh-marigold (*Caltha*

palustris), Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*), Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*) and Bog-sedge (*Carex limosa*). Some examples of wet grassland on the site are referable to *Molinia* Meadows, a habitat type listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive.

This site also includes sandhills, coastal beaches, a cobble storm-beach, sand-covered drumlins and a small coastal lagoon. A series of smaller loughs, Drumoske, Drumhoe and Birra, are also included. All of these areas are of general ecological interest.

The large areas of wet grassland adjacent to the lough provide important feeding areas for swans and geese. Nationally important numbers of Greenland White-fronted Goose (148) and regionally important numbers of Mute Swan (91), Bewick's Swan (13) and Whooper Swan (58) are found here. Bewick's Swan, Whooper Swan and Greenland White-fronted Goose are all species listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Regionally/locally important numbers of Wigeon (37), Pochard (116), Tufted Duck (30), Goldeneye (39), Scaup (23) and Coot (210) also occur on Durnesh Lough. All figures are maximum winter averages over the period 1994/5 to 1997/8.

Otter, a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, has also been recorded at this site.

This site contains an excellent example of a lagoon, a priority habitat on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, and a second Annex I habitat, *Molinia* Meadows, is also present. Durnesh Lough also supports populations of three species listed on Annex I of the Birds Directive (Bewick's Swan, Whooper Swan and Greenland White-fronted Goose) and one species listed under Annex II of the Habitats Directive (Otter). The wetlands and sandhills add further botanical and ecological interest to the area.