SITE SYNOPSIS

Site Name: Raven Point Nature Reserve SAC

Site Code: 000710

The Raven is situated on the north side of Wexford Harbour, incorporating the dynamic sand system of Raven Point and the coast running north to Curracloe House. The site is designated as a National Nature Reserve. The site incorporates a large sand dune system comprising a suite of coastal habitats which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The dynamic nature of the system is best seen at the southern end of the site where sandflats, lagoons, drift lines and small dune slacks develop and are being continuously transformed by the activity of the sea and the wind. There has been heavy erosion along the eastern side of the site in recent years, but the sand dune system on the south-western end of the Raven is accreting, building towards the west along the wall which is the southern boundary of the Wexford Slobs, at about 3 m per year.

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):

[1140] Tidal Mudflats and Sandflats
[1210] Annual Vegetation of Drift Lines
[1330] Atlantic Salt Meadows
[2110] Embryonic Shifting Dunes
[2120] Marram Dunes (White Dunes)
[2130] Fixed Dunes (Grey Dunes)*
[2170] Dunes with Creeping Willow
[2190] Humid Dune Slacks

Part of Raven Point Nature Reserve SAC was planted with commercial conifer forest in the 1930s and 1950s, partly as a coast defence measure to stabilise the dunes and protect the slob behind. Species planted include Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), Monkey Puzzle (*Araucaria araucana*), Contorta Pine (*Pinus contorta*), Corsican Pine (*P. nigra*), Monterey Pine (*P. radiata*) and Scots Pine (*P. sylvestris*). Under these conifers two communities can be recognised: a Bracken / Bramble / Ivy (*Pteridium aquilinum* / *Rubus fruticosus* agg. / *Hedera helix*) community with Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*); and a mixed grass and sedge community with Common Bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*) and Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*). In some wetter parts of the commercial forest, the understorey vegetation is dominated by Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*).

The unplanted areas of fixed dunes are fairly typical of the habitat, with a low open sward of grasses, herbs, bryophytes and lichens occurring amongst areas of Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*). Species present include Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Lady's Bedstraw (G*alium verum*), Wild Pansy (*Viola tricolor* subsp. *curtisii*), Biting Stonecrop (*Sedum acre*), Field Wood-rush (*Luzula campestris*), Common Restharrow (*Ononis repens*), Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*) and Early Hair-grass (*Aira praecox*). The moss and lichen component includes *Hypnum cupressiforme, Tortula ruraliformis, Rhytidiadelphus triquetris, Peltigera* spp. and *Cladonia* spp. Towards the southern end of the system Burnet Rose (*Rosa pimpinellifolia*) and Bramble become more frequent in fixed areas.

A feature of the site is the presence of dune slacks. Some of the current slack communities are associated with artificial ponds that were originally created as forest fire control reservoirs. Where the slacks maintain moist conditions, characteristic species include Creeping Willow, Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*), Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*), Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*) and the mosses *Pseudoscleropodium purum, Rhytidiadelphus triquetris* and *Calliergon cuspidatum*. The Sea Rush (*Juncus acutus*), which displays a disjunct distribution in Ireland, is recorded from these slacks. Other interesting species include Broad-leaved Helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*) and the rare Round-leaved Wintergreen (*Pyrola rotundifolia* subsp. *maritima*). Many of these slacks have dried up due to the afforestation, though Creeping Willow and some of the other character species remain common.

Dune ridges with Marram occur in a band along the eastern and south-eastern sides of the site. Other species present include Sea Spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*), Portland Spurge (*E. portlandica*) and Sea-holly (*Eryngium maritimum*). These dunes are not particularly high, generally reaching heights of not more than 5 m. Good examples of embryonic dunes occur on the seaward side of the Marram dunes. Species present include Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*), Sand Couch (*Elymus farctus*) and Prickly Saltwort (*Salsola kali*). Associated with the embryonic dunes and the upper beach area is a band of annual drift line vegetation.

A small, though good example of Atlantic salt meadow occurs below the fixed dunes at the more sheltered western side of the point. Typical species are present, including Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) and Common Saltmarsh-grass (*Puccinellia maritima*).

A number of rare and protected plants have been recorded from this dune system including Round-leaved Wintergreen, Lesser Centaury (*Centaurium pulchellum*) and Wild Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis* subsp. *prostratus*), all three of which are protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999.

As mentioned above, a number of ponds were created as water reservoirs for forest fire control, but more have been created as part of the introduction to the site of the Natterjack Toad (*Bufo calamita*), a rare, legally protected Red Data Book species. The toads are breeding successfully and appear to have established themselves in the site.

The dunes at this site support a diverse invertebrate fauna with significant species in the fore dunes, Marram dunes and fixed dune grassland. Notable species include two rare carabid beetles (Order Coleoptera), *Nebria complanata* and *Pristonychus terricola*, the robber fly *Epitryptus cowini* (Order Diptera), the snail-killing fly *Pherbellia knutsoni* (Order Diptera) and the weevil *Ceuthorrhynchus hirtulus* (Ordere Coleoptera). A rare woodlouse *Armadillidium album* (Order Isopoda) has also been recorded from the dunes.

The invertebrates of the marine and intertidal habitats have also been described at this site. Four intertidal biological community types have been described: a sand community complex dominated by polychaetes; an estuarine mud community complex dominated by polychaetes and crustaceans; a mixed sediment community complex; and a fine sand community complex with *Spiophanes bombyx*. The sheltered intertidal shore to the west of Raven Point supports communities of bivalves and worms (e.g. *Cerastoderma edule, Arenicola marina*). The steeper shores to the north-east of the Point, which are predominantly sandy sediment, supports a sparser fauna, but with one notable species *Pseudorchestoidea brito* - a sandhopper which is known from only one other location in Ireland.

The Raven has important bird interests, being part of the Wexford Slobs and Harbour complex. Of critical significance is that it forms the principal night roost for the internationally important Wexford Harbour population of Greenland White-fronted Goose. In the four winters 1994/95 to 1997/98, seven species occurred in nationally important numbers (numbers are average maxima over the four winters): Cormorant (216), Red-breasted Merganser (38), Grey Plover (732), Knot (288), Sanderling (149), Dunlin (1,510) and Black-tailed Godwit (167). Golden Plover (570) and Bar-tailed Godwit (113) also occur, these species being of special conservation interest as they are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. The Raven has been an important breeding site for Little Tern (e.g. 26 pairs in 1984) but in recent years conditions have been less suitable due to the spread of Marram and the terns have bred elsewhere in Wexford Harbour.

Curracloe is a popular summer resort and parts of the Raven receive high recreational pressure. In particular, pony trekking has caused erosion of the embryonic dunes in some places. It is planned to gradually remove all the conifers from the sand dune system. Some selected areas will be clearfelled, others will be left as scrub pine. After harvesting the conifers, certain areas behind the dunes will be planted with hardwoods, including Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*). Other areas, in particular the more low-lying areas of former dune slack, will be left to regenerate naturally.

The Raven Point Nature Reserve is an excellent example of a dynamic dune system that contains a suite of coastal habitats listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. It also provides a roosting site for an internationally important flock of Greenland White-fronted Goose, a species listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Further, it supports many uncommon species of plant and animal. Overall, this is a site of considerable conservation significance.