



**Site Name: Carrowmore Point to Spanish Point and Islands SAC**

**Site Code: 001021**

This site extends along the Co. Clare coastline from Spanish Point (3 km west of Milltown Malbay) in a south-westerly direction to Carrowmore Point. It comprises a strip of coastline, several offshore islands and rocks (notably Mutton Island), and the open marine water of Mal Bay between the islands and the mainland. Lough Donnell is a lagoon found near Carrowmore Point at the southern end of the site. Underlying the site are Carboniferous grits which are bedded at a low angle and which give rise to surf conditions in places along the coast. The headlands experience some of the most severe conditions of exposure in Ireland.

As well as the habitats listed in Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive (lagoon, reefs, vegetation of stony banks and petrifying springs), a further range of marine and coastal habitats are represented on the site, including mud/sandflats, sand dunes, sandy, shingle and boulder beaches, clay and rocky sea cliffs, bedrock shores, the associated wetland communities of the lagoon and a short section of the Annageeragh River.

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):

[1150] Coastal Lagoons*
[1170] Reefs
[1220] Perennial Vegetation of Stony Banks
[7220] Petrifying Springs*

The priority habitat of petrifying springs with tufa formations is well represented at the site and occurs along the sea cliffs at the south end of Spanish Point beach. Species typical of tufa formations found at the site include the bryophytes *Palustriella commutata*, *Cratoneuron filicinum*, *Eucladium verticillatum*, *Leiocolea turbinata* and *Pellia endiviifolia*.

The intertidal reefs have both good zonation of communities down the shore and excellent examples of communities which occur in areas very exposed to moderately exposed to wave action. Spanish Point holds a very high number of littoral reef communities (13 different community types). The low shore and subtidal fringe at both Spanish Point and Cloghaunicy Point have high species richness that range from 71 to 85 species. Subtidally, the area is important for its deep, exposed reef communities that are characterized by erect sponges and the fragile sea fan *Eunicella verrucosa*. There are a number of rare species present including the sponge *Tetilla*

*zetlandica*, which is only known from four localities in Ireland between Galway Bay and the Kerry Head Shoal. Algal communities are well developed, with an excellent diversity of red and brown algae species.

Small sand dune systems are found near Spanish Point, about Lurga Point and further south. The northern dune system is somewhat degraded, while that near Lurga Point is less damaged and more stable, and includes areas of foredune and fixed dune.

Shingle banks are found at the base of cliffs and at the head of bays. Due to their exposure these support a sparse vegetation with species such as Sea Beet (*Beta vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*), oraches (*Atriplex* spp.), Sea Mayweed (*Matricaria maritima*) Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*) and Sea-milkwort (*Glaux maritima*).

Lough Donnell is a shallow (generally <1 m), sedimentary lagoon. It has an impressive cobble barrier approximately 7 m high and 40 m wide, modified by the installation of a large concrete tunnel which forms a permanent inlet/outlet. Seawater enters through this tunnel, perhaps on most tides and also by percolation through the barrier. A small river, the Annageeragh River, enters the lagoon from the east. Salinity is assumed to be oligohaline as relatively large volumes of fresh water entering the lagoon appear to prevent appreciable amounts of seawater entering on most tides.

Geomorphologically, Lough Donnell is a classic lagoon with one of the most impressive barriers in the country. Floristically, the most notable feature of the lagoon is the presence of the lagoonal specialist Beaked Tasselweed (*Ruppia maritima*). Marginal vegetation, which is best developed on the eastern and southern shores, consists mostly of Common Reeds (*Phragmites australis*), Grey Club-rush (*Scirpus lacustris* subsp. *tabernaemontani*) and Sea Club-rush (*Scirpus maritimus*). A Red Data Book plant species, Corky-fruited Water-dropwort (*Oenanthe pimpinelloides*), occurs along the Annageeragh River. The faunal assemblage reflects the predominance of freshwater over marine influence throughout the lagoon. A total of 32 aquatic faunal taxa were recorded of which 5 species are regarded as lagoonal specialists. These are *Palaemonetes varians* (Order Decapoda), *Sigara stagnalis* (Order Hemiptera), *Jaera nordmanni* (Order Isopoda), *Neomysis integer* (Order Mysida) and *Notonecta viridis* (Order Hemiptera). *Notonecta viridis* is a rare brackish water species in Ireland.

The stretch of coastline between Quilty and Lurga Point has extensive areas of mud/sand flats and supports nationally important bird populations. The following counts are average maxima of individuals over five winters 1994/95-1998/99: wintering Purple Sandpiper (239), Dunlin (1,540), Turnstone (476), Ringed Plover (170) and Sanderling (189). Other species which occur in winter include Grey Plover, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Curlew, Redshank and Golden Plover.

The offshore islands Mutton Island and Mattle Island, and rocks, Carrickaneelwar and Seal Rock, are important for the seabirds that breed on them, i.e. Storm Petrel

(Mutton Island and Mattle Island, the only colonies in Clare, though recent studies are uncertain), Cormorant (Mattle Island, 60 pairs in 1990), Shag (Mattle Island and Mutton Island, c. 30 pairs in 1990), Great Black-backed Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Herring Gull. Mutton Island also holds an internationally important wintering flock of Barnacle Goose (c. 350 individuals in 1994, with up to 480 recorded previously). This species is also occasionally seen on Mattle Island and on adjacent parts of the mainland. A variety of land birds, e.g. Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Rock Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Raven, Swallow, Wheatear and Stonechat, amongst others, also use the islands (mainly Mutton Island) and are presumed to breed there.

Lough Donnell is used by a variety of birds, mainly waders (numbers in parentheses are based on a single count in one season between 1984/85 and 1986/87): Wigeon (16), Golden Plover (65), Grey Plover (12), Lapwing (170), Dunlin (65), Curlew (230) and Shag (52). Sand Martin nest in low clay cliffs to the north of the lake.

Mutton Island and Mattle Island are designated Special Protection Areas for their birds; the former is also a Wildfowl Sanctuary. Barnacle Goose, Storm Petrel and Golden Plover are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.

Grey Seal are regular in the area and haul out on all of the islands. Mutton Island has a high density of Irish hares.

The coastline around Spanish Point is an amenity and tourist resort and the sand dune system here has become degraded by overuse. Other areas of sand dune on the site have been damaged by over-grazing and erosion.

The site contains a diversity of habitats, plant and animal communities and species, and is notable for the occurrence of several habitats listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. The presence of lagoons and petrifying springs, both habitats accorded priority status on this Annex, is of particular significance. The range of birds that use the site and the large populations of several of these add considerably to the importance of the site. Additionally, the site has been highly rated for the diversity of marine plant and animal species it supports.