

## SITE SYNOPSIS

**SITE NAME: SKERRIES ISLANDS SPA**

**SITE CODE: 004122**

The Skerries Islands are a group of three small uninhabited islands, Shenick's Island, St Patrick's Island and Colt Island, situated between 0.5 km and 1.5 km off the north Co. Dublin coast. Skerries Islands SPA comprises the three islands and the seas surrounding them, to a distance of 200 m from the shore. The three islands are all low-lying with maximum heights ranging from 8 m to 13 m above sea level. St Patrick's Island and Colt Island have low cliffs, while Shenick's Island has more extensive expanses of intertidal rocky shore and sand flats. Shenick's Island also has a shingle bar and is connected to the mainland at low tides; it became a BirdWatch Ireland Reserve in 1987. The vegetation of the islands is dominated by rank grasses, with Brambles (*Rubus* spp.) and other species such as Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*) occurring commonly.

The site is a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the E.U. Birds Directive, of special conservation interest for the following species: Cormorant, Shag, Light-bellied Brent Goose, Purple Sandpiper, Turnstone and Herring Gull. 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 islands are of importance for both breeding seabirds and wintering waterfowl. In 1999 a survey recorded an internationally important population of breeding Cormorant (558 pairs) and a nationally important population of Shag (100 pairs) on St Patrick's Island. The Cormorant population, which was only established in the early 1990s, when taken together with the nearby associated colonies on Lambay Island and Ireland's Eye, comprises about 30% of the total Irish population. A nationally important population of Herring Gull (300 pairs) occurs on St Patrick's Island and Shenick's Island. Other breeding seabirds recorded during the 1999 survey include: Fulmar (35 pairs), Lesser Black-backed Gull (1 pair) and Great Black-backed Gull (95 pairs). Large gulls also breed on Colt Island but there has been no census in recent years. Other breeding birds present include Shelduck, Ringed Plover and Oystercatcher (several pairs of each).

In winter the islands regularly support a range of waterfowl species, including an internationally important population of Light-bellied Brent Goose (242) and nationally important populations of Cormorant (391), Purple Sandpiper (46), Turnstone (242) and Herring Gull (560) – all counts are mean peaks for the five year period 1995/96- 1999/2000. Other species utilising the site during winter include Wigeon (205), Mallard (240), Oystercatcher (463), Ringed Plover (66), Golden Plover (240), Grey Plover (15), Lapwing (238), Dunlin (42), Snipe (27), Curlew (327), Black-headed Gull (110) and Great Black-backed Gull (250). The islands are also a regular wintering site for Short-eared Owl, with several birds recorded in most winters.

The Skerries Islands SPA is of high ornithological importance for both breeding seabirds and wintering waterfowl. Internationally important populations of breeding Cormorant and nationally important populations of two other breeding seabirds occur on the islands. The wintering population of Light-bellied Brent Goose is of international importance and four other species occur in nationally important numbers during the winter. The presence of Golden Plover and Short-eared Owl, two species that are listed on Annex I of the E.U Birds Directive, is of note.

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