



Site Name: Blasket Islands SAC

Site Code: 002172

The Blasket Islands are situated at the end of the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry. The site includes all of the islands in the group as well as a substantial area of the surrounding seas. There are six main islands, plus some rocky islets and sea stacks. Great Blasket Island, separated from the mainland by the Blasket Sound, is by far the largest of the islands (459 ha) and rises to 292 m above sea level. Inishtooskert (99 ha, 162 m), Inishnabro (51 ha, 175 m), Inishvickillane (81 ha, 138 m) and Tearaght Island (27 ha, 184 m) are located between approximately 7 km and 12 km from the mainland and, like Great Blasket, rise steeply from the sea. In contrast, Beginish is a small, low lying island (15 ha, 14 m) and lies within 2 km of the mainland. The bedrock is principally Old Red Sandstone, with some outcrops of volcanic and Silurian rocks on Inishvickillane and Beginish. The islands have a very maritime climate, being exposed to the prevailing Atlantic wind and swells. There are no permanent habitations, though Great Blasket was inhabited until 1953.

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):

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| [1170] Reefs |
| [1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs |
| [4030] Dry Heath |
| [8330] Sea Caves |
| [1351] Harbour Porpoise (<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>) |
| [1364] Grey Seal (<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>) |

The vegetation of the islands is typical of exposed western islands. Sea cliffs are the dominant habitat and, aside from the cliffs themselves, much of the vegetation of the islands consists of species typical of cliffs or cliff-tops. Typical species of the more rocky cliffs include Rock Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*), Tree-mallow (*Lavatera arborea*) and Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*). On the higher slopes where a maritime turf exists, swards of Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*), Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*) and Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) are all abundant, along with such species as Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*). Sea caves occur at the base of the cliffs on several of the islands.

The cliff vegetation merges into dry grassland dominated by Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) on several of the islands. Also occurring are areas dominated by Bracken

(*Pteridium aquilinum*). Several of the islands have small areas of dry heath. Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) is the main species and often occurs in a stunted form due to exposure. Other characteristic heath species include Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*) and Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*).

The seas surrounding the islands have well-developed reef communities. In particular, there are good examples of exposed and tide swept shallow water kelp communities, deeper water sponge dominated communities and a hydroid dominated community. The kelp forest community, composed of *Laminaria hyperborea*, with *Laminaria saccharina* and/or *Saccorhiza polyschides*, extends to 18 m below sea level. There is an understorey of diverse foliose red algae, including the rare red alga *Schizymenia dubyi*. On vertical surfaces, jewel anemones (*Corynactis viridis*), massive sponges (*Pachymatisma johnstonia*) and encrusting sponges (*Esperiopsis fucorum*) are characteristic. There are patches of vertical cliff face in very exposed areas that are characterized by plumose anemones (*Metridium senile*) and dense bryozoans (*Chartella papyracea*) where the rare nudibranch *Crimora papillata* is found. Species richness in these marine communities can be high. At depths greater than 20 m animal dominated communities are found. The communities present may be characterised by Deadman's Fingers (*Alcyonium digitatum*), massive sponges such as *Clinoa clelata*, and species of *Nemartesia* hydroid, indicating that there is moderate tidal stream. Other areas have a mixture of cushion sponges, hydroids and the rose 'coral' *Pentapora foliacea*. The brown alga *Carpomitra costata*, an uncommon species, is found in this community and is considered a good indicator of clean oceanic waters.

The site has a large Grey Seal population (648-833 breeding in 2005; one-off moult count of 989 seals in 2007). This is one of the largest populations in the country and represents about one-third of the Irish population. The seals breed on boulder beaches and caves on several of the islands. The seals on these islands are sometimes perceived as competitors for local fish stocks. This occasionally leads to threats to their welfare; the most recent occurred in November 2004 when a large number of adults and pups were shot and clubbed.

The site is also of importance for Harbour Porpoise, a species which has a regular presence in Blasket Sound. A population estimate in 2008 gave a figure of 267-477 individuals. Other cetaceans (whales and dolphins) regularly observed in the site include Common Dolphin, Bottle-nosed Dolphin, Risso's Dolphin, Killer Whale and Minke Whale. Few other mammal species occur on the islands, though Inishvickillane has an introduced population of native Red Deer.

The site supports one of the most important seabird colonies in the country, with at least 11 species of seabird breeding regularly. It is the most important site in the world for Storm Petrel, and in the country for Manx Shearwater, the populations of both being of international importance (approx. 51,000 and 20,534 pairs respectively in 2000/01). Nine other seabird species occur regularly in nationally important numbers, the populations of three being of particular importance, i.e. Fulmar (approx. 3,000 pairs), Lesser Black-backed Gull (421 pairs) and Puffin (approx. 5,000 individuals). Other species present in nationally important numbers are Shag (350+

pairs), Herring Gull (100+ pairs), Great Black-backed Gull (approx. 400 pairs), Kittiwake (750+ pairs), Razorbill (500+ individuals) and Black Guillemot (44+ individuals). Guillemot also breeds though in relatively low numbers (470+ individuals). Arctic Tern breeds in some years, with at least 200 pairs in 1988 and 102 pairs in 2001. The Blaskets is one of the few known sites in the country where Leach's Petrel has bred and may still breed.

The islands are traditional sites for Peregrine (1-2 pairs) and Chough (11 pairs in 2002). Both of these species are listed under the E.U. Birds Directive. Additional breeding species typical of western islands that occur include Oystercatcher, Rock Dove, Wheatear, Raven and possibly Twite. The Blaskets formerly had wintering populations of Greenland White-fronted Goose and Barnacle Goose. The islands have a long history of seabird recording, with a major survey being undertaken in 1988 and partly updated during the Seabird 2000 survey.

This extreme south-western maritime site has high conservation value owing to the occurrence of good examples of several habitats that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, i.e. vegetated sea cliffs, dry heath, marine caves and reefs, as well as populations of Grey Seal and Harbour Porpoise, both species that are listed on Annex II of this Directive. The site is also one of the most important seabird sites in the country, with the populations of two species present being of international importance and at least a further nine being of national importance. Of especial significance is that it is the most important site in the world for Storm Petrel. The occurrence of important populations of Storm Petrel and Arctic Tern is of particular note as these are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive; also listed are Leach's Petrel, Peregrine and Chough. The islands are also noted for their cultural, and in particular, literary importance.