

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: BOYNE ESTUARY SPA

SITE CODE: 004080

This moderately-sized coastal site is situated west of Drogheda on the border of Counties Louth and Meath. The site comprises most of the estuary of the Boyne River, a substantial river which drains a large catchment. Apart from one section which is over 1 km wide, its width is mostly less than 500 m. The river channel, which is navigable and dredged, is defined by training walls, these being breached in places. Intertidal flats occur along the sides of the channelled river. The sediments vary from fine muds in the sheltered areas to sandy muds or sands towards the river mouth. The linear stretches of intertidal flats to the north and south of the river mouth are mainly composed of sand. One or more species of Eelgrass (*Zostera* spp.) occur in the estuary. Parts of the intertidal areas are fringed by salt marshes, most of which are of the Atlantic type, and dominated by Sea-purslane (*Halimione portulacoides*). Other species present include Common Saltmarsh-grass (*Puccinellia maritima*), Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*), Lax-flowered Sea-lavender (*Limonium humile*) and Glasswort (*Salicornia* spp.). Common Cord-grass (*Spartina anglica*) occurs frequently on the flats and salt marshes.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Shelduck, Oystercatcher, Golden Plover, Grey Plover, Lapwing, Knot, Sanderling, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Turnstone and Little Tern. 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.

The Boyne Estuary is the second most important estuary for wintering birds on the Louth-Meath coastline. Black-tailed Godwit occurs here in internationally important numbers (471). A further nine species of wintering waterbirds have populations of national importance, i.e. Shelduck (218), Oystercatcher (1,179), Golden Plover (6,070), Grey Plover (146), Lapwing (4,771), Knot (1,944), Sanderling (81), Redshank (583) and Turnstone (221) - all figures are mean peaks for the 5 year period 1995/96-1999/2000. Of particular note is that the site supports 6.8% of the all-Ireland population of Knot and almost 3% of the total for Golden Plover. Other species which occur include Bar-tailed Godwit (86), Cormorant (97), Brent Goose (172), Wigeon (454), Teal (230), Dunlin (498), Curlew (395), Mallard (197), Red-breasted Merganser (14), Greenshank (6), Ringed Plover (80) and Mute Swan (13). The site provides both feeding and high-tide roost areas for the birds. The estuary also attracts large numbers of gulls in winter, including Black-headed Gull (593), Common Gull (145), Herring Gull (403) and Great Black-backed Gull (160).

Little Tern have bred here since at least 1984 and a nationally important population was recorded in 1995 (14 pairs). In the intervening years breeding numbers and fledgling success has varied significantly. In 1996 approximately 20 pairs fledged 15

- 20 chicks but in 1998 and 1999 part of the shingle bank where the birds nested was washed away by storms. In 2008 35 pairs of Little Tern were recorded.

The site is of considerable ornithological importance for wintering waterfowl, with Black-tailed Godwit occurring in internationally important numbers and nine other species having populations of national importance. Of particular significance is that three species that regularly occur, Golden Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit and Little Tern are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. Part of the Boyne Estuary SPA is a Wildfowl Sanctuary.