

Site Name: Horn Head and Rinclevan SAC

Site Code: 000147

Horn Head extends northwards into the Atlantic Ocean from Dunfanaghy, Co. Donegal. This site also extends westwards, reaching just beyond Dooros Point. It is a diverse coastal site containing a wide range of habitats from high rocky quartzite cliffs in the north to mud flats, sand flats, dunes and a brackish lake 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):

- [2110] Embryonic Shifting Dunes
- [2120] Marram Dunes (White Dunes)
- [2130] Fixed Dunes (Grey Dunes)*
- [2170] Dunes with Creeping Willow
- [2190] Humid Dune Slacks
- [21A0] Machairs*
- [3130] Oligotrophic to Mesotrophic Standing Waters
- [1013] Geyer's Whorl Snail (*Vertigo geyeri*)
- [1364] Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)
- [1395] Petalwort (*Petalophyllum ralfsii*)
- [1833] Slender Naiad (*Najas flexilis*)

On the rocky sea-cliffs (maximum height 207 m), exposure is a limiting factor to plant growth, but where soil has built up, maritime plants such as Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*) and Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) occur. Two rare bryophytes (*Acrobolbus wilsonii* and *Geocalyx graveolens*) have been recorded from Horn Head Cliffs, as have two species of flowering plant listed in the Irish Red Data Book, Corncockle (*Agrostemma githago*) and Scots Lovage (*Ligusticum scoticum*). Inland from the cliffs are hills supporting heathy vegetation dominated by Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*).

In the south-western part of the site is a dune system which is impressive in terms of its size, range of dune types and its relatively undisturbed nature. Of particular note is the area of fixed dunes to the north-east of Dunfanaghy village and to the north-east of Trawmore, especially at Lurgabrack. The dominant vascular plant species are Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) and Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), accompanied by such species as Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and the Pansy (*Viola tricolor* subsp.

curtisii). Lesser Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum minus*), a nationally scarce plant species, has been confirmed from areas of fixed dune at Lurgabrack. The bryophyte component of the vegetation is very well developed with such species as *Tortula ruraliformis*, *Pleurozium schreberi* and *Homalothecium lutescens* being particularly abundant. In addition to the commoner mosses, a number of rarer bryophytes have also been recorded from fixed dunes around Dunfanaghy. These include *Thuidium abietinum*, *Bryum marratii* and *Distichum inclinatum*.

Other dune types which occur are Marram dunes, embryonic dunes and dune slacks. The dune slacks are characterised by the presence of Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*). The Marram dunes are typical in being quite species-poor, with Marram as the main species. These areas are typically <30 m wide, but can reach up to 8 m high in places. The embryonic dunes are characterised by being found as a thin strip along the margins of dunes. Sand Couch (*Elymus farctus*) is often the main species. A small area of machair is located in Murroe townland in the south-western corner of the site. Here the machair grassland occurs as a number of sloping surfaces with high dunes to the north-west and extensive dune slack to the north-east. The quality of the machair appears to be rather low.

Port Lough, a mesotrophic to oligotrophic lake of good water quality, has a diverse flora and supports an important population of Slender Naiad (*Najas flexilis*). This species is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive and is also legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999.

A small population of the rare liverwort, Petalwort (*Petalophyllum ralfsii*), a species that is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, has recently been recorded from a grassy hillside near Dunfanaghy.

The rare whorl snail, *Vertigo geyeri* (also an Annex II species), has also recently been recorded from the site - near Cloghernagh, associated with base-rich flushes supporting Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*).

A main feature of this site is the colony of breeding seabirds on the cliffs of Horn Head. Species present include Razorbill (<6,000 individuals), Guillemot (<5,000 individuals), Kittiwake (<4,500 pairs), Fulmar (1,000 pairs), Shag (200 pairs), Puffin (100 pairs), Black Guillemot (25 pairs) and Cormorant (20 pairs). All figures date from before 1989.

A few pairs each of Chough (six pairs) and Peregrine Falcon (three pairs) breed here. These are both listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Red Grouse, a species undergoing some decline in Ireland, breeds on the heather-covered hills inland from the cliffs. Several species of wader breed in the site, notably Lapwing (11 pairs) and Dunlin (six pairs).

During winter, a flock of Greenland White-fronted Goose (average peak 160, 1992/93 - 1996/97) frequent the New Lake area in the south of the site. A nationally important population of Barnacle Goose winter at the site, though they also use other

traditional sites in the region. In recent winters, numbers have varied between 250 and 300 birds. Along with the geese species there is a small but regular wintering flock of Whooper Swans. The mean peak for the five winters up to 1996/97 was 38. All three of these species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. At least eight other species of waterfowl have been recorded including Pochard (237), Wigeon (119) and Tufted Duck (29). All figures are average peaks 1984/85 - 1986/87.

A small population of Grey Seal occurs at Horn Head. This species is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The breeding population was estimated at four or five individuals in 2005.

Relative inaccessibility gives a degree of protection to the cliffs and the breeding seabirds, but an increase in tourist activity on the cliffs or offshore fishing could pose a threat to the colony. Parts of the dune areas have undergone a little modification through agricultural usage. The small size of the Petalwort population makes it vulnerable to changes in land use (either through under- or over-grazing), as well as trampling, land slippage, etc. Grazing in the area where *Vertigo geyeri* occurs is currently quite intensive and any further increase could be very damaging to the snail. Any attempts at drainage in the area of the population could also be very damaging.

This scenic site contains a good range of coastal habitats (including the priority habitat fixed dune) which are of considerable conservation value. The size of the seabird colony makes this a site of international importance. This was reflected in the designation in 1988 of a Refuge for Fauna at Horn Head. The New Lake is managed as a Wildlife Sanctuary by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which contributes to the protection of the important populations of waterfowl in the site.