



Site Name: Slyne Head Islands SAC

Site Code: 000328

This site comprises a long archipelago of islands, islets, rocks and reefs located off the western shores and south-western tip of the Slyne Head Peninsula in Co. Galway. The surrounding shallow marine areas are also included as part of the site. The islands are mostly low-lying and have a covering of a grassy maritime turf. A few sandy coves occur on the larger islands, along with shingle. The islands are uninhabited apart from an automated lighthouse on Illaunamid.

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):

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| [1170] Reefs |
| [1349] Bottle-nosed Dolphin (<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>) |
| [1364] Grey Seal (<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>) |

Slyne Head Islands SAC contains excellent examples of reefs, ranging from those extremely exposed to wave action to more sheltered ones. The complexity of the islands helps provide a good range of habitat conditions, and many typical communities are present. The rocky shores moderately exposed to wave action have an excellent example of community zonation down the shore, with an extensive zone of grey lichens followed by a zone of black lichens. Below this there is a narrow band of Channel Wrack (*Pelvetia canaliculata*) and following this an extensive area of limpets and barnacles. The mid shore has an extensive zone of *Fucus serratus* and in the lower shore *Fucus serratus* and *Himantalia elongata* are common. The sublittoral fringe has a mixture of *Laminaria saccharina* and *L. digitata*.

Subtidally the reefs range from being very rugged to gently sloping. In shallow water kelp forests of *Laminaria hyperborea* are present, but at 25 m the kelp is sparse and the brown alga *Dictyota dichotoma* is abundant.. Some areas are heavily grazed by the sea urchin *Echinus esculentus*. The red alga *Drachiella spectabilis*, which is a good indicator of clear water, occurs here. Where vertical rock is present it supports a community of bryozoans and sponges, including the rare species *Plakortis simplex*. At depths of 30 m or greater excellent examples of the Axinellid cup sponge community are present, typical of reefs exposed to wave action. In this area, both the cup sponges *Axinella infundibuliformis* and *Phakellia ventilabrum* are found, along with the red soft coral *Alcyonium glomeratum*, the sea fan *Eunicella verrucosa*, the rose 'coral' *Pentapora foliacea* and the sea squirt *Diazona violacea*. Rare or uncommon species found in this community include two sponges, *Phakellia vermiculata* and *Lissodendoryx* sp., the rare sea slug *Aldisa zetlandica*, the hydroid *Tamarisca tamarisca* and the brachiopod

Terebratulina retusa. Areas of stony gravel dunes within the site support a community characterised by the burrowing sea cucumber *Neopentadactyla mixta*.

The site contains an important breeding colony of Grey Seal, a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The breeding population is estimated at 238-306 individuals (in 2005). A one-off moult count in 2007 gave a figure of 162 seals. Waters within the site also support groups of the Annex II species Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) that are likely to be part of a population inhabiting the west and north coasts of Connacht and which numbers at least 177-337 dolphins. Group sizes of up to 12 individual dolphins have been recorded within the site and sighting records have predominantly occurred in September.

The islands also support important colonies of breeding seabirds. In 1995, 329 pairs of Arctic Tern were recorded on Illaunamid - this was one of the largest colonies in Ireland and comprised 11.3% of the national total. Terns have also bred on Chapel Island in the past. Also of national importance is the colony of Black Guillemots, with 60 individuals counted in 1980. Other seabirds which breed include Storm Petrel (50 pairs), Manx Shearwater (70-90 pairs), Shag (6-8 pairs), Herring Gull (50 pairs) and Great Black-backed Gull (30 pairs) – all figures from 1980. Of the above seabird species, Arctic Tern and Storm Petrel are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.

This site is an important example of exposed low-lying western islands with good examples of reefs, a significant grey seal population and important colonies of breeding birds. The site is also of conservation importance due to the occurrence of groups of Bottlenose Dolphin, a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive.