

Site Name: Akeragh, Banna and Barrow Harbour SAC

Site Code: 000332

Akeragh, Banna and Barrow Harbour SAC is a large coastal site covering a 10 km section of coastline in Co. Kerry, and including a wide diversity of habitats. The underlying rock is limestone, which outcrops only in the southern part of the site, in the impressive columns and hillsides north of Fenit. Elsewhere shell sand is predominant with occasional development of peat.

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):

- [1210] Annual Vegetation of Drift Lines
- [1310] Salicornia Mud
- [1330] Atlantic Salt Meadows
- [1410] Mediterranean Salt Meadows
- [2110] Embryonic Shifting Dunes
- [2120] Marram Dunes (White Dunes)
- [2130] Fixed Dunes (Grey Dunes)*
- [2190] Humid Dune Slacks
- [4030] Dry Heath

Sand dunes run southwards from Ballyheigue and they become especially interesting south of the Akeragh outflow where they show great variety in both physiography and vegetation. The largest proportion of the sand dune system is fixed dune grassland. The vegetation is made up of a mosaic of Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) tussocks interspersed with low-lying patches of a Red Fescue-Lady's Bedstraw (*Festuca rubra-Galium verum*) community. Other species occurring include Smooth Meadow-grass (*Poa pratensis*), Daisy (*Bellis perennis*), Ribwort Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) and Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*). There is a sparse occurrence of moss species, including *Brachythecium rutabulum*, *Tortula ruralis* ssp. *ruraliformis* and *Homalothecium lutescens*. These tend to be restricted to areas close to rabbit burrows, where they are associated with species such as Germander Speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*), Squinancywort (*Asperula cynanchica*) and Dog Lichen (*Peltigera* spp.). A number of other species typical of Mesobromion grasslands are found in this habitat type, reflecting the calcareous nature of the site. These include Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), Thyme-leaved Sandwort (*Arenaria serpyllifolia*) and Hairy Rock-cress (*Arabis hirsuta*). Dodder (*Cuscuta epithimum*), a parasitic plant, grows in abundance on the fixed dune slopes at Carrahane.

Mobile Marram dunes occur as a narrow band running along the seaward side of the entire coastal strip. There is a slight increase in dune mobility towards the growing tip at Carrahane. The main ridges are dominated by Marram and reach heights in excess of 20 m in places. Companion species include Sea Spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*), Colt's-foot (*Tussilago farfara*), Sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) and Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*). Also occurring are embryonic dunes, with such species as Sand Couch (*Elymus farctus*) and Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*). The latter species, along with Spear-leaved Orache (*Atriplex prostrata*), has also been recorded from the 'annual vegetation of drift lines' habitat at this site.

The site contains a number of dune slack areas, these being best developed on the landward side of Carrahane dunes. Species present in these dune slacks include Common Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*), Glaucous Sedge (*Carex flacca*), Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*), Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*) and the scarce Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*).

Of particular ecological interest is the gradation from fixed dune and dune slack to saltmarsh at Carrahane. Saltmarsh here is particularly well-developed but also occurs at Barrow Harbour. Common saltmarsh species include Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Red Fescue, Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*), Saltmarsh Rush (*Juncus gerardi*) and Sea Rush (*Juncus maritima*). A number of scarce species are associated with the saltmarsh, notably Hard-grass (*Parapholis strigosa*), Saltmarsh Flat-sedge (*Blysmus rufus*), Strawberry Clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) and a species of sea-lavender (*Limonium recurvum*). Glassworts (*Salicornia* spp.) occur on the edges of the saltmarsh and in sheltered areas extends onto the intertidal muds.

The harbour is surrounded by low hills of limestone which support an interesting grassland community where they remain unfertilised. This is best seen at the entrance to Carrahane Bay but recurs sporadically elsewhere. Coastal heath occurs scattered on limestone rocky areas in the southern part of the site. It generally occurs in association with dry grassland. Species which occur include Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), Western Gorse (*U. gallii*), Burnet Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Biting Stonecrop (*Sedum acre*), Black Medick (*Medicago lupulina*), Common Whitlowgrass (*Erophila verna*), Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) and Wild Madder (*Rubia peregrina*), among others.

Akeragh Lough now supports extensive areas of brackish vegetation. It was formerly richer in birdlife, but the lake level has been controlled by a sluice on the outflow, the total water area has declined. Also, the peaty land to the east has been afforested. The site supports important wintering waterfowl populations. Brent Goose occur in internationally important numbers (360 in winter 1996/97), while in winter 1996/97 nationally important populations of Ringed Plover (130), Grey Plover (62), Lapwing (approx. 2000), Sanderling (280) and Bar-tailed Godwit (345) occurred. Notable populations of Golden Plover, Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Curlew and Redshank also occur. The regular occurrence of Golden Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit is of note as these species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.

This large site is of major ecological interest due both to its range of floristically-rich coastal habitats, nine of which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, including one priority habitat, and as a wintering site for significant numbers of waterfowl (including two Annex I species).