

Site Name: Courtmacsherry Estuary SAC

Site Code: 001230

This site is located in west Cork, some 12 km south of Bandon and immediately east of the village of Timoleague. The estuary consists of the drowned valley of the Argideen River, which is now filled with sediments, resulting in an extensive area of mudflats. The site contains a complex of coastal habitats, including ten which are listed in the E.U. Habitats Directive.

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):

- [1130] Estuaries
- [1140] Tidal Mudflats and Sandflats
- [1210] Annual Vegetation of Drift Lines
- [1220] Perennial Vegetation of Stony Banks
- [1310] *Salicornia* Mud
- [1330] Atlantic Salt Meadows
- [1410] Mediterranean Salt Meadows
- [2110] Embryonic Shifting Dunes
- [2120] Marram Dunes (White Dunes)
- [2130] Fixed Dunes (Grey Dunes)*

The greater part of this estuary site is mudflat and tidal channels, but three rivers flow into the site and areas of fresh- and saltmarsh are found. Most of the mudflat at Courtmacsherry is unvegetated, although in places cord-grass (*Spartina* sp.) occurs.

Saltmarsh has developed in a number of areas, with the most abundant species being Sea Club-rush (*Scirpus maritimus*), Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*), Sea Arrowgrass (*Triglochin maritima*), Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*), Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) and Saltmarsh Rush (*Juncus gerardi*). On the outer edges such species as Greater Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia media*), Lesser Sea-spurrey (*S. marina*) and Lax-flowered Sea-lavender (*Limonium humile*) occur, while on their landward edge the saltmarshes frequently support Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*), Soft Rush (*Juncus effusus*), Common Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*) and others. A particularly well-developed and intact saltmarsh occurs at Garranefeen Strand.

Tideline communities of Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*) and oraches (*Atriplex* spp.), including Grass-leaved Orache (*A. littoralis*), are noted from this site. In stony areas

east of Courtmacsherry the uncommon Sea-kale (*Crambe maritima*) occurs, and Yellow Horned-poppy (*Glaucium flavum*) has also been recorded. Glasswort (*Salicornia* spp.) communities have been recorded from Garraneen inlet.

The site also supports small but interesting sand dune systems. Embryonic dunes occur in a number of places, including Garraneen, Flaxford Strand and near Courtmacsherry, and the species Sand Couch (*Elymus farctus*) occurs. Marram dunes are well developed on the eastern spit at Garraneen inlet. Species present include Sea Bindweed (*Calystegia soldanella*), Sea-spurge (*Euphorbia paralias*) and Sand Couch. Fixed dunes are not particularly well developed at this site, but where present, support species such as Red Fescue, Common Restharrow (*Ononis repens*), Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) and Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*).

The site also includes small areas of sand dune, sandy and shingle beaches, reedbeds of Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), scrub, dry grassland, and areas of both wet and dry semi-natural broadleaved woodland, parts of which are dominated by oak (*Quercus* sp.).

The presence of some rare and scarce plant species at the site is noteworthy. The rare Red Data Book species Sea-kale occurs on shingle and the scarce grass, Tor-grass (*Brachypodium pinnatum*), has been recorded on cliffs between Broadstrand and Wood Point.

The site is of ornithological importance for the many waders and wildfowl that feed on the mud- and sandflats. The winter flocks of Golden Plover (2,600) and Black-Tailed Godwit (110) constitute nationally important numbers, and at least nine other species occur in numbers which are significant for the region - Wigeon (58), Mallard (69), Red-breasted Merganser (18), Oystercatcher (162), Lapwing (629), Dunlin (215), Bar-tailed Godwit (178), Curlew (731) and Redshank (139). Although these figures are the average peaks of 4 counts between 1984/85 and 1986/87, at times the numbers present far exceed those given. For example, in January 1992, 5,800 Golden Plover, 671 Wigeon, 731 Dunlin and 456 Oystercatchers were present.

The spread of cord-grass on parts of the mudflats poses a threat to the quality of the area for feeding birds, and pollution is an ever-present threat in such a wetland.

Courtmacsherry Estuary is an important site for the complex of coastal habitats found there, including ten listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, and for the large numbers of birds that use the area. The presence of rare and scarce plant species adds further interest and value to the site.