

**Site Name: Sheephaven SAC**

**Site Code: 001190**

Sheephaven Bay is a north-facing bay, situated north of Creeslough on the north-west coast of Co. Donegal. The site occupies the entire inner part of the bay, and includes the intertidal area at Carrickgart. The bedrock geology of the site is quite varied, with schist (at least two types), quartzite and metadolerite present. The site receives the flows of a number of rivers, notably the Lackagh River, the Duntally River, the Faymore River and the Carrownamaddy River. The site contains a diversity of habitats ranging from mudflats, saltmarshes and sand dunes, to lakes, rivers, heath, scrub and woodland.

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
[1310] <i>Salicornia</i> Mud
[1330] Atlantic Salt Meadows
[1410] Mediterranean Salt Meadows
[2120] Marram Dunes (White Dunes)
[2130] Fixed Dunes (Grey Dunes)*
[21A0] Machairs*
[91A0] Old Oak Woodlands
[1395] Petalwort ( <i>Petalophyllum ralfsii</i> )
[1065] Marsh Fritillary ( <i>Euphydryas aurinia</i> )

Extensive areas of intertidal sands and muds occur at the Back Strand, Ards Strand, Doo Castle Strand and at Carrickgart. Marble Hill Strand is a north-east facing beach on the west side of the bay. The sediment here is fine, well-sorted sand, and the communities present are representative of shores moderately exposed to wave action to sheltered from wave action. The rare hermit crab *Diogenes pugilator* is present at its most northerly record station in Ireland.

The site is particularly notable in a national context owing to its extensively vegetated intertidal zone. The sand-flats support one of the largest areas of annual vegetation dominated by Glasswort (*Salicornia europaea*) anywhere in Ireland and this is the largest extent of habitat known that is not affected by Common Cordgrass (*Spartina townsendii*), an invasive species that threatens this habitat. There are also excellent examples of unmodified zonation between pioneer vegetation through to

upper marsh saltmarsh communities. The site is actively accreting and this is having a positive influence on the site.

Large areas of sand dune occur at Rosapenna and at Marble Hill. The fore dunes are dominated by Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*), with abundant Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), and herbs such as Dove's-foot Crane's-bill (*Geranium molle*) and clovers (*Trifolium* spp.) occurring on the fixed dunes behind. Some areas of sand dune at Rosapenna have been damaged through agricultural improvement, and golf course development has also had an impact on the site.

A relatively small area of sand dune machair occurs on flat to gently undulating ground behind the dune system, to the north-west of Carrigart village. Typical species such as Red Fescue, Ribwort Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and Daisy (*Bellis perennis*) are present. The machair displays an interesting gradation to saltmarsh vegetation.

An extensive area of saltmarsh occurs at Back Strand, with further areas at Ards Strand and to the west of Carrigart village. A variety of sedges (*Carex* spp.) and rushes (*Juncus* spp.) occur, including Distant Sedge (*Carex distans*) and Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*), along with Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) and Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*).

The site includes several areas of woodland. Creeslough Wood consists of a range of deciduous trees, such as oak (*Quercus* sp.), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*), but Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) is also a common tree. Ards Forest Park includes areas of deciduous woodland and conifer plantation. Rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) is widespread in parts of the wood. Two rare species of Myxomycete fungus have been recorded from Ards, namely *Cribraria rufa* and *Stemonitopsis hyperopta*.

The rare liverwort, Petalwort (*Petalophyllum ralfsii*), a species that is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive, has been recorded from this site.

The Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas aurinia*), an E.U. Habitats Directive Annex II and red-listed butterfly, is known from suitable habitat (machair and dune grassland with Devil's bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) at Ards and Carrigart and it may occur elsewhere. The habitats at Ards support a notable butterfly assemblage including one of the most northern sites for the Cryptic Wood White (*Leptidea juvernica*) in Ireland. In total 21 species are known, including the red listed and near-threatened species Small Blue (*Cupido minimus*), Dark Green Fritillary (*Argynnis aglaja*), Grayling (*Hipparchia semele*) and Small Heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*). The following red-listed and near threatened terrestrial molluscs are known from the site: *Pupilla muscorum*, *Helicella itala*, *Leiostyla anglica*, *Vertigo antivertigo*, *Vertigo pygmaea* and *Vertigo substriata*.

The intertidal mud and sandflats support moderate numbers of waterfowl in autumn and winter. These include Shelduck (75), Wigeon (414), Teal (129), Mallard (117),

Oystercatcher (155), Ringed Plover (48), Dunlin (107) and Curlew (86) (data from 1984/85-86/87 period). The site is sometimes used by the population of Barnacle Goose which is centred at the New Lake at Dunfanaghy. This flock numbers up to 300. Barnacle Goose is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Other Annex I species associated with the site are Chough (2 possible breeding pairs), Peregrine (occasional visitor) and Common Tern. Terns have not been recorded breeding in recent years, though suitable habitat exists. Part of the site is a Wildfowl Sanctuary.

The site is of particular conservation significance for the presence of good examples of several habitats listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive and for the important bird populations it supports.