

SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: RATHLIN O'BIRNE ISLAND SPA

SITE CODE: 004120

Rathlin O' Birne Island is situated in the north-west corner of Donegal Bay, approximately 2 km from the mainland at Malin Beg. It is largely composed of granite and is mostly low-lying, rising to 26 m above sea level at the southern end where some cliffs occur. It is wind-swept and fully exposed to extremely powerful wave action from the Atlantic Ocean on its south and west coasts. This exposure is reflected in the dominant vegetation of the island, which comprises a short sward of maritime grassland. Several small islets occur off the western shore. The island is uninhabited and has an automated lighthouse. The site includes the surrounding seas, where seabirds forage, bathe and socialise, to a distance of 200 m from the shore.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Barnacle Goose.

Rathlin O' Birne is an important site for breeding seabirds. There is a well-established Storm Petrel colony (160 pairs in 2001). The very rare Leach's Petrel has been recorded from the island (9 individuals trapped in 1986, 15 caught and ringed in August 1987) but it is not considered to breed here as the habitat is largely unsuitable.

Other breeding seabirds using the site include Shag (4 pairs in 1996), Lesser Black-backed Gull (7 pairs in 1987), Herring Gull (505 pairs in 1987), Great Black-backed Gull (45-60 pairs in 1987) and Black Guillemot (11 pairs in 1987). Common Tern/Arctic Tern have bred in the past, with 15 pairs recorded in 1984. Eider have also been recorded breeding on the island (15-20 pairs in spring 2008).

The island regularly supports a nationally important Barnacle Goose population (402 birds recorded – four year mean between 1993 and 2003). The numbers present in 1999 exceeded the threshold for international importance. The birds use the island in winter for feeding and refuge, and commute to other islands along this stretch of coast, particularly Inishduff.

Rathlin O' Birne Island SPA is of high ornithological importance, as it supports a nationally important population of Barnacle Goose, a species that is listed on Annex I of the E.U. Bird Directive. Of note is the regular presence of Storm Petrel and records of the very rare Leach's Petrel, two species which are also listed on Annex I of this directive.

31.10.2014