

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: CASTLEMAINE HARBOUR SPA

SITE CODE: 004029

Castlemaine Harbour SPA is a large coastal site occupying the innermost part of Dingle Bay. It extends from the lower tidal reaches of the River Maine and River Laune to west of the Inch and Rosbehy peninsulas (c. 16 km from east to west). The average width of the estuary is 4-5 km though it is c. 11 km wide at the outer limit. The site comprises the estuaries of the River Maine and the River Laune, both substantial rivers, and has extensive areas of intertidal sand and mud flats. A number of other rivers, e.g. the Caragh and the Emlagh, flow into the site, as well as numerous small streams. Conditions in the bay are very sheltered due to the presence of three protruding sand spits on its seaward side. These spits overly gravel bars. Two of the spits, Rosbehy and Inch, are included within the site. Salt marshes fringe much of the shoreline. A very large dune system occurs on the Inch peninsula. A substantial area of shallow marine water is included in the site.

The intertidal flats are mostly muds or muddy sands and have high densities of polychaete worms such as Ragworm (*Hediste diversicolor*) and Lugworm (*Arenicola marina*), along with a good variety of bivalves and molluscs. Eelgrass (*Zostera* spp.) is common in places. The introduced Common Cord-grass (*Spartina anglica*) is found in sheltered areas of the intertidal flats and has colonised the lower part of the saltmarsh at Inch. Salt marsh vegetation includes Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Common Saltmarsh-grass (*Puccinellia maritima*), Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*), Sea Rush (*Juncus maritimus*) and Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*). The sand dune system at Inch is the largest and arguably the best remaining intact dune system in the country and includes large areas of embryo dunes, Marram (*Ammophila arenaria*) dunes and fixed dunes, as well as dune slacks.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Red-throated Diver, Cormorant, Light-bellied Brent Goose, Wigeon, Mallard, Pintail, Scaup, Common Scoter, Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Greenshank, Turnstone and Chough. The E.U. Birds Directive pays particular attention to wetlands and, as these form part of this SPA, the site and its associated waterbirds are of special conservation interest for Wetland & Waterbirds.

Castlemaine Harbour SPA is one of the most important sites for wintering waterfowl in the south-west. It provides habitats for an excellent diversity of waterbirds, including divers and seaduck. It is of international importance for its Light-bellied Brent Goose population (694) - figures given are mean peaks for the five winters 1995/96-1999/2000, as well as nationally important populations of a further fourteen waterbird species, i.e. Red-throated Diver (56), Cormorant (136), Wigeon (6,819), Mallard (487), Pintail (145), Scaup (74), Common Scoter (3,637), Oystercatcher (1,035), Ringed Plover (206), Sanderling (335), Bar-tailed Godwit (397), Redshank

(341), Greenshank (46) and Turnstone (144). The population of Wigeon is of note, being 7.6% of the all-Ireland total, while that of Sanderling is over 5%. Other species which occur include Great Northern Diver (22), Shelduck (90), Teal (287), Red-breasted Merganser (29), Golden Plover (972), Grey Plover (46), Knot (199), Dunlin (933), Curlew (474) and Black-headed Gull (538). The site provides good quality habitat for the feeding and roosting requirements of the various bird species which winter here. Whilst not breeding within the site, Chough occur in nationally important numbers and are regularly found on the sand dunes at Inch where they feed and socialise; during the autumn in 2002/03 and 2003/04 the dunes at Inch held flocks of up to 40 and 64 birds respectively.

Castlemaine Harbour SPA is a very important ornithological site, with one species, Light-bellied Brent Goose, occurring in numbers of international importance. In addition, it supports nationally important populations of a further fifteen species. Of particular note is that five species that occur regularly are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive, i.e. Red-throated Diver, Great Northern Diver, Golden Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit and Chough. Castlemaine Harbour is a Ramsar Convention site and parts of Castlemaine Harbour SPA are designated as a Statutory Nature Reserve and as Wildfowl Sanctuaries.