

Site Name: Tory Island Coast SAC

Site Code: 002259

Tory Island is a remote, rocky island lying some 11 km to the north of Bloody Foreland in Co. Donegal. The island is approximately 4 km long by 1 km wide, and consists in the main of igneous granite, with a few dolerite intrusions. The extreme eastern section, however, is made up of more erosion-resistant Ards Quartzite and high, dramatic coastal cliffs occur here. The surrounding coastal waters are included in the site.

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):

[1150] Coastal Lagoons*
[1170] Reefs
[1220] Perennial Vegetation of Stony Banks
[1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs
[8330] Sea Caves

Tory Island has many good examples of subtidal reef communities that range from being extremely to moderately exposed to wave action. In shallow water the reefs are characterised by kelp forests of *Laminaria hyperborea* that have an understorey of the jewel anemone, with a variety of red foliose algae or an understorey of cushion like fauna of sponges and sea squirts with red algae. This latter community is considered to be uncommon. The kelp becomes sparse in water deeper than 24 m, though the species richness of both flora and fauna can be high in these algal dominated (infralittoral) reefs (e.g. 70 species south west of Rinnamorreeny on the west side of the island; 85 species south-west of Carrickadda). The rare alga *Carpomitra costata* occurs.

In deeper water, the fragile animal dominated (circalittoral) reef communities are characterized by both the Axinellid cup and branching sponge community, and by communities characterised by scour tolerant fauna and flora. Species richness in the circalittoral reef communities is high (88 species north-east of Balligaereggagh; 70 species at the end of Tormore; 83 species east of Tormore; 79 species west of Rinnamorreeny). These species rich communities are important geographical variations of these reef communities, with a number of southern species that are close to the northern limits of their distributions. The uninterrupted zonation between the shallow and deep reef communities, and the fully to moderately exposed communities, is of note and should be respected as an ecological unit.

High coastal cliffs occur along most of the northern side of the island and also at the eastern end. Many parts are sheer and are unvegetated except by lichens, but where soil has accumulated typical plants such as Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), scurvygrass (*Cochlearia* sp.), Sea Mayweed (*Matricaria maritima*), English Stonecrop (*Sedum anglicum*), Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*) and Buck's-horn Plantain (*P. coronopus*) are common. Of particular note is the occurrence of Scots Lovage (*Ligusticum scoticum*), a Red Data Book species, which is found on the high cliffs in the east of the island, where it is inaccessible to grazing animals. There are five visible sea caves in this area, concentrated on a rocky promontory at the east end of the island.

The southern and western shoreline consists of bedrock shores, with occasional rockpools, and shingle and boulder beaches. The lower zone of the boulder beaches have a covering of algae, including *Fucus spiralis* and *Pelvetia canaliculata*. Typical plants of the shingle zone are Sea Sandwort (*Honkenya peploides*), Spear-leaved Orache (*Atriplex hastata*), Curled Dock (*Rumex crispus*), Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*) and Sea-milkwort (*Glaux maritima*). The Red Data Book species Sea-kale (*Crambe maritima*) has been recorded from the boulder beaches.

An acid, maritime heath occupies the area sloping back from the cliffs along much of the length of the island. Common species in this habitat are Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*), Sheep's-bit (*Jasione montana*), Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*), Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*), Velvet Bent (*Agrostis canina*) and Heath-grass (*Danthonia decumbens*). This habitat is usually very open and the vegetation is low and becoming eroded due to the extreme exposure, grazing by domestic stock and rabbits, and localised peat cutting.

A number of wetlands on Tory Island greatly increase the habitat diversity of the site. Lough Ayes is an excellent example of a shallow (1-2 m) sedimentary lagoon with a long, unbroken cobble barrier. This lagoon is one of only a very few in Ireland with a completely natural barrier and no tidal inlet. Its vegetation is dominated by dense growths of tasselweed (*Ruppia* sp.) and Slender-leaved Pondweed (*Potamogeton filiformis*), with Shoreweed (*Littorella uniflora*) and Brackish Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus baudottii*) in the shallow margins. Lough Ahooley and Lough Aher are freshwater lakes, surrounded by marshes and wet heath. These support a wide range of plants including, amongst others, Common Spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*), Bristle Club-rush (*Scirpus setaceus*), Floating Club-rush (*S. fluitans*), Sharp-flowered Rush (*Juncus acutiflorus*), Bulbous Rush (*J. bulbosus*), Common Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Cuckooflower (*Cardamine pratensis*), Bog Pondweed (*P. polygonifolius*), Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*), Alternate Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum alterniflorum*), Lesser Water-plantain (*Baldellia ranunculoides*), Water Purslane (*Lythrum portula*) and water-starworts (*Callitriche* spp., including *C. hermaphrodita*).

Tory Island, and its surrounding marine waters, supports important populations of birds. Four species listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive breed within the site - Chough (2-6 pairs, 1992), Peregrine (1-2 breeding territories), Little Tern (2+ pairs, 1995) and Storm Petrel (20 pairs, 1987). A fifth Annex I species, Corncrake, has an important breeding population (19 singing males in 1998) in the neighbouring fields just outside the site boundary. This area, and indeed the whole island, is protected as a Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds and their habitats. Tree Sparrow (a Red Data Book species) also breed in small numbers. The lack of disturbance by livestock, farm machinery and predators such as foxes enables several ground-nesting birds to breed on Tory, such as Snipe, Redshank, Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Common Gull and Wheatear. The rocky cliffs, especially around Tormore, support large seabird colonies, with Puffins (1,402 individuals in 1999), Razorbill (1,002 individuals in 1999), Guillemot (568 individuals in 1999), Kittiwake (408 pairs in 1999) and Fulmar (641 pairs in 1999), and smaller numbers of Shag (27+ pairs in 1999), Herring Gull and Great Black-backed Gull.

In conclusion, Tory Island Coast SAC is of conservation interest for its range of coastal and marine habitats, particularly for its important lagoon, sea cliffs, boulder beaches, sea caves and submarine reefs. Also of value are the two Red Data Book plant species. The islands cliffs and offshore sea stacks and islets are used by breeding seabird colonies and the site provides good habitat for Chough. The shingle and boulder beaches provide good breeding habitat for the rare Little Tern.