

Site Name: Clare Island Cliffs SAC

Site Code: 002243

Clare Island lies at the entrance to Clew Bay, in Co. Mayo, some 5 km from the mainland. The island has a diverse geology, being composed of Dalradian sandstones and shales, Carboniferous sandstones, shales and conglomerates, and a variety of Silurian rocks. Much of the low-lying ground is covered by boulder clay and locally-derived glacial drift. Clare Island has been the subject of detailed scientific studies since the early 1900s and its natural history is well documented.

The site comprises the coastal fringe of the island, extending from Kinnacorra in the east, along the north coast and around the south-western corner of the island as far east as Tonabrickill. It extends inland on the southern flanks of Knockmore Mountain.

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):

- | |
|--------------------------------|
| [1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs |
| [8210] Calcareous Rocky Slopes |
| [8220] Siliceous Rocky Slopes |

The dominant feature of Clare Island is a ridge that runs east to west and attains a height of 462 m at Knockmore Mountain and forms precipitous sea cliffs (400 m high) along the north-western shore. Lower sea cliffs occur elsewhere on the northern coastline, as well as on the west and south of the island. Small areas of shingle beach, boulder beach and saltmarsh are found on the eastern side of the site, while Knockmore Mountain supports areas of wet heath, upland acid grassland, scree and exposed rock.

The sea cliffs of the northern coastline consist of vertical precipices alternating with steep grassy slopes and huge blocks of rock. The cliffs are well vegetated, with grasses and herbs such as Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) and Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*). Along the top of the lower cliffs is found a *Plantago* sward, i.e. low-growing vegetation dominated by *Plantago coronopus* and *P. maritima*, in association with some twenty other plant species. On the upper cliffs, there is a concentration of alpine vegetation, which is species-rich and which includes a number of rarities. Here, plants such as Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Alpine Saw-wort (*Saussurea alpina*), saxifrages (*Saxifraga rosacea*, *S. oppositifolia*, *S. spathularis* and *S. spathularis x hirsuta*), Dwarf Willow (*Salix herbacea*) and ferns

(*Asplenium viride*, *Polystichum lonchitis*, *Cystopteris fragilis* and *Hymenophyllum wilsonii*) occur, in association with a species-rich bryophyte flora. The cliffs and rocky habitats correspond to three habitats that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, i.e. vegetated sea cliffs, chasmophytic vegetation of siliceous rocky slopes and chasmophytic vegetation of calcareous rocky slopes.

Including some mentioned above, among the most notable and rare Red Data Book plant species which have been recorded from the site are: Holly Fern, Moss Campion, Purple Saxifrage, Alpine Saw-wort, Heath Cudweed (*Omalotheca sylvatica*) and Sea Pea (*Lathyrus japonicus* subsp. *maritimus*). The last two species listed are legally protected under the Flora (Protection) Order, 1999.

The Clare Island cliffs support important colonies of breeding seabirds - a census before 1987 recorded the following: Fulmar (2,555 pairs), Shag (30 pairs), Great Black-backed Gull (30 pairs), Kittiwake (800 pairs), Razorbill (200 individuals), Guillemot (less than 1,000 individuals) and Puffin (less than 100 pairs). The sea cliff colony is one of the largest in the country for Fulmar and one of the largest in Galway and Mayo for Kittiwake, Guillemot and Razorbill. An embryonic Gannet colony exists close to the island. Although it is still very small (1-2 pairs), it is important as it is the most northerly in the country.

In addition to the seabirds, Clare Island is important for a number of other bird species, notably three which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive - Peregrine (1 pair), Chough (10 pairs in 1992) and Barnacle Goose (less than 50 individuals).

The site is of considerable conservation significance for the presence of good examples of three habitats that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. Of additional significance is the presence of important seabird colonies, of populations of three species that are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, and of a variety of rare Red Data Book vascular plant species.