

## SITE SYNOPSIS

**SITE NAME: ROCKABILL SPA**

**SITE CODE: 004014**

Rockabill consists of two small, low-lying, granitic islets situated *c.* 7 km off the Co. Dublin coast. The islands are separated by a narrow channel, though are connected at low spring tides. The main island, known as the Lighthouse Island, is vegetated by a scrubby sward of Tree Mallow (*Lavatera arborea*), with a range of other maritime species occurring, such as Sea Mayweed (*Matricaria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene maritima*), Sorrel (*Rumex* spp.), Common Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia officinalis*), Orache (*Atriplex* spp.) and Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*). The smaller island, known as the Bill, is very exposed and is sparsely vegetated. A lighthouse, manned until 1989, is situated on the main island. The site includes the two islands and the surrounding seas to a distance of 3.5 km from the islands.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Purple Sandpiper, Roseate Tern, Common Tern and Arctic Tern.

Rockabill has a long history of nesting by terns and it is now the most important Roseate tern colony in Europe. The All-Ireland Tern Survey in 1995 recorded an internationally important population of Roseate Tern (554 pairs) and nationally important populations of Common Tern (351 pairs) and Arctic Tern (49 pairs) on Rockabill. Intensive wardening, management and monitoring since the 1980s has seen the colony grow significantly. In 2010 the Roseate population had increased to 1,093 pairs, which represents approximately 65% of the entire European biogeographic population. The Common Tern population is the largest in Ireland with 1,940 pairs recorded in 2010. The Arctic Tern population has also increased with 250 pairs recorded in 2010. Sandwich Tern nested up to the 1930s but apparently not since. Surveys of the foraging behaviour of the Roseate Tern population on Rockabill have recorded up to 73% of Roseate Terns foraging within 3.5 km of the islands. The seas surrounding the islands, to a distance of 3.5 km, are therefore included within the SPA to protect the foraging resource of this internationally important Roseate Tern population.

The terns nest amongst the scrubby vegetation and increasingly so in the nest boxes which are provided as part of the BirdWatch Ireland/National Parks and Wildlife Service conservation programme. Large gull species are discouraged from nesting on the islands, for the benefit of the terns, and visitors to the islands are strictly controlled. Detailed research is carried out each year, including studies on breeding behaviour, productivity and feeding. A ringing programme has been in operation since the 1980s and this has produced important information on the movement of the birds in an international context.

Other breeding seabirds which utilise the site include Black Guillemot (82 pairs in 2010) and a small colony of Kittiwake (163 pairs in 2010). Both of these species are monitored annually and most of the chicks produced are ringed.

In winter the site supports a nationally important population of Purple Sandpiper (48). Other species recorded include Cormorant (18), Oystercatcher (14) and Turnstone (38) – all figures are 3 year mean peaks for the period 1997/98 to 1999/2000.

Rockabill SPA is of ornithological importance as it supports the most important Roseate Tern colony in Europe. The site also supports nationally important breeding populations of Common Tern and Arctic Tern, and a nationally important wintering population of Purple Sandpiper. All three species of tern which occur are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Owing to its international and national importance, Rockabill is a designated Refuge for Fauna.