

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: SKELLIGS SPA

SITE CODE: 004007

The site comprises Great Skellig and Little Skellig islands. These highly exposed and isolated islands, which are separated by a distance of 3 km, are located in the Atlantic some 14 km and 11 km (respectively) off the County Kerry mainland. The geology of the islands is of Old Red Sandstone, with a little slate and veins of white quartzite. Both islands are precipitous rocky sea stacks, Great Skellig rising to 218 m and Little Skellig to 134 m.

Great Skellig supports a sparse maritime flora on shallow soils. Common plant species include Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene maritima*) and Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*), with patches of Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Dock (*Rumex* sp.) and Sea Mayweed (*Matricaria maritima*) occurring frequently. Its lichen flora is notable for the number of rarities that occur, including several species not recorded elsewhere in Ireland. Little Skellig is largely unvegetated, due both to the low soil cover and to the effect that the nesting birds have on the vegetation. However, Sea Mayweed occurs on ledges that are too small for Gannets, and Tree Mallow (*Lavatera arborea*), a local species in Ireland, has been recorded.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, Storm Petrel, Gannet, Kittiwake, Guillemot and Puffin. It is also of special conservation interest for holding an assemblage of over 20,000 breeding seabirds.

The Skelligs comprise one of the most important seabird colonies in the country for populations and species diversity. Great Skellig has an internationally important population of Storm Petrel (9,994 pairs in 2002), with birds nesting both in the stonework associated with the monastic settlement and in natural crevices amongst the scree and rock. Little Skellig is best known for its long established and internationally important Gannet colony, with 29,683 pairs in the last full census in 2004. This is by far the largest colony in Ireland and one of the largest in the world. Great Skellig also has one of the largest Puffin colonies in the country, with 6,000 pairs estimated in 2002. Other seabird species which occur on the islands in nationally important numbers are as follows: Fulmar (830 pairs), Manx Shearwater (902 pairs), Kittiwake (1,035 pairs) and Guillemot (1,652 pairs) – all data from 2002. Razorbill (283 pairs - five year mean between 1998 and 2002) occur but below the threshold of national importance.

Great Skellig is a traditional site for Chough, though the relatively small size of the island supports only one nesting pair. Peregrine has also nested in some years.

The breeding seabirds on the Skelligs have been fairly well documented over the years, with references to the Gannets dating back to the 1700s. Owing to the high

importance of the islands for birds, each has been designated a Statutory Nature Reserve. In addition, the non-governmental organisation, BirdWatch Ireland, holds a long-term lease on Little Skellig.

This site is one of the top five seabird sites in the country and is of international importance on account of both the assemblage of over 10,000 pairs of breeding seabirds and the individual populations of Storm Petrel and Gannet. The site also holds nationally important populations of a further five species of breeding seabird. Also of note is the regular presence of three species, Storm Petrel, Chough and Peregrine, which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.