

Site Name: Bellacragher Saltmarsh SAC

Site Code: 002005

Bellacragher Bay is a very sheltered inlet situated to the north-west of Mallaranny in Co. Mayo. The saltmarsh is situated on the eastern side of the bay, immediately west of the N59 road.

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):

[1330] Atlantic Salt Meadows [1410] Mediterranean Salt Meadows

The saltmarsh at Bellacragher is of the fringe type and occurs mostly on a peat substrate, though some patches occur on the stony shoreline. The width of the fringe varies, in places being up to 20 m in places. Species typical of Atlantic saltmarsh are present, including Saltmarsh Rush (*Juncus gerardi*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*), Sea Plantain (*P. maritima*) and Thrift (*Armeria maritima*). In places, Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*) is dominant, indicating the presence of Mediterranean salt meadows.

A feature of the marsh is the presence of 'turf fucoids', a term given to various species of brown algae which occur in miniature forms on saltmarshes, especially in western Ireland. Of particular interest is that a community of these algae was first described from this area.

In addition to saltmarsh, the site contains stony shoreline, a small sandy beach, intertidal sand- or mudflats and some damp grassland.

The saltmarsh is grazed mainly by sheep and some areas are noticeably close-cropped. Also, the turf surface has been broken in places by trampling. The invasive tree species Rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) is naturalised in the area and at one point grows right down to the shoreline.

Owing to its proximity to a public road, the saltmarsh is easily accessible and has been visited over the years by student groups, researchers and interested botanists.

The saltmarsh at this site is typical of the fringe type found along the western seaboard and is considered to represent good examples of Atlantic and Mediterranean salt meadows, both habitats which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive.