

Site Name: Bray Head SAC

Site Code: 000714

This coastal site is situated in the north-east of Co. Wicklow between the towns of Bray and Greystones. The bedrock geology is Cambrian quartzites and shales (with mudstones and greywackes). Bray Head consists of a plateau of high ground, with five prominent quartzite knolls and has a maximum height of 241 m. The more exposed higher ground has a covering of shallow acidic soils, with protruding bedrock and scree. Elsewhere, deeper soils are formed by drift deposits and are calcareous in character.

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):

[1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs [4030] Dry Heath

Dry heath is the principal habitat over much of Bray Head. The vegetation of the upper plateau area is dominated by dwarf shrubs, mainly Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*) and gorse (*Ulex europaeus* and *U. gallii*). Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) also occurs, and associated with the gorse and broom is the Red Data Book species Greater Broomrape (*Orobanche rapum-genistae*). In the areas where the shrubs are less dense Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Common Milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*), Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*) and a variety of grasses (e.g. *Aira praecox*, *Agrostis tenuis*, *Deschampsia flexuosa*) are present. Where rock outcrops occur species such as English Stonecrop (*Sedum anglicum*) and Sheep's-bit (*Jasione montana*) are found. Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) is dominant in some areas.

The heath communities which occur on the dry slopes above the sea cliffs, especially those south-facing, are more open in character and dominated by grasses rather than dwarf shrubs. The annual plant communities which develop here are typical of those found only on sites in south-eastern Ireland. Common species include Wood Sage (*Teucrium scorodonia*), clovers (*Trifolium dubium* and *T. campestre*), Scarlet Pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*) and Field Madder (*Sherardia arvensis*). An uncommon annual species which can appear abundantly in the heath after a fire event is Yellow Fumitory (*Corydalis claviculata*). Some rare plants are found in this habitat, notably Bird's-foot (*Ornithopus perpusillus*) and Spring Vetch (*Vicia lathyroides*), both Red Data Book species.

Calcareous dry grassland, typically species-rich, occurs on deposits of glacial till. The primary grass species are Quaking-grass (*Briza media*), Smooth Meadow-grass (*Poa*

pratensis) and Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*). Typical calcicole herbs include Pale Flax (*Linum bienne*), Salad Burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*), Burnet-saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*), Carlina Thistle (*Carlina vulgaris*) and Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*). Orchids are a feature of this habitat, with five species known from the area - Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), Common Spotted-orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*), Common Twayblade (*Listera ovata*), Fragrant Orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*) and Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*). Bloody Crane's-bill (*Geranium sanguineum*) was re-found recently in this community at Bray Head - this is a typical species of the Burren and associated areas, and is very rare in eastern Ireland.

Rocky sea cliffs, another Annex I habitat, form most of the seaward boundary at this site and extend for approximately 2 km. Steep clay cliffs extend southwards for a further 1 km, with a small area of clay cliff also at the northernmost part of site. The rocky cliffs are divided by a railway track built in the 1800s. The lower cliffs are fairly steep in places but above the track they are less steep, and often support heath or dry grassland vegetation. In parts the cliffs are up to 60 m in height. Typical species of the more exposed rock areas are Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*), Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*), Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*), and Sea Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*). On some sections of the cliff face, the locally scarce Tree Mallow (*Lavatera arborea*) is found. Species of the upper cliff flora include Kidney Vetch and Red Fescue. A widespread species found from the mid to upper zones of the cliff face is Ivy (*Hedera helix*), and associated with this is the scarce Wild Madder (*Rubia peregrina*). The clay cliffs in the southern part of the site are steep and unstable and have little vegetation.

A stand of mostly native woodland occurs in the northern part of the site. This is a fairly pure Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*) dominated woodland, with some Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*). Understorey trees include Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*). The wood is on shallow drift and the ground flora often has species more associated with heath than woodland. Other habitats which are found at this site include bedrock shore, a sandy/shingle beach and an area of shallow marine water.

Bray Head has an important seabird colony. A census in 1999 gave the following populations: Fulmar (55 pairs), Shag (8 pairs), Kittiwake (781+ pairs), Guillemots (286 individuals), Razorbills (191 individuals) and Black Guillemots (123 individuals). A few pairs of gulls also breed. Both the Kittiwake and Black Guillemot populations are of national importance.

Peregrine Falcon, an Annex I species of the E.U. Birds Directive, breeds at the site, as do Raven and Kestrel. Characteristic bird species of the heath areas include Stonechat, Whitethroat, Linnets and Skylark.

The heath and grassland habitats at this site are threatened by reclamation for agriculture and also by frequent burning. The site is a popular recreational area and is especially used by walkers.

Bray Head is of high conservation importance as it has good examples of two habitats (sea cliffs and dry heath) listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. It also supports a number of rare plant species and has ornithological importance.