



Site Name: Cahore Polders and Dunes SAC

Site Code: 000700

This site is located just south of Cahore Point, 10 km south of Courtown, Co. Wexford. The site comprises a sand dune system that extends along the coast for over 4 km, backed by areas of polder grassland, wetland and drainage channels. It is underlain by rocks of Cambrian age. A sand dune ridge and sandy beach forms the eastern boundary of the site. These dunes are highest in the north (up to 18 m high) and gradually become lower towards the south. The dunes display a well-developed zonation of fixed dunes grading eastwards to Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*)-dominated dunes, embryo dunes and, at the top of the beach, drift line vegetation.

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
- [2110] Embryonic Shifting Dunes
- [2120] Marram Dunes (White Dunes)
- [2130] Fixed Dunes (Grey Dunes)*
- [2190] Humid Dune Slacks

At the northern end of the site the sand dunes support mature fixed dune vegetation, including such species as False Oat-grass (*Arrhenatherium elatius*), Lesser Meadow-rue (*Thalictrum minus*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Burnet Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*), Marram, Barren Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*), Carlina Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*), Wild Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis* subsp. *prostratus*), Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Cowslip (*Primula vulgaris*), Cat's-ear (*Hypochoeris radicata*), Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*), Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*), Sheep's-bit (*Jasione montana*) and Germander Speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*). Several of these species are indicative of the fact that these dunes are old and somewhat decalcified through leaching. Under-grazing in this area has allowed the spread of Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.), Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and Sea-buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*), which occur in dense patches. Over the years there has been loss of dune habitat in this area to houses, caravan parks and erosion by the sea.

Fixed dune vegetation at the southern end of the site is younger and undisturbed, and supports a rich variety of species, including Marram, Burnet Rose, Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*), Portland Spurge (*Euphorbia portlandica*), Sea Spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*), Moore's Horsetail (*Equisetum x moorei*), Common Centaury (*Centaureum*

erythraea), Sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*), Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Common Restharrow (*Ononis repens*), Dewberry (*Rubus caesius*), Pignut (*Conopodium majus*), Fairy Flax (*Linum catharticum*), Thyme-leaved Sandwort (*Arenaria serpyllifolia*), Biting Stonecrop (*Sedum acre*), Sand Pansy (*Viola tricolor* subsp. *curtisii*), Heath Dog-violet (*Viola canina*), Sand Cat's-tail (*Phleum arenarium*), Common Milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*), Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*), Red Fescue, Lady's Bedstraw, Yellow-wort (*Blackstonia perfoliata*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*), Rayless Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea* var. *flosculosus*) and Umbellate Hawkweed (*Hieracium umbellatum*), amongst others. These dunes also support a good range of bryophyte and lichen species. Most of these species are also to be found in the less overgrown areas of fixed dunes at the northern end of the site.

Several areas of dune slack vegetation have been recorded. Among the typical slack species are Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*), Common Bird's-foot trefoil, Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*), Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*) and Creeping Willow. Sharp rush (*Juncus acutus*) also occurs. In the wetter parts of the slacks, Marsh pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) and Spear moss (*Calliergonella cuspidata*) are found. Sea rush (*Juncus maritimus*), an indicator of saline conditions, is present in some of the slacks.

Marram dunes are found as a band approximately 30 m wide on the seaward side of the fixed dunes, particularly in the southern half of the site, and are dominated almost exclusively by Marram. A narrow band of embryonic shifting dunes (5-8 m wide) with Sand Couch (*Elymus farctus*), Marram, Sea Holly and Curled Dock (*Rumex crispus*) is found on the seaward edge of these dunes. Below the embryo dunes at the top of the beach is a narrow band (4-5 m wide) of drift line vegetation, with species such as Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*), Frosted Orache (*Atriplex laciniata*) and Prickly Saltwort (*Salsola kali*).

The dunes grade westwards to polder grassland. This area was formerly a wetland, which has been drained and reclaimed to provide improved grassland for grazing animals. These grasslands are relatively species-poor but are important feeding areas for large numbers of wintering waterfowl. Numerous drainage channels traverse the polders; these are lagoonal in character and have been colonised by brackish water species. The presence of brackish water in these channels is the result of inefficiencies in flap valves which have allowed seawater to enter. However, with recent improvements to these valves it remains to be seen if the brackish water plant and animal communities present in the channels are maintained. A variety of aquatic and emergent plant species occur in the channels, including Soft Hornwort, (*Ceratophyllum submersum*), Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum* sp.), Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus* sp.), Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), Grey Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris* subsp. *tabernaemontani*) and, recorded in 2002, Water Fern (*Azolla filiculoides*).

Several artificial ponds with more or less fresh water occur near the southern end of the site and support a variety of aquatic and emergent plant species, including Water-plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*), Branched Bur-reed (*Sparganium erectum*), Common Duckweed (*Lemna minor*), Ivy-leaved Duckweed (*Lemna trisulca*), Water

Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*), Amphibious Bistort (*Polygonum amphibium*), Watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*), Soft Hornwort, Bulrush (*Typha latifolia*), Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*), Water mint and Broad-leaved Pondweed (*Potamogeton natans*), amongst others.

The site is notable for the presence of a number of rare and scarce plants. Wild Asparagus has been recorded from the north end of the dune ridge. This taxon is listed on the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015, as is Moore's Horsetail, the hybrid between Rough Horsetail (*E. hyemale*) and Branched Horsetail (*E. ramosissimum*). This latter species occurs commonly on the sand dunes. This hybrid is particularly notable for the fact that it does not grow with either parent, one of which, *E. ramosissimum*, has not been recorded from Ireland. The hybrid is confined to the coastline of Wexford and Wicklow and is listed on the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015. Drainage ditches in the polders support Soft Hornwort. This is a very rare and only relatively recently recorded species in Ireland, and in the Republic is otherwise known only from similar situations in south Co. Wexford. Water Fern, an introduced species that floats on water was recently recorded from drainage ditches in the site. Umbellate Hawkweed has its only known Co. Wexford site on the Cahore dunes. The relatively scarce Sharp Rush (*Juncus acutus*), Hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum vulgare*) and Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) have also been recorded from the site.

Cahore Dunes and Polders is a site of major ornithological importance for wintering waterfowl. The improved grassland provides a feeding site for a sub-flock of the Wexford Harbour Greenland White-fronted Goose population. Numbers are of national importance, with a mean of 286 for the five winters 1996/97 to 2000/01. Both Whooper and Bewick's Swans also occur, though in relatively low numbers with means of 28 and 9 respectively. The site supports nationally important populations of a further four species – Wigeon (1,568), Golden Plover (3,787), Shoveler (54) and Lapwing (2,054) (all quoted figures are means for the five winters 1996/97 to 2000/01). Other species which occur in significant numbers are Teal (470), Mallard (179) and Curlew (536).

The Gatekeeper butterfly has been recorded from dunes in the site.

Cahore Polders and Dunes is a site of considerable conservation value, containing good examples of fixed dune, Marram dune, embryonic shifting dune, dune slack and drift line habitat; all of these habitats are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, and fixed dunes with priority status. The presence of a number of species that are listed on the Flora (Protection) Order, 2015 and of other rare species is notable. It is also of high conservation value as a site for wintering waterfowl, in particular Greenland White-fronted Goose, Golden Plover, Lapwing and Wigeon.