

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: BLASKET ISLANDS SPA

SITE CODE: 004008

The Blasket Islands are situated at the end of the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry. The site comprises all of the main islands in the group, as well as the various islets and rocks, and also the seas which surround the islands to a distance of 500 m. There are six main islands, plus some smaller islands, islets and sea stacks. The largest island, Great Blasket, is separated from the mainland by the Blasket Sound, a distance of some 2 km. The smallest island, Beginish, lies close to Great Blasket, while the other islands (Inishtooskert, Inishnabro, Inishvickillane, Tearaght Island) are between about 7 km and 12 km from the mainland. The bedrock is principally Old Red Sandstone, with some outcrops of volcanic and Silurian rocks on Inishvickillane and Beginish. Apart from the low-lying Beginish near the mainland, all of the main islands rise to substantial heights, as follows: Great Blasket 292 m, Inishtooskert 162 m, Inishnabro 175 m, Inishvickillane 138 m and Tearaght 184 m. There are no permanent habitations, though Great Blasket was inhabited until 1953.

Sea cliffs, mostly precipitous, are the dominant habitat and, indeed, much of the vegetation on 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-spurry (*Spergularia rupicola*). On the higher slopes where a maritime turf is found, swards of Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene maritima*), Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*) and Buck's-horn Plantain (*Plantago coronopus*) are dominant, along with such species as Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis vulneraria*), Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) and Common Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia officinalis*). The seas surrounding the islands have well-developed reef communities.

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, Shag, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Kittiwake, Arctic Tern, Razorbill, Puffin and Chough. The site is also of special conservation interest for holding an assemblage of over 20,000 breeding seabirds.

The Blasket Islands SPA is 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 country for Storm Petrel and Manx Shearwater, with internationally important populations of both (c. 52,141 and 19,534 pairs respectively in the 2000/2001 survey). A survey of some of the Blasket Islands conducted in 1988 recorded the following nationally important populations: Fulmar (2,179 pairs), Lesser Black-backed Gull (at least 333 pairs), Herring Gull (131 pairs), Kittiwake (773 pairs) and Puffin (4,924 pairs). An incomplete survey in 1999/2000 recorded a nationally important population of Shag (60 pairs). Guillemot also breeds though in relatively low

numbers (316 pairs in 2001). A nationally important population of Arctic Tern also breeds within the site with at least 200 pairs in 1988 and 102 pairs in 2001.

The islands are traditional sites for Peregrine (1-2 pairs) and Chough (9 pairs in 2002). Further breeding species typical of western islands include Oystercatcher, Rock Dove, Wheatear, Raven and possibly Twite.

The Blasket Islands SPA is one of the most important seabird sites in the country, with two species having internationally important populations and at least a further eight having nationally important populations. A nationally important population of breeding Chough also occur on the islands. Of note is the regularly occurrence of four species listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive - Storm Petrel, Arctic Tern, Peregrine and Chough. Tearaght Island is a Statutory Nature Reserve.