

Site Name: Slieve League SAC

Site Code: 000189

This site encompasses the spectacularly scenic coastline from Glen Bay, at Glencolumbkille, around to a point south-east of Teelin, in south Co. Donegal. Inland, the uplands of Slieve League (595 m O.D.) and Leahan (427 m O.D.) are included, along with Loughs Agh and Auva.

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):

[1170] Reefs
[1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs
[4010] Wet Heath
[4030] Dry Heath
[4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
[6430] Hydrophilous Tall Herb Communities
[7130] Blanket Bogs (Active)*
[8110] Siliceous Scree
[8210] Calcareous Rocky Slopes
[8220] Siliceous Rocky Slopes

The site has important examples of reef communities, including two rare biotopes. A reef of cobbles, pebbles and boulders exposed to wave action, in 12-17 m of water, supports a community characterised by the brown alga *Laminaria saccharina* and ephemeral red algae. This is a rare community and the recently described red alga *Schmitzia hiscockiana* is present. *Halarachnion ligulatum* is also characteristic of the area.

At depths of between 17 and 26 m the substratum is solid bedrock. The community present here is characterised by sponges, hydroids, the sea fan *Eunicella verrucosa*, the anthozoans *Alcyonium digitatum* and *Alcyonium glomeratum*, the fragile bryozoans *Pentapora foliacea* and *Porella compressa*, the bryozoan crust *Parasmittina trispinosa*, and the feather star *Antedon bifida*. A variety of red algae, including *Cryptopleura ramose*, and the brown alga *Dictyota dichotoma* are present. This site is one of the most northerly records for the sea fan *Eunicella verrucosa*. This biotope is similar to the biotope with erect sponges *Eunicella verrucosa* and *Pentapora foliacea* on slightly tide swept moderately exposed circalittoral rock, but is unusual in that it occurs in shallower water and has a variety of red algae present.

Along the southern side of the site are very steep, often precipitous slopes and sea cliffs which are among the highest in Europe (590 m O.D.), rising from the sea almost to the summit of Slieve League. Mainly of quartzite, they are capped by an inlier of basal Carboniferous sandstones and conglomerates, a remnant of the Tertiary peneplain. Only parts of the less-steep slopes are vegetated. A heathy vegetation of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and dwarf Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) occurs, with Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) and Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), and coastal elements including Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*) and Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*). Where slopes are very sheer, there is no vegetation and the cliff faces and scree patches are exposed.

On the northern slopes of the mountain is a fine, north-facing corrie, in which lies Lough Agh. The steep back wall of this corrie is also remarkable for its flora, which consists of an extremely species-rich assemblage of alpine plants, including a number of rare species, including some which are listed in the Irish Red Data Book. These include Alpine Bistort (*Polygonum viviparum*), Alpine Saw-wort (*Saussurea alpina*), Yellow Saxifrage (*Saxifraga aizoides*), Purple Saxifrage (*S. oppositifolia*) and Holly Fern (*Polystichum lonchitis*). An upland ledge aspect of the Annex I habitat Hydrophilous tall herb communities has recently been recorded from the site. A further species found on the coast at this site is Sea Pea (*Lathyrus japonicus* subsp. *maritimus*). This species is listed in the Red Data Book and the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015, as is Alpine Bistort. Slieve League also has a range of Red Listed bryophyte species, including *Arctoa fulvella*, *Campylopus subulatus*, *Ditrichum zonatum*, *Gymnomitrium concinnatum*, *Marsupella sphacelata*, *Philonotis rigida* and *Scapania gymnostomophila*.

The remainder of the site is predominantly covered with blanket bog. In places, deep erosion channels in the peat expose the full peat profile. A fine example of undrained blanket bog with numerous pools occurs at Lough Auva. Wet heath occurs on the shallower peats in association with blanket bog and with dry or alpine heaths. It is notable for the presence of Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*), along with more common species such as Heather, Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), Deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*) and Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*).

This site is of major ecological importance. Slieve League supports good quality lowland and mountain blanket bog, wet and dry heath and excellent quality alpine heath and sea cliff vegetation. The cliffs above Lough Agh support a very rich and diverse montane flora which includes some very rare vascular plants and bryophyte species. The site provides good breeding habitat for several seabird species, and also holds important populations of Chough and Peregrine, both listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. The site is an important feeding site for Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Goose.