

Site Name: Omey Island Machair SAC

Site Code: 001309

Omey Island lies 9 km north-west of Clifden on the Connemara coast in Co. Galway. An area of sandflats some 300 m wide separates it from the mainland. Most of the northern and western sides of the island support unfenced machair and dry sandy grassland, while the remainder of the island is dominated by small agricultural holdings. The island is of archaeological interest due to the presence of a fulacht fia and an early Christian church and burial grounds. The main bedrock in the area is granite.

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):

[21A0] Machairs*
[3140] Hard Water Lakes
[1395] Petalwort (<i>Petalophyllum ralfsii</i>)

Omey Island holds one of the largest remaining areas of machair in Co. Galway. The main area of machair has an undulating surface which is severely eroded in places. The machair supports a typical flora dominated by Daisy (*Bellis perennis*) and Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), with White Clover (*Trifolium repens*), Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*), Ribwort Plantain (*P. lanceolata*), Common Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and the moss *Brachythecium albicans* occurring commonly. There are also areas dominated by Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), a feature rarely seen in Irish machairs.

Fahy Lough, in the central area of the island and adjacent to the machair plain, is a shallow freshwater lake. This is a good example of a hard water lake and supports a very diverse charophyte flora (including *Chara aspera*, a dwarf form of *C. contraria*, *C. globularis*, *C. rudis* and *C. desmacantha*). In the deeper water a community of Perfoliate Pondweed (*Potamogeton perfoliatus*) and Spiked Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*) is found. An area of granite gravel supports Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) and Alternate Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum alterniflorum*). The lake has little fringing vegetation apart from Sand Sedge (*Carex arenaria*). Fahy Lough has a high chloride content (c. 90 mg/l) reflecting its proximity to the sea.

Other habitats on the site include sandy beaches, boulder beaches and sand dunes. The site includes some areas of Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) dune and embryonic dune. Small areas of species-rich freshwater marsh vegetation are found at Lough Namackan, a small lake lying north of Fahy Lough. Species found here include

Mare's-tail (*Hippurus vulgaris*), Jointed Rush (*Juncus articulatus*), Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*), Lesser Spearwort (*Ranunculus flammula*), Creeping Buttercup (*R. repens*), Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*), Yellow Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*) and the moss *Calliergon cuspidatum*, amongst others.

Recently, a population of Petalwort (*Petalophyllum ralfsii*) has been discovered on Omey Island. This maritime species of liverwort is of high conservation importance as it is listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive.

Between 15 and 20 Chough are regularly seen feeding on the machair and dry grassland. Chough is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Up to 400 Golden Plover may occur on the island during autumn and winter; this species is also listed in the E.U. Birds Directive. The intertidal sandflats between the island and the mainland provide good habitat for waterfowl in autumn and winter. Ringed Plover (198 individuals in 1994/95-96/97) and Sanderling (30-50 individuals) occur in nationally important numbers, while Brent Goose, Grey Plover, Dunlin and Turnstone are some of the species to be found in small numbers.

The problem of widespread erosion on the machair is exacerbated by the large numbers of rabbits on the island. Over-grazing, burrowing by rabbits and increasing pressure from visitors make the machair more susceptible to erosion by wind and sea. In common with most of the machair in the county this site would benefit greatly from a reduction in grazing pressure.

The site is of considerable conservation significance. It is particularly important because of the presence of habitats which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, one of which, machair, is accorded priority status. The population of *Petalophyllum ralfsii* and the regular presence of two Annex I Birds Directive species also add to the significance of the site.