



Site Name: Inishkea Islands SAC

Site Code: 000507

The Inishkea Islands are the two largest islands off the west coast of the Mullet Peninsula in north-west Co. Mayo. As well as Inishkea North and Inishkea South, this site includes Carrickawilt, Carrigee, Carrickmoyleenacurhoga, Pluddany Rocks, Carrickfad, Carrickgormal, Carricklaur, Carrickalaveen and several smaller rocks and reefs.

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):

[21A0] Machairs*
[1364] Grey Seal (<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>)
[1395] Petalwort (<i>Petalophyllum ralfsii</i>)

The north island is low-lying and dominated by machair vegetation, typified by a Plantain sward (*Plantago* spp.), with Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Smooth Meadow-grass (*Poa pratensis*), White Clover (*Trifolium repens*) and Daisy (*Bellis perennis*). A small lake, Doon Lough, which occurs at the northern end of the island, supports a vigorous growth of Mare's-tail (*Hippuris vulgaris*) and is bounded by a bed of Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*). The south island has a low-lying cover of machair vegetation in the northern part, but is characterised by a heath-covered ridge and hill (70 m O.D.) to the south. The dominant heath plants are Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*), Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), Sheep's-bit (*Jasione montana*) and Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*). The outlying rocks and reefs are largely unvegetated.

The Inishkeas, together with a group of neighbouring islands, including Inishglora, Inishkeeragh and the Duvillauns, are an important breeding site for Grey Seal, a species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The breeding population is estimated at 665-855 individuals (in 2005). A one-off moult count in 2007 gave a figure of 1,742 seals.

A population of the liverwort Petalwort (*Petalophyllum ralfsii*) occurs on North Inishkea. This species is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. It is a species typically associated with machair habitat.

The Inishkeas are of ornithological interest for breeding seabirds. The following figures are derived from the 1984 and 1995 Tern Surveys, respectively, and refer to number of pairs recorded. Arctic Tern (220; 73), Common Tern (20; 1), Little Tern (41;

4). All three species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Numbers for other seabirds from 1984 are as follows: Great Black-backed Gull (c. 558 individuals), Herring Gull (c. 304 individuals), Lesser Black-backed Gull (5 individuals), Common Gull (15 individuals), Black-headed Gull (15 individuals), Black Guillemot (10 pairs pre-1988). Important concentrations of breeding Oystercatcher (136 pairs), Lapwing (14 pairs), Ringed Plover (31 pairs), Redshank (5 pairs), Snipe (5 pairs) and Dunlin (5 pairs) also occur.

The islands are the main wintering site for Barnacle Goose in Ireland and hold internationally important numbers (22-year mean 2,230; max. 2,800). The geese also make much use of neighbouring islands, particularly the Duvillauns and Inishkeeragh. Nationally important numbers of wintering Golden Plover (1,500 pre-1988), Sanderling (200 pre-1988), Purple Sandpiper (175 pre-1988) and Turnstone (400 pre-1988) are also found.

There are remains of a village on both main islands, but, although still used for sheep and cattle grazing, the islands have been uninhabited since 1932.

In summary, the Inishkea Islands site is very important for machair, a habitat rare in Europe and given priority status under the E.U. Habitats Directive. The significance of the site is added to by the presence of a population of the rare liverwort *Petalophyllum ralfsii*. It is also an important area for wintering and breeding populations of birds, particularly Barnacle Goose. The Inishkeas are part of a group of islands off the Mullet Peninsula that are an important breeding ground for Grey Seal.